

LENA ASHWELL
1869-1957
‘ACTRESS, PATRIOT, PIONEER’

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ABSTRACT

A detailed account of the working life and achievements of the English actress/manager, Lena Ashwell, between the years 1891 and 1929, set in the context of the theatrical and social environment of these four decades. The thesis presents a chronological record of Ashwell's stage career, her development as a theatrical manager and her contributions to progress in her profession as well as to the changing perception of the role of women in society. It also records Ashwell's contribution during the First World War, taking entertainment to the war zones to boost the morale of soldiers and to provide employment for actors and musicians. It continues with an account of the post-war pursuit of her aim of making theatre accessible to the whole community through dedicated commitment to the British Drama League and the idea of a National Theatre and the creation and management of the Lena Ashwell Players.

The thesis proposes that Ashwell has been unjustly neglected in histories of this period and that her considerable achievements are worthy of recognition and inclusion in accounts not only of the acting profession and the achievements of women playwrights, but also of the Suffrage and women's movement, the First World War, the National Theatre of Great Britain and the municipal or regional theatres established throughout the country, state subsidy and public support for the arts, actor training and the study of drama and theatre within the education system.

Five chapters give a narrative account of Ashwell's work from her first stage appearance in March 1891 to the closure of the Lena Ashwell Players in August 1929. Each chapter adds to the cumulative impact of Ashwell's achievements, while identifying areas where she has left a lasting legacy. The Postscript provides a brief account of the last twenty-seven years of her long life, when she was less able to play an active role in society, but never lost her indomitable spirit or ambition for a better world. The Appendices provide a chronological list of her stage appearances and details of the members of the Lena Ashwell Players and the company's repertoire during the 1920s.

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Margaret Leask

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Lena Ashwell published four books:

Modern Troubadours, London, Gyldendal, 1922

Myself a Player, London, Michael Joseph, 1936

Reflections from Shakespeare, edited by Roger Pocock, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1926

The Stage, London, Geoffrey Bles, 1929

These publications are quoted throughout the thesis and all page references are from these editions.

List of abbreviations:

AFL	Actresses' Franchise League
AGM	Annual General Meeting
CEMA	Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts
ENSA	Entertainments National Service Association
LAP	Lena Ashwell Players
LCC	London County Council
M.P.	Minister of Parliament
MRA	Moral Re-Armament
NFDDSS	National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
WAACS	Women's Auxiliary Army Corps Service
WEC	Women's Emergency Corps
WRENS	Women's Royal Naval Service
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis has been to examine Lena Ashwell's career in the light of a society that generally marginalized and failed to acknowledge women's achievements in the serious creative and social processes. At the same time this society accepted the progress made, and absorbed the initiatives taken by Ashwell and her kind, into patterns of behaviour and used them to assist further progress. Lack of acknowledgement has inhibited our understanding of women's social history and this thesis has sought to redress the balance in relation to one woman who made a great difference but who has never been fully acknowledged in histories of the period. Initially, I embarked on a biographical account; planning to look specifically at Ashwell's career as an actress/manager - recognising that I would need to accept that some personal information would never come to light and that her autobiography (*Myself a Player*) would contain inaccuracies, memory lapses and carry her point of view at the time of writing (1936). In the course of the research I realised Ashwell's work, particularly in the 1920s, had wider implications than I had imagined. It became necessary to give a more detailed account of this period, about which very little is written, in order to account for and illustrate what neither Ashwell nor contemporary commentators could have guessed would be the outcome. For this reason, and in order to give a full career biography of its founder, it has been necessary to examine in depth the work of the Lena Ashwell Players between 1919 and 1929.

Ashwell lived through and participated in many major social and cultural events between 1890 and 1950 – she acted with Henry Irving, fought for female suffrage and an equal place for women in all walks of life, she endured two world wars, raised the whole issue of public support for the arts and was passionately committed to leaving the world a better place. I discovered that, to a great extent, Ashwell's achievements, beyond success as an actress and promoter of new plays, were made during the First World War – a period recorded primarily from the male perspective, and the 1920s, largely interpreted historically as being of little significance, except as a period of recovery from the war. This may account for much of the neglect; together with the fact that most of Ashwell's work was undertaken, particularly in the 1920s, away from the mainstream theatrical environment of London's West End. She was working in community theatre – frequently associated with 'amateur' and educational theatre and therefore apparently of less significance than the high profile professional stage. In addition, at the end of her life she embraced the Moral Re-Armament movement, which, in recent years, has attracted disdainful and negative response as an extremely reactionary and conservative approach to a very changed world. Lilian Baylis, in many ways similar to Ashwell, has fared better – she operated from a still functioning central London theatrical base, the Old Vic Theatre, which has provided a focus for theatrical and social historians. Ashwell's base in Kensington, the Century Theatre, no longer exists as a theatre and has all but disappeared from memory.

In the light of the above, and using the words of one succinct tribute - “Lena Ashwell, actress, patriot, pioneer,” made by family and friends on the plaque of dedication of Dressing Room 2 at London’s Westminster Theatre, I approached the research and writing of this thesis with this description as my starting point.

THE AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

I first read of Lena Ashwell in Donald Spoto’s biography, *Laurence Olivier* (HarperCollins, London, 1991), which describes the actor’s brief sojourn with the Lena Ashwell Players in the mid 1920s and his dismissal for lack of control on stage. I subsequently discovered her untouched scrapbooks in the Theatre Museum and learnt, through the Society for Theatre Research, of further material in the Imperial War Museum. While I found many brief references to her acting roles and style in accounts of the English theatre, including fulsome praise in A.E. Wilson’s *Edwardian Theatre*, published in 1951, and in autobiographies by her contemporaries; nowhere, despite considerable contemporary newspaper reports of her work between 1900 and 1929, was there an assessment of her role in such important and long term developments as public subsidy for the arts, the British Drama League, Theatre in Education or the increasingly recognised social commitment of the artist in the community.

As the attention of researchers and writers in the 1980s and 1990s focussed on the role of women in theatre, particularly as playwrights, directors and agents of social change, Ashwell’s activities as a theatre manager, suffragist and initiator of wartime entertainment for the purposes of boosting morale and providing employment, have been included in a number of published accounts. These have provided important stimulus and essential background material for this thesis. Julie Holledge’s *Innocent Flowers, Women in the Edwardian Theatre* (Virago, London, 1981) provides a significant and essential account of the Actresses’ Franchise League and the women (including Ashwell) who created, or emerged from, this organisation. Lis Whitelaw’s *The Life & Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton* (The Women’s Press, London, 1990), provides special insight into the life and work of a close colleague of Ashwell and the author of *Diana of Dobson’s* – the play that focussed attention on Ashwell as an actor/manager and woman with a social conscience. While surprisingly it provides very little information on Hamilton’s role as director, actor and playwright with the Lena Ashwell Players in the 1920s, I found it a good example for my own approach to “making known the achievement of a remarkable woman” (p.1). The most frequent references to Ashwell in other published material are in accounts of Hamilton’s *Diana of Dobson’s* – Sheila Stowell in *A Stage of Their Own, Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Manchester University Press, 1992) and ‘Drama as a Trade: Cicely Hamilton’s *Diana of Dobson’s*’ in *The New Woman and Her Sisters, Feminism and theatre 1850-1914* edited by Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1992), makes reference to Ashwell through her association with this play. Stowell provides a detailed analysis and interpretation of Hamilton’s play and Ashwell’s role in its development and success. However, given the scope of Stowell’s subject matter,

there is not room for expansion on Ashwell's involvement with other new playwrights or other aspects of her career. Gardner and Rutherford's collection of essays (*The New Woman and Her Sisters*) has made a significant contribution to understanding the personalities and environment that encouraged Ashwell's initiatives. Michael Sanderson, in *From Irving to Olivier, A Social History of the Acting Profession 1880-1983* (Athlone Press, London, 1984) appears to be alone in acknowledging Ashwell's public statements on actors' conditions and her commitment to their improvement. His account acknowledges her assistance to colleagues through the Three Arts Club, training opportunities and the Concert Parties. Maggie Gale's *West End Women, Women and the London Stage 1918-1962* (Routledge, London, 1996) makes brief mention of Ashwell's involvement with the British Drama League and the AFL, and her work in the 1920s. Gale's focus is on women playwrights and the staging of their plays in the West End of London during her chosen period and as such Ashwell is not eligible for detailed consideration. Gale follows her acknowledgement of Ashwell with mention of Nancy Price, who worked with Ashwell during the 1920s. Obviously influenced by Ashwell's ideals, Price went on to found the People's National Theatre in 1930 and the English School Theatre Movement, which toured to schools. Gale notes that "there still exists very few studies of the work carried out by these women, who through their desire to have some kind of control over the kind of theatre work with which they were involved, or through their desire to expand the repertoire of theatre in England, moved from the position of employee to that of employer" (p.64).

Most recently Elizabeth Schafer has focussed on Ashwell as a director, of both Shakespeare's plays and the masques of Ben Jonson (*Ms-Directing Shakespeare: Women Direct Shakespeare*, The Women's Press, London, 1998, and *Ben Jonson and Theatre*, edited by Richard Cave, Elizabeth Schafer and Brian Woolland, Routledge, London, 1999). Claire Hirshfield provides a brief summary of Ashwell's career in her chapter, 'The Actress as Social Activist: The Case of Lena Ashwell,' published in *Politics, Gender and the Arts: Women, the Arts, and Society*, edited by Ronald Dotterer and Susan Bowers (Susquehanna University Press, Selinsgrove, 1992, pp. 72-86). Hirshfield highlights the significant role Ashwell played as one of those actresses, described by George Bernard Shaw, "who had awakeningly truthful minds as well as engaging personalities" (Lillah McCarthy, *Myself and My Friends*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1933, Preface by G.B. Shaw, p. 8). She provides a concise summary of Ashwell's role in social issues but has little space for elaboration. In such a chapter it has not been possible for Hirshfield to examine the influences, impact and contradictions, which are essential ingredients for a comprehensive account of a career as varied and diverse as Ashwell's.

The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to detail and put into context the contribution made by Ashwell, to date largely overlooked and unrecorded, as both an individual and a representative of women of her time. Her lasting legacy and influence can be seen in the work of local authority support for the arts, the subsidised theatre, university drama and theatre departments, theatre in education and the status of the artist in the community.

SOURCES

Much of the information gathered is from Ashwell's considerable number of very large scrapbooks (twelve in the Theatre Museum, London, and three in the Imperial War Museum). There is evidence there were more (from notes at the end of the 1919 scrapbook), but these have not been found and so the scrapbook material only covers the period 1890 to 1919. The practice of collecting reviews, printed memorabilia and programmes is a common one for actors (and certainly was when Ashwell was working as an actress), as many obviously have an eye to the eventual autobiography. As a participant in this practice, Ashwell was very meticulous in her record keeping and obviously, from the press coverage she received, a good self publicist. Many of the newspaper titles and dates of cuttings in the scrapbooks are written in her own hand, although other handwriting was probably that of one of her two sisters, Ethel and Hilda, with whom she worked and lived. During the war years she appears to have taken advantage of a newspaper cutting service and secretarial assistance. However, there is evidence that she may have excluded some items which either displeased her or she did not wish to be remembered by in later years. These include public mention of the 'adoption' of the daughter of a cousin; comments about the Lady Caroline/Jane behind the scenes situation regarding Kingsway Theatre funding (which she implies was public knowledge in *Myself A Player*) and support given to her by royalty, circa 1910, when her wayward brother, Roger Pocock, was under scrutiny during investigations into the death of Sir Arthur Curtis. He had died in unexplained circumstances some years earlier, when in the company of Pocock.¹ These are commented on by Ashwell in *Myself a Player*, but there is no evidence in press cuttings in the scrapbooks. However, these aspects of her life are much more the subject of a biography than an analysis of her work, which is the concern of this thesis.

Ashwell wrote four books – *Modern Troubadours* (London, Gyldendal, 1922), which is an account of the work of her Concert parties during the First World War; *Reflections from Shakespeare* (London, Hutchinson & Co., 1926), edited from a series of lectures she gave to raise money for the Lena Ashwell Players; *The Stage* (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1929), her thoughts on the state of the theatre and role of the actor, and an autobiography, *Myself A Player* (London, Michael Joseph, 1936), which have provided considerable insights into her life and work. These are quoted throughout the thesis.

The other main source has been local newspapers, available in the Newspaper Library, Colindale, London, with reviews and advertisements for her work in the 1920s. Other sources include the Lord Chamberlain's Collection of Plays and the George Bernard Shaw Papers in the British Library Manuscript Section; the Arncliffe Sennett and Bulloch Special Collections in the British Library; play scripts from the British Drama League of NSW Library, now at Fisher Library, University of Sydney; letters such as the collection in the Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester; personal anecdotes from

¹ Roger Pocock, *A Frontiersman*, London, Gay & Hancock Ltd., 1904, p.219-225.

Ashwell's nephew, Henry Macnicol and Godfrey Kenton, an actor who worked with her, as well as accounts by contemporaries. Extant playbills, picture postcards and programmes have also provided information and stimulus.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

There were three main phases in Ashwell's working life – as an actress, an actress/manager and as a manager. For the purposes of this study her working life has been divided into five chapters. In each chapter it has been necessary to 'set the scene' in relation to the theatre of the time and to provide a context in which Ashwell was working. Through this the aim has been to show how she influenced her working environment and contributed to practices and ideas which have since gained wide acceptance. Aspects of her personal life which have impinged on her work or been influenced by her work, such as her constantly evolving religious beliefs and strong moral commitment, have been included where necessary, but this is not an attempt at a full biography. The material is to a large extent arranged chronologically, although given that some of her commitments were ongoing, this is not strictly adhered to.

The first chapter deals with her early career as an actress and her first steps into management between 1891 and 1907. The second covers her management of the Kingsway Theatre, during which she gave some of her finest performances as an actress, and her emergence as a woman determined to play an active role in her society between 1908 and 1914. The third chapter records her work during the Great War, including her last major work as an actress. Chapter Four details her role in the theatre of the 1920s, while Chapter Five examines the work of the Lena Ashwell Players and the last phase of her working life as a manager. The Postscript is the concluding statement on her life and work from 1929 to her death in 1957.

The appendices contain a list of the plays in which Ashwell acted, the texts of the patriotic wartime poems she frequently recited and her statement on the Purpose of Theatre. Appendices relating to the Lena Ashwell Players include the company's weekly itinerary between 1919 and 1929, details of the leading company members and a bibliography of the 250 plays presented by the company over ten years.

EARLY BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS AND FAMILY BACKGROUND

Lena Ashwell was born into a close-knit family of intrepid and determined individualists. The family memorial plaque in Holy Trinity Church, Cookham, England, indicates that her father was Charles Ashwell Boteler Pocock, Clerk in Holy Orders and Royal Navy Commander, born in March 1829, died February 1899. His uncle was the sea artist, Nicholas Pocock, and there was obviously a sea-faring tradition in the family – Ashwell was born on board the Wellesley training ship, at the time under her father's 'command' as a home for "boys 'unconvicted of crime' but under suspicion" (*Myself a Player*, p.

13). Her mother, Sarah Margaret Stevens (Cole on *her* mother's side), born in December 1839 and dying as a result of an accident in Canada in May 1887, was also from a sea-faring family. The Pockocks had two sons and five daughters, one of whom died as a child while the family was in New Zealand. Of the six surviving children, Lena Margaret Pockock was the second youngest, born on 28 September 1869.² Ashwell was closest to Henry Roger (born November 1865, died November 1941), Ethel Georgiana (born October 1867, died September 1924), and Hilda Frances (born April 1871, died 1964). Nothing is known of her eldest brother Francis Agnew Pockock, born in 1858, who apparently lived in the United States of America. Her eldest sister, Rosalie (born in August 1860, died June 1941), was the second wife of Canadian civil engineer, Samuel Keefer, who designed the suspension bridge across the Niagara gorge. Ashwell's early schooling was in England, but when she was eight, her father's health having broken down, the family moved to Canada, living in a wooden cabin near Brockville and overlooking the St Lawrence River. She describes in her autobiography that "Here was great beauty; but also great discomfort. No water laid on in the house, no drainage, no gas nor electric light, no modern conveniences whatever" (*Myself a Player*, p.25). But there was "a river to swim in, a canoe to sail or paddle, a forest to wander in, and at home, plenty of hard work" (ibid). Ashwell attended a Government school, but her education was interrupted through illness and then a family move to Toronto. She then attended the Bishop Strachan's School for Young Ladies, becoming a boarder with Hilda when her mother died. At this point Ashwell apparently established a pattern repeated throughout her life. She determined to matriculate, doing the "two years' work in one. I had to work very hard and used to get up before the dawn" (ibid. p.34). She matriculated at the University of Toronto fourteen months after her mother's death. Her father, devastated by the loss of his wife, decided to give up his Church work and the Treasury of God he had established in Canada and to move to Europe with his three youngest daughters.

Lausanne, Switzerland, was their destination, where Ashwell attended a Government School with French speaking children and studied music at the Conservatoire. Although she was being prepared to become a governess, when an English cathedral organist heard her sing, he recommended she go to study at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Ashwell's father disapproved of this possibility and Ashwell "was torn between my love for my father and my determination to follow my dream and be an opera-singer" (ibid. p.44). With the help of a wealthy school-friend, Ashwell managed to go to London and stayed with relatives until, on her acceptance into the Academy, her father and her sisters joined her. Ethel began studying (when her health would allow) at the Slade School of Art and Hilda began her nursing training at the Alexandra Hospital for children. Ashwell's career from this point is the subject of the following chapters.

² For years Ashwell pretended that she was younger than her sister Hilda, so most obituaries give her birth year as 1872.

CHAPTER ONE: 1891 to 1907 ‘Actress’

EARLY PERFORMING CAREER

She was a queer-looking child, handsome, with a face suggesting all manner of possibilities. When she stood up to read the speech from *Richard II* she was nervous, but courageously stood her ground. She began slowly, and with a most ‘fetching’ voice, to *think* out the words. You saw her think them, heard her speak them. It was so different from the intelligent elocution, the good recitation, but bad impersonation of the others! ‘A pathetic face, a passionate voice, a *brain*,’ I thought to myself. It must have been at this point that the girl flung away the book and began to act, in an undisciplined way... but with such true emotion, such intensity, that the tears came to my eyes... It was an easy victory for her. She was incomparably better than any one. ‘She has to work,’ I wrote in my diary that day. ‘Her life must be given to it, and then she will... achieve just as high as she works.’ Lena Pocock was the girl’s name, but she changed it to Lena Ashwell when she went on the stage.

Thus wrote Ellen Terry¹, describing the occasion, in 1890, when she was asked to distribute medals at the Royal Academy of Music while her daughter, Edith Craig, was a student there.

Influenced by Terry’s encouraging response, Ashwell set her sights on a theatrical rather than musical career, making her first professional appearance, aged nineteen, on the stage of the Islington Grand Theatre in north London on 30 March 1891. Her debut in *The Pharisee*², in the role of a servant girl, was notable mainly because, as she mentioned often when describing her career,³ she was so overcome with stage fright that she left the stage without uttering the four words assigned to her. Between this small debacle and September 1900, her career took much the same path as that of many aspiring young actresses, although she was based mostly in London and did not learn her trade on tour or with provincial companies as many of her contemporaries did. She wrote the usual letters seeking employment to producers such as Frederick Harrison of the Haymarket Theatre, who wrote, after she had appeared in *That Dreadful Doctor*⁴, “I have had excellent accounts of your performance... I shall certainly not forget you when another opportunity comes,”⁵ but she did not initially impress George Alexander⁶ when she expressed her disappointment for not being given a promised role in London following a minor role (at the intervention of Ellen Terry) in his production of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* on tour in the summer of 1892. As she describes in *Myself a Player*,

the control of the theatres was in the hands of the actor-managers, most of whom had been through every kind of experience... in the provinces before they arrived in London. To be

¹*The Story of My Life*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1908, p. 247-8.

²A play by Malcolm Watson and Mrs Lancaster-Wallis, which ran for a two-week season over the Easter holidays.

³For example, in an interview Ashwell gave for *The Sketch*, 23 November 1910.

⁴A comedietta by Charles Young given in a special matinee at the Opera Comique in July 1891, on the same bill as Dan Leno, Vesta Tilley and Arthur Playfair. This play also toured to Cambridge and Oxford. It was through Malcolm Watson that Ashwell was engaged by Arthur Bouchier for this production. Her nervousness prompted his advice, “You are a very NICE little girl, but take my advice and give it up” (*Myself a Player* p. 58). This was a statement Ashwell and Bouchier later considered to be a long running shared joke between them.

⁵Letter from Harrison to Ashwell dated 17 June 1891, Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester.

⁶George Alexander (1858-1918) was initially an actor who performed with Irving. As a manager and director he encouraged new English playwrights, including Wilde and Pinero, particularly at the St James Theatre, London.

Figure 1: Grand Theatre, Islington, programme for Lena Ashwell's first professional stage appearance in *The Pharisee*, March 1891. (Author's collection)

engaged in these managements was as if you were permitted to pay a visit to some distinguished house where your host was always present to see that all the fine traditions and accepted laws of hospitality were conformed to and where everyone knew his or her position in the general scheme of life. (p.59)

She was cast in some noteworthy productions (and some which disappeared without trace⁷), making her West End debut in two curtain raisers (*Through the Fire* and *Two in the Bush*) which preceded James Mortimer's comedy, *Gloriana*, at the Globe Theatre between November 1891 and early February 1892, where she conformed to the practice of playing a small role and understudying another.⁸ At this time she became a colleague and friend to a number of her contemporaries, including Eva Moore and Gertrude Kingston. She was a member, briefly, of the ill-fated Amy Roselle's⁹ company, playing Arthur Dacre's sister, Dora Prescott, in the American play *Man and Woman* by Henry C. de Mille and David Belasco at the Opera Comique in March and April 1893, which earned her a notice in the *Referee*, "Miss Lena Ashwell, a refined and sympathetic young actress, makes a big step forward" (26/3/93). Eva Moore wrote of Ashwell at this time:

She was not very happy; for some reason, Amy Roselle did not like her, and did nothing to make things smooth for her. Lena Ashwell, in those days, was a vague person, which was rather extraordinary, as she was a very fine athlete, and the two qualities did not seem to go together.¹⁰

Through Ellen Terry, Ashwell met producer Comyns Carr who engaged her to understudy Winifred Emery¹¹ in Meilhac and Halevy's *Frou Frou* at the Comedy in June 1893. From 30 September she understudied Emery's Rosamund in Sydney Grundy's¹² *Sowing the Wind*, played in the curtain raiser, *In Strict Confidence*, by Paul Heriot, and from mid December to early February 1894 appeared in the daily Christmas matinee performances of Robert Buchanan's *The Piper of Hamelin*; she had a minor break when Emery was ill on the third night of the run, impressing the company and the small audience who remained after hearing Emery would not perform. Alice Comyns Carr described Ashwell as

the gentle girl with the good voice... very adaptable... delighted to transfer her energies to the legitimate drama (from her studies at the Royal Academy of Music), and though very modest about her own capabilities, she took her new vocation with the utmost seriousness, and studied almost night and day to fit herself for the part.¹³

⁷See Appendix One for full list of the plays in which Ashwell appeared as an actress.

⁸Ashwell's biographical details in publications such as *Who Was Who in the Theatre* state that she played Jessie Chadwick in *Gloriana*, but the extant playbills list Ashwell as appearing only in the curtain raisers.

⁹Amy Roselle (1852-1895) and her husband Arthur Dacre (1851-1895), were English comic actors. They died in Australia in a murder-suicide following an unsuccessful, financially disastrous nine-month tour.

¹⁰*Exits and Entrances*, London, Chapman & Hall, 1923, p.35.

¹¹Winifred Emery (1862-1924) was born into a theatrical family - her great grandfather, grandfather and father were all actors. She made her debut at the age of eight, becoming one of the most versatile and popular actresses of her time. She premiered *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Little Minister* (1897). She married the actor Cyril Maude. (P. Hartnoll, ed., *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹²Sydney Grundy (1848-1914) was a playwright, journalist and critic. He initiated the private or club performance in 1882 to beat the censorship.

¹³*Reminiscences*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1926, p.229.

The night Ashwell went on for Emery, Mrs Comyns Carr

plied her with sal volatile during the intervals, but I don't think she really needed the stimulant... the minute she was back on the stage all discouragement slipped from her. She was an artist, and enthusiasm and excitement... her best restoratives... Perhaps the greatest tribute... was Emery's rapid recovery... the understudy was only allowed to play the role for one night! (ibid)

Ashwell, aware of her inexperience, observes in *Myself a Player* that at the time she may not have been able to repeat the performance which was "inspired by a sudden opportunity... Acting is a curious, elusive art and difficult to really learn... it is necessary not only to make an effect but to know exactly in what way the effect has been produced" (p.62).

At the Comedy Theatre in February and March 1894 she played Lady Pamela in Buchanan's comedy *Dick Sheridan*, loosely based on the real life romantic exploits of the author and playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan. In June 1893 she began a two year contractual commitment to Comyns Carr, which guaranteed work but little choice of roles. When *Frou Frou* returned to the Comedy repertoire, Ashwell played Pauline for the matinees (*Era*, 7/2/03), eventually playing the lead when it went into the evening bill. Like many young actresses, Ashwell had her special admirers; one such was Reginald Golding Bright.¹⁴ His letters to her, commenting on her performances, give an insight into the strengths and weaknesses of her acting at this time. There are four extant letters¹⁵ (written between 20 March and 16 April 1894), signed from 'your sincere admirer'. He wrote,

Your only fault on Saturday [as Pauline in *Frou Frou*] was that you spoke your lines too quickly and consequently the audience lost much of what they should have heard. If the piece is put into the regular evening bill, you will of course remedy this defect... Of course, the part is a poor one... after all it is only a question of time, for talent and genius such as yours cannot long remain hidden... I trust that my ...letters have not given you offence, as you have never taken any notice of them? I... should be extremely obliged if you would say whether my notes are disagreeable to you... if so, I would immediately cease writing.

Presumably Ashwell wrote to say they were not 'disagreeable' as he wrote sending some stamps so she could send him a telegram if she was suddenly called upon to play Gilberte Brigard in *Frou Frou*. He could not resist giving her some advice as to how to play it, "Work it up deliberately until you reach 'crescendo' (the meaning of which you as a musician will comprehend)." On April 9 Ashwell played Emery's role. He wrote the following day with praise tempered with criticism: "you rose to a height which even I had scarcely expected of you... though I fear that the strain rather told upon you." He

¹⁴Golding Bright became a theatrical agent and author representative; by the early 1920s he was well known, shrewd, popular but lazy, apparently sleeping through most first nights, despite his involvement. "He was a small, quiet, very well dressed man, of considerable charm, public school and Oxford... He always wore white kid gloves at first nights, which he never removed" (W. Macqueen-Pope, *The Footlights Flickered*, Severn House, 1975, p.30).

¹⁵These letters are in the Rush Rees Collection, University of Rochester library.

reminded her she had taken some prompts (“no doubt due to nervousness”), and hurried her words occasionally, but concluded the letter with congratulations. On 16 April he advised that he had written two notices of her *Frou Frou* performance, sent to the *Star* and the *Sun*; the latter publishing a shortened version, of which he sent her a copy, together with the rejected *Star* article, written under his nom de plume, Leonard Fanfare. He concluded with the hope her elevation to the top ranks would mean he could write more detailed praise of her work.

In May 1894 Ashwell was ‘lent’, by Comyns Carr, to play Lady Belton for a revival of *Marriage* by Brandon Thomas (author of *Charley’s Aunt*) and H. Keeling at the Royal Court Theatre, in a season that ran from 17 May to July. She enjoyed working in this play (as indicated in *Myself a Player* p.63), particularly given such reviews as:

Miss Lena Ashwell is evidently one of the actresses of the future. She has a voice of infinite tenderness and variety, a voice full of expression and charm, and an earnestness that is better than all. Miss Lena Ashwell does not take up acting as a trivial pastime, but a serious undertaking. Her heart is in her work and she shows it in every line of it.

(*Daily Telegraph* 18/5/94)

She returned to Comyns Carr to tour in Sydney Grundy’s *Sowing the Wind*, which opened at the Gaiety in Dublin on 13 August 1894. Ashwell played Rosamund in this popular love story involving an illegitimate daughter of a gentleman whose adopted son falls in love with her; the drama focussed on the resolution of unknown identities and her mother’s reputation before they could be united. The Irish critics were generous with their praise and no doubt Ashwell was relieved. She struggled to take on the mantle of the role from Evelyn Millard who had toured it previously with the grand old actor, W.H. Vernon, who again played the gentleman father. Ashwell describes in *Myself a Player* how “He drilled and drilled me in the path of virtue, but at last gave me up in despair and told me to play the part in my own way... It was in Dublin that I was allowed to act the part without trying to be like someone else” (p.64).

The *Irish Times* admitted,

It is difficult to fully convey how truthfully Miss Ashwell interprets this difficult role. There are very many temptations to overdo it, to tear passion to tatters. But in all she does there is a perfect naturalness, and reserve of force, which, combined with her intelligent rendering of the dialogue, her tenderness of expression, pathos, youth, charming grace, sympathetic voice, and freshness, render her acting almost perfect. There was something intensely impressive and powerful in her delivery (it was too artistic to be called mere declamation) of the lines in defence of erring woman, or rather in denunciation of that society which shrinks from the stricken sister... in [this] ...the gifted young actress was sublime. (14/8/94)

An admirer, John G. Glover, also expressed his appreciation:

the greatest treat I have ever experienced was derived from your superb interpretation... I have never witnessed or listened to anything that stirred me so deeply, and made me experience so keen enjoyment as your natural acting... I have no object but to express my

deep obligation for a benefit conferred, and for the revelation afforded of what true acting is,¹⁶

while Mr Forster-Huddle considered her “the most powerful and the most natural actress I ever saw. This little bit of encouragement I trust may cheer you in moments of depression.”¹⁷

She then experienced the rigours of provincial touring throughout September and October, which she describes with wry humour in *Myself a Player*, with performances in Cork, Birmingham, Sheffield, Blackpool, Manchester and Hastings. During the tour she gave several promotional interviews to local papers,

I am the property of Mr Carr for two years, wailing [sic] like a famous character in fiction, for something to turn up. I entered into a two years' engagement, and, of course, when we have finished *Sowing The Wind* [there was still ten more weeks of the tour to go], I shall have to take up something else. (Blackpool Gazette 28/9/94)

When asked, by ‘Yorick’ for the *Topical Times*, why she had gone on the stage, when originally educated in Switzerland towards being a governess, her response was “I think you must see that I would not probably have been much of a success as a governess, and I do like to get on in whatever I take up” (6/10/94).

WORKING WITH HENRY IRVING AND BEERBOHM TREE

In 1895 Ashwell had the opportunity many young actresses of her generation would have only dreamt of - to play in a production with Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. In J. Comyns Carr's *King Arthur*, which opened at the Lyceum on 12 January, Ashwell played Elaine and understudied Terry. It was a major theatrical event, as was any production with Irving and Terry, attended by royalty and other leaders of the theatrical profession. As *Queen* pointed out, “It is always promotion for a young actress to go to the Lyceum, even though it be to take a part smaller than some she may have already played” (19/1/95). Ashwell was noticed, attracting many favourable reviews. “The actress [Ashwell] spoke from her heart, and when she was not speaking she was showing the workings of her soul; an art that few young actresses understand” (Clement Scott, *Daily Telegraph*, 13/1/95). Ashwell always spoke and wrote later with great affection for Irving, but her first experience in his company was not without difficulties. Irving's grandson, Laurence, writes that during *King Arthur*, Ellen Terry's “undisguised partiality for Frank Cooper” (playing Mordred), set tongues wagging and Ashwell was very distressed

to discover an undercurrent of petty rivalries and conspiracies in what she looked upon as a hallowed temple of the art in which she was so earnest an initiate. One night Irving, in the wings, found her in tears. ‘Is there anything I can do?’ he asked, adding by way of kindly consolation, ‘You know - we were born crying.’¹⁸

¹⁶Letter from John Glover to Ashwell dated 14 August 1894, Rush Rhees Collection, University of Rochester.

¹⁷Letter from Forster-Huddle to Ashwell dated 14 August 1894, Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester.

¹⁸*Henry Irving: The Actor and His World*, Columbus Books, London, 1951, p.595. Laurence Irving was a friend of Ashwell's, and presumably this is an anecdote told directly to him.

Figure 2: Top: Lena Ashwell as the Prince of Wales in *Richard III*, Lyceum Theatre, 1896. Bottom: Lena Ashwell as Elaine in *King Arthur*, Lyceum Theatre, 1895. (Theatre Museum, London)

The run of *King Arthur* was an emotional time for Ashwell. She writes in *Myself a Player* that during this production Oscar Wilde was arrested. His trial aroused a great deal of interest and

the atmosphere of London was horrible and cruel. His plays were so very brilliant, and I had seen him when I was on tour in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, so I felt that he was a friend in desperate trouble. During his term of imprisonment he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a poem which moved me very deeply. (p.80)

She also knew that the Terry/Irving partnership was breaking up. While acknowledging there were a number of influences at work, Ashwell considered an important factor was “the great difficulty that at the time there were few leading parts for the mature woman. All the heroines were young. Heroes might be any age, but the older women were merely backgrounds to the drama” (ibid p.81). Later, Ashwell was greatly affected by the fact that Terry, for financial reasons, was still giving ‘one-night stand’ lecture tours in America at the age of sixty-one: “Almost all the histories are tragic of those who devote their lives to art” (ibid p.82), and she resolved not to be in the same position.

Reginald Golding Bright wrote with unqualified praise of her performance as Elaine, but could not resist words of advice and criticism on some of her movements in the play.

I can see ...that you are overworking yourself to an alarming extent. Ambition in a young actress is highly commendable; but do not, let me implore you, carry it too far. You have done well... in the few years that have elapsed since I saw you play the blind girl in *Young Mrs Winthrop* at an amateur entertainment, which first gave me a hint of hidden powers. Be advised and take a good rest... Nature will have its revenge for hours stolen from sleep and given to study, and a breakdown is to be dreaded. (16/1/1895, Rush Rhees Collection)

He apologises for the disagreeable advice and offers sincere congratulations on her success as well as advising her to try to curb her nervousness by imagining the audience to be made up of friends. However, the experience at the Lyceum was not as painful as the above may suggest. In 1936 Ashwell recalled it as a “golden time... I was in the seventh heaven. The stage-door of the Lyceum is still the same, and I can’t pass it now without a thrill” (*Myself a Player*, p.79).

King Arthur played for over one hundred performances into June 1895; from the playbills it appears Ashwell last played Elaine on 25 May, and was replaced by Annie Hughes. However, the Comedy Theatre playbill for *The Prude's Progress* (by Jerome K. Jerome and Eden Phillpotts), which opened on May 22, includes Ashwell in the cast, so she may have played both roles for a few days. “Miss Lena Ashwell’s Nelly Morris is a lovable creation, the loyalty and devotion of the self sacrificing sister being sweetly delineated. Mr Arthur Playfair makes the egoism of Theodore Travers extremely amusing” (*Era* 29/5/1895). Ashwell played Nelly into July, together with the role of Sybil in the curtain raiser, a new comedietta by C.L. Hume, *A Practical Joker*, which joined the bill on 15 June. For the *St James Gazette*, “Ashwell revealed a genuine sense of humour and particularly in the semi-tragic passages, played with a

mock intensity that at once stamped her as a comedienne of approved ability”¹⁹ (17/6/95). It was during this time she became engaged to Arthur Playfair; marrying sometime before February 1896 when the *Theatre* for that month had an article on Ashwell stating that she was married. Golding Bright wrote, somewhat patronisingly, on 23 May after seeing the opening night performance - once again with notes, praise and criticism - “a growing tendency to allow your voice to be tinged with a note of sadness which is ever present and is apt to become just a wee bit monotonous” (Rush Rhees Collection).

In September 1895 she played the role of Blanche Ferraby in *Her Advocate* by Walter Frith at Duke of York’s, no longer under contract to Comyns Carr. It appears that having established herself in London, from this time Ashwell did not enter any long-term contractual agreement with a particular management and was able to get work on a regular basis without such a commitment. There were mostly positive reviews for Ashwell in this production, which she acknowledged when interviewed for the *Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News*.

The press has... been exceedingly kind... I am grateful for the good notices... the part is a difficult one to play, as, speaking as a woman, I think there are few of my sex who would have made such determined efforts to hold a recreant lover or to accept his lukewarm manifestation of second-hand affection. However, it is my duty to work on the lines laid down by the author, and the character certainly meets with appreciation, especially from the men. I suppose it tickles their vanity to assume there are women in the world who will willingly suffer anything rather than be ...deprived of the man they love. I wonder why it is I am always being cast for the love-sick maidens? ...[but I] will not give up the stage until it gives me up.
(2/11/95)

Ashwell clearly wanted to be considered a serious actress, despite her youth, and the above interviewer quotes Ashwell as being keen, as part of her gaining insight into human nature, to visit a prison; which apparently she did by taking part in a Sunday service at Wormwood Scrubs prison in October 1895. She also wanted to visit the wards of Bedlam, the insane asylum, and to be present at a murder trial. When interviewed by *Today* she described her ideal part as one in which

humour and pathos are combined... when you hardly know whether to laugh or cry - that is, to me, true pathos... But I am getting almost tired of pathetic parts: I want a change - something lighter... [but] we [actresses] are always wanting to do the very thing we can’t, and we are too apt to forget that the public are far better judges of our capabilities than we are ourselves.
(23/11/95)

Clearly she was thinking about the roles she was best suited to, and already recognising that to have the choice, she would have to have more control over her career, with theatre management being an obvious direction to work towards.

¹⁹In an interview for the *Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News* 2 November 1895, Ashwell claims “a severe indisposition compelled me to leave the cast after the first month” of this season, but the extant playbills indicate she was still in the cast in mid July and until September when she was replaced by Doris Templeton.

Remaining at the Duke of York's, she appeared next in late January 1896 in *The Fool Of The Family*, a new three-act comedy by Fergus Hume. George Bernard Shaw, who for a number of years was very critical of Ashwell's vocal ability, commented, in one of the mixed reviews for the play and production, that he wished "Miss Ashwell would remember that there are short vowels in the dictionary as well as long vowels" (*Saturday Review* 1/2/96).

Her next few roles did not last long: in May at the Shaftesbury Theatre she played Margaretta in a new comedy, *The Matchmaker*, by Clotilde Graves and Gertrude Kingston. This, and Henry Hamilton's dramatic version of Prosper Merimee's novel, *Carmen*, which opened at the Gaiety on 6 June, were not considered worthwhile. "With positive regret is the name of Miss Lena Ashwell (Dolores) associated with this unfortunate production. Her refined, graceful and sympathetic work only serves to heighten the painfulness of Miss [Olga] Nethersole's performance [as Carmen]" (*Queen* 13/6/96).

In the autumn of 1896 Irving cast her as Edward, Prince of Wales, in his *Richard III*, which opened at the Lyceum on 19 December. While the *Daily Telegraph* considered "[Her]...pathetic voice and utterances had a world of meaning in them" (21/12/96), George Bernard Shaw, in the *Saturday Review*, took issue with Irving's casting:

No doubt we were glad to see Miss Lena Ashwell - but from the moment she came on the stage all serious historical illusion necessarily vanished... replaced by the most extreme form of theatrical convention. Probably Sir Henry Irving cast Miss Ashwell for the part because he has not followed her career since she played Elaine in *King Arthur*. She was then weak, timid, subordinate, with an insignificant presence and a voice which contrasted as it was with Miss Terry's, could only be described - if one had the heart to do it - as a squawl. Since then she has developed precipitously. If any sort of success had been possible for the plays ...at the Duke of York's and Shaftesbury Theatres, she would have received a large share of the credit of it. Even in *Carmen*, when perhaps for the sake of auld lange syne, she squawled, stood on the tips of her heels for the last time (let us hope), her scene with the dragoon in the first act was the one memorable moment in the whole of that disastrous business. She now returns to the Lyceum... as an actress of mark, strong in womanly charm, and not in the least the sort of person whose sex is so little emphasized that it can be hidden by a doublet and hose... Nothing can be more absurd than the spectacle of Sir Henry Irving elaborately playing the uncle to his little nephew when he is obviously addressing a fine young woman in rational dress, who is very thoroughly her own mistress, and treads the boards with no little authority and assurance as one of the younger generation knocking vigorously at the door. Miss Ashwell makes short work of the sleepiness of the Lyceum, and though I take urgent exception to her latest technical theory ...that the bridge of the nose is the seat of facial expression, I admit that she does all that can be done to reconcile us to the burlesque of her appearance in a part that should have been played by a boy. (26/12/96)

After the first performance, however, Irving injured his leg and the Lyceum closed for a month. *Richard III* was not performed again until the end of February. Laurence Irving writes that in March Ashwell replaced Julia Arthur as Lady Anne.

For the first time she was able to play a sustained scene with Irving and to appreciate the precision of movement and timing which characterized his method. In the wooing scene, he told her never to be beyond arm's length from him; when she discovered that every time Lady Anne wavered in her hatred of Richard, a bell tolled off-stage, the whole mood and meaning of the scene became clear to her.²⁰

Irving implies that Arthur became difficult and left the company. From the playbills, however, she had a week away (March 22-26) during which Ashwell played Lady Anne, resuming the role of Prince Edward from 27 March to 7 April.

Given the hiatus while Irving was indisposed, it appears Ashwell joined her husband, Arthur Playfair, in his season at Terry's Theatre, to play in the curtain raiser, *Delicate Ground*, a revival of the comedietta by Charles Dance. In an interview, Ashwell described how for a week in December 1896 she was playing in *Delicate Ground* at Terry's, then quickly removing her Pauline costume, dressed for her role as the Prince of Wales and clad in a long cloak would hurry across to the Lyceum to go on in *Richard III* (*World*, 3/3/03). From the playbills and the fact that there was only one performance of *Richard III* in December 1896, it is more likely this overlap occurred in February or March 1897.

Ashwell then played Nelly Bassett in the American play, *The Sleeping Partner*, at the Criterion, which opened on 17 August 1897. The *Daily Mail* thanked Ashwell for toning down the "roughness of the playwright" and suggesting "the poetry...[in fact she] lifted the play, turned its artifice into nature, its daubs into a gracious and delicate picture... [She] is an actress who helps us to think that the English stage is not all trickery and stale affectation" (18/8/97).

More successful was Louis N. Parker's²¹ *The Vagabond King*, which played a week at the Metropole Theatre, Camberwell, from 18 October and moved into the Royal Court on 4 November. Ashwell won critical superlatives for her characterisation of Stella Desmond:

a conspicuous success - very few young actresses with so little effort could have thrown such energy and earnestness into a part that carried home conviction by the very simplicity of the methods employed, and we doubt if the by-play she associated with the character could have been more intelligently expressed. (*Stage* 21/10/97)

In December 1896 Ashwell had taken part in a matinee performance of the comedy *Sweet Nancy*, adapted by Buchanan from Rhoda Broughton's novel *Nancy*. When it was produced during a season at the Avenue Theatre in early January 1898, she resumed the role of Barbara Gray with Annie Hughes as

²⁰Op.cit. p.602. Ashwell also refers to this in *Reflections from Shakespeare*. p.8-9.

²¹Louis N. Parker (1852-1944) studied at the Royal Academy of Music and was then director of music at Sherborne School for 19 years. A composer of cantatas and songs as well as playwright, he was created a Fellow of the RAM in 1898. Between 1905 and 1910 he devised a number of community pageants involving hundreds of local people. He collaborated with other writers and translated foreign plays and was a great admirer of Ibsen (*Era* 23/2/07).

Nancy and Martin Harvey²² as Algernon. She went straight from this into Arthur Law's *The Sea Flower*, opening on 5 March at the Comedy (under Charles Hawtrey's management), with Arthur Playfair and Eva Moore. The *Saturday Review* stated: "If Miss Ashwell [Mrs Trafford] is not careful, she will play herself off the stage; it is dangerous to act too well under existing conditions" (12/3/98).

She played alongside Martin Harvey again in Robert Marshall's²³ new play, *The Broad Road*, at Terry's Theatre in November 1898. The character of Cecilia Melville gave her "the opportunity of revealing that she is an actress of a high order, who, if the dramatic authors can supply her with true plays, may make for herself a great name. The play is not a good one" (*Daily Telegraph*, 7/11/98). For the *Sportsman*, Ashwell "cast a spell over the audience by the deep tenderness and rare delicacy with which she told the story of Cecilia's love" (7/11/98). The *Morning Leader* likened her, with enthusiastic admiration, to Mrs Kendal²⁴ (7/11/98).

The last time Ashwell appeared on stage with Arthur Playfair was in *The Crystal Globe*, Sutton Vane's adaptation of a French melodrama, *La Joueuse D'Orgue*, at the Princess Theatre, which opened on Christmas Eve, 1898. In *Myself A Player* (p.94-96) Ashwell gives a detailed description of the physical perils she and Lawrence Irving (playing an evil sorcerer) went through in this production, including escape from a burning house and walking a plank to obtain the crystal globe. By this time Ashwell's short marriage was in trouble. She had met Playfair on tour and thought him

amusing and a good actor. His imitations of famous people were amazing, and I enjoyed the laughter and the fun. There was no sign of his weakness as he was on the 'water waggon', going through a period of reform. The reformation did not last... after our marriage, I was plunged into the world of sordid horror and misery which drunkenness creates.

(*Myself a Player* p.113)

Ashwell's father was very ill at the time and she decided to endure the situation but at a cost. "I was forced to go through a breaking up of all my illusions and day-dreams; to see life raw. My soul was stripped of its comfortable covering as I fought my way to freedom" (p.114). She was also put back into the position of bread-winner for herself and ailing sister, Ethel. Her personal distress no doubt added to the intensity of her performance in H.V. Esmond's *Grierson's Way*, given on February 7,9,10 and 13, 1899, in a series of experimental matinees at the Haymarket Theatre under the auspices of the New Century Theatre Society. Writing in his autobiography, cast member J.H. Barnes described the play as

²²Martin Harvey (1863-1944) was an actor-manager later known as John Martin-Harvey, who worked for 14 years with Henry Irving, and was closely associated with the role of Sydney Carson in *The Only Way*, an adaptation of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (*Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, op.cit. p.529).

²³An Army Captain, Marshall wrote two comedies, *His Excellency The Governor* and *The Duke of Killiecrankie*, both popular at the turn of the century.

²⁴Madge Kendal (1848-1935), actress, who in partnership with husband William, were highly respected members of their profession for more than 40 years. In *Myself A Player*, Ashwell quoted Dame Madge as having said, "the art of acting was concentrated imagination", and in fact when the image is felt the words do become alive" (p.51).

dealing with a “somewhat gruesome subject... a cripple whose nature and temperament were warped by his misfortune and who worked the evil of the story.”²⁵ He doubted Ashwell

ever played better than in this play, though perhaps she won't thank me for saying so. I have seen and admired much of her work on the stage... but with the advantage of the author's ideas, and in consultation with him, I think she never reached a higher plane in her art than in *Grierson's Way*. (ibid)

Early evidence, perhaps, of Ashwell's particular ability to work well with contemporary authors and ideas and to contribute to the development of a new play. The *St James Gazette*, however, suggested, “One little word of caution should also be addressed to this accomplished young actress in respect of her manner of walking the stage, as also her tendency in striving after colloquialism to drop into carelessness of diction” (8/2/99), while the *Daily Mail* considered that “To Miss Lena Ashwell we look always for intellect combined with femininity in a degree which she, almost alone, can command” (8/2/99). Max Beerbohm wrote that

no actress could have intensified its [the character of Pamela] reality better than Miss Lena Ashwell. She did not move gracefully on the stage or use her voice beautifully, but she played with intense sincerity and power. And in a realistic play of this kind grace of movement and diction are of less importance than sincerity and power.²⁶

Ashwell's father died after a long illness in late February 1899 while she was in rehearsal for Louis Parker's *The Mayflower*. Parker wrote a long, supportive letter, indicating his understanding of the very difficult period she had been through, but urging her,

Don't lose courage. Don't lose faith... remember that you are surrounded with friends who love you... We mean to see you get on... to see you great and famous... I am grateful beyond words for your beautiful art, grateful... for your generous and enthusiastic help... my brightest hope is that we shall go on and on helping each other when occasion offers. Work is the thing. (25/2/99, Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester)

This may have emboldened her, in collaboration with fellow actress Henrietta Watson, to what she herself later described as ‘impertinence’ (*Myself a Player*, p.93). It was during the tour of *The Mayflower*, which opened at the Metropole, Camberwell in early March, playing in Manchester and Liverpool in late April.

The play was in many ways most charming, and the public were intensely interested until the middle of the story, when it seemed to ‘flop’ and did not recover. We... decided to reconstruct the script... and changed the sequence of the scenes. The manager was more or less of an amateur...I... asked L.N. Parker to come and see the improvements that we had made. There was a row! He was more than furious at the mess we had made and the play was restored. I was not only surprised and disappointed, but deeply injured that all our hard work and valuable efforts had not been properly appreciated. (ibid)

²⁵J.H. Barnes, *Forty Years on the Stage*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1914, p. 226-7.

²⁶Max Beerbohm, *Around Theatres*, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953, p.23.

However, the *Liverpool Daily Post* considered it “A beautiful play of original interest” (25/4/99), about the Pilgrim Fathers. Ashwell played Joan Mallory - “a stirring portrayal”(ibid). The *Manchester Evening News* quoted interviews with Ashwell, who, maintaining a positive public persona, described her enjoyment of sailing, canoeing, swimming and reading, particularly Shakespeare. She declared she liked fencing best of all, as well as anything that had to do with water. (22/4/99)

Ashwell returned to London and went straight into rehearsals for the reopening, on 23 May, of the Royal Court Theatre with R.C. Carton’s²⁷ new comedy, *Wheels Within Wheels*. In this play Mrs Onslow Bulmer, in attempting to stop her sister-in-law, Lady Curtois (played by Ashwell), from continuing unfaithfulness to her husband, becomes embroiled in the intrigue and comic compromising situations which she seeks to prevent. “Miss Ashwell is the most seductive, albeit the most heartless, of matrons that ever deceived both her husband and her lover” (*Globe* 24/5/99). The production had a comparatively long run until late September, by which time Ashwell was rehearsing for a return to the Lyceum Theatre and England was embarking on the Boer War which lasted until 1902 and which created much anxiety for the theatre profession, and for society in general.

Ashwell had obviously not alienated Parker completely when she tampered with *The Mayflower*; she returned to the Lyceum in *Man and His Makers*, co-authored by “two authors [Parker and Wilson Barrett] who have seemed to have little of thought or style in common [but] have joined their talents in a happy union” (*Referee* 8/10/99). Not only had Ashwell come back to the Lyceum, she was returning to the management of Comyns Carr. This “play of modern life in four acts”²⁸ opened on 7 October 1899 and dealt with the subject of heredity. A young couple in love, Sylvia Faber (Ashwell) and John Radleigh (Wilson Barrett), are thwarted by her father’s belief that John is doomed by his antecedents. Sir Henry Faber is proved wrong and hope is restored, but not before the characters experience considerable pain. “Miss Lena Ashwell was the individual success of the evening. She took hold of the horrible subject and never once flinched, and her realisation of the truth and the real condition of her opium fiend sweetheart was a perfect piece of art” (*Weekly Despatch* 8/10/99).

The next two productions provided Ashwell with the opportunity to work with the American actor, Robert Taber, who became a friend in whom she confided both professionally and personally. His first experiment in management in London was at the Adelphi Theatre with a production of Lawrence Irving’s historical drama, set in 1688, *Bonnie Dundee*, which opened on 10 March 1900. The *Times* considered it to be very unsuccessful (12/3/00), and *The Pilot* commented, “Mr Taber and Miss Lena Ashwell, both really good actors, can do nothing in such parts” (17/3/00). It was reviewed in the *Westminster Gazette* by

²⁷R.C. Carton was a nom de plume for Richard Claude Critchett (1856-1928).

²⁸The description in the programme for this production of *Man and His Makers*, from the author’s collection.

Malcolm Watson who had given Ashwell her first professional engagement.²⁹ “[Ashwell]...was very well chosen for the part [Lady Jean Cochrane], in which her reticent style, real power, and curious charm, enabled her to present an interesting and pathetic figure” (12/3/00), but he considered the play to be irritatingly unsatisfactory.

Bonnie Dundee was followed on 5 May by *Quo Vadis*, adapted from Sienkiewicz’s famous novel by Stanislaus Stange with Taber and Ashwell leading the cast. It was preceded by controversy over the dramatic rights; there were two versions in America (given on the same night in New York) as well as Wilson Barrett’s version, *The Sign Of The Cross*. “A more thankless role than that of Lygia could hardly be assigned to any actress, and although Miss Lena Ashwell bravely struggled to breathe into it life and meaning, even her efforts could not accomplish the impossible” (*St James Gazette* 7/5/00). Max Beerbohm was compelled to ask: “Why is her [Ashwell’s] uncompromising intelligence, her almost uncouth sincerity, always chartered for melodrama, which it can but ruin, and so kept out of the serious plays which it would glorify?”³⁰ For the *Daily Mail*,

the tawdry and irreverent could no further go; *Quo Vadis*... is a compound of magnificent scenery and irreverence... the note is insincerity... the chief impression is that never before has religion been quite so cynically used as an advertisement to fill the shilling gallery and the half-crown pit... The story of the Christian girl who converts the pagan noble has been told before and very much better told... [the cast] did their best... the audience cheered itself hoarse in praise of play, playwright and players. There is possibly a numerous public for such pieces. (7/5/00)

J.H. Barnes wrote of this play: “On the first night it appeared an unqualified success...[but] had distinctly bad luck. England was staggering under ...the reverses of the [Boer] War...[it] ran only four weeks.”³¹

Ashwell, while ‘resting’ in June and July - except for participation in summer charity events such as the “grand national patriotic fete at the Alexandra Place in aid of the Lord Mayor’s Fund” in late June (*Islington Gazette* 7/6/00), was, by early August, preparing for the opening of *Julius Caesar* at Her Majesty’s Theatre on 7 September. A revival by Beerbohm Tree (playing Mark Antony), this production originally premiered in January 1898 and Ashwell replaced Evelyn Millard in the role of Portia. The *Pall Mall Gazette* thought Ashwell lent “tenderness and grace to the part of Portia” (7/9/00), while for the *Saturday Review*: “her intelligence and her sincerity are unrivalled by any other actress” (15/9/00). The *News of the Week* perhaps identified why Ashwell was not usually a director’s first choice for Shakespeare’s women.

²⁹In *Myself A Player* Ashwell described her first meeting with Malcolm Watson: “I was so terrified that I tore the gimp off the arm of a chair and, realising what I had done, became absolutely speechless, praying that he had not noticed the destruction. I think that my agony softened his heart” (p. 57).

³⁰*Around Theatres*, op.cit. p.76.

³¹*Forty Years on the Stage*, op.cit. p.242.

Figure 3: Lena Ashwell and Robert Taber in *Bonnie Dundee*, Adelphi Theatre, 1900. (Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

Figure 4: Cover of *Julius Caesar* programme, 1900. (Author's collection)

Ashwell's engagement for the part of Portia was an interesting experiment, and the note of sexual passion always evident in this sympathetic actress's voice lends much tenderness to the wife's appeal to Brutus. But it is impossible for so typically modern and neurotic a woman to suggest the classic dignity of a Roman matron, the quiet heroism of Cato's daughter - and there are not a few faults of mistaken emphasis and false intonation in [her] elocution. (8/9/00)

For her subsequent appearances in Shakespeare's plays, critics continued to observe that her style of acting was not in keeping with the accepted interpretation of Shakespeare at the time. "I have already praised her way of seeming like a real person. In some parts - in any Shakespearean part - this very realism, this utter refusal to compromise with beauty, is rather a drawback" (*Saturday Review on Chance, The Idol*, 13/9/02). She did not play many Shakespearean roles, presumably because directors agreed with the above opinion.

Ashwell left the production of *Julius Caesar* before the end of its season, replaced by Eleanor Calhoun, to go into *Mrs Dane's Defence*. From an undated letter she wrote to Tree at this time, it appears she was called in to help out in the short term only, as she was already committed to *Mrs Dane's Defence*. "I am glad to be able to help & I am so very sorry for your disappointment & unfortunate illness. I can't write a sensible letter I feel too nervous. The cloaks are charming & I think the dresses will be alright. I will come & see you if I may on Monday."³² Presumably she was rehearsing during the run of *Julius Caesar* and left at the end of September or early October.

MRS DANE'S DEFENCE AND OTHER NEW PLAYS

The opening, on 9 October 1900, of *Mrs Dane's Defence* by Henry Arthur Jones at Wyndham's Theatre, was a significant occasion for Ashwell. The subject of the play is a 'woman with a past' who almost manages to convince a small community outside London that she is a respectable married woman, Mrs Dane, instead of Felicia Hindmarsh, whose affair with a married man led to his wife's suicide. As her past begins to catch up with her, the adopted son (Lionel) of the esteemed judge, Sir Daniel Carteret, played by Charles Wyndham, falls in love with her. Undoubtedly, this was Ashwell's most significant role to date and one for which she is remembered in accounts of the theatre at this time. The *Morning Post* in its review, described the gamut of emotions conveyed to her audience.

Her Mrs Dane was from first to last one of the finest, deepest and truest impersonations that one has ever seen. Her assumed indifference at the outset, her apparent sincerity, her growing wretchedness as she finds the ground she thought so firm slipping away from beneath her feet, her hysterical outbursts of defence and refusals to be further questioned and her piteous breakdown... the whole performance was exquisite and an honour to the English stage. (10/10/00)

³²Letter from Ashwell to Beerbohm Tree in the Bristol University Theatre Collection.

People considered “The greatest value of the play, was the full revelation of the power of Miss Lena Ashwell as the guilty adventuress, put to the torture by the dread of discovery” (14/10/00). Playwright Christopher Fry recalled a colleague’s comment on Ashwell’s realism - apparently she ‘unconsciously’ traced the pattern of the carpet with her foot as she was interrogated by the judge.³³ The *Standard* thought the play enabled Ashwell “to realise the high expectations formed by those who long ago predicted that only opportunity was wanted to place her on an equality with the best of our emotional actresses” (27/12/00).

A contemporary of Ashwell’s, and to some extent a rival, actress Irene Vanbrugh, wrote in her autobiography that

Mrs Dane was played with remarkable understanding by Lena Ashwell – an actress who held a unique position at that time. She was very sensitive with a quiet method and an interesting voice and expressive face. She depended entirely on her own way to gain her effects and undoubtedly succeeded in giving to any part she played a depth of feeling which she controlled with a technique of underplaying which was very successful.³⁴

Ashwell, who perceived clearly the significance of the role, told *The Sketch* that

I recognised from the very first the great opportunity ...I had... I made up my mind to try to take advantage of the chance given to me... my first association with Mr Wyndham, whose attitude is the personification of kindness. His help, advice, and his sympathy no words of mine can possibly repay... Mrs Dane is the best part I have ever played... the author has given the actress all the available opportunity. (17/10/00)

This was echoed by dramatic critic, William Archer, in his article *Study and Stage, The Criticism of Acting*, in which he argues that recognition for Ashwell had been given before; the reason for the current acclaim was because this was the best play she had appeared in, and it was important to remember the actor’s debt to the author: criticism must acknowledge the creator as well as the interpreter (*Morning Leader* 20/10/00).

At the end of 1900 *Mrs Dane’s Defence* was continuing its successful run. The *Era* considered that “The modern play of the year is undoubtedly Mr Henry Jones’ *Mrs Dane’s Defence*” (29/12/00). Other plays commented on in this category included *Mr and Mrs Daventry*; Beerbohm Tree’s production of Stephen Philips’ poetical drama, *Herod*; and J.M. Barrie’s *The Wedding Guest*. The *Weekly Register* summed up Ashwell’s strong position:

Perhaps the pleasantest event of the theatrical year has been the discovery of the general public of Miss ...Ashwell... a young artist who has for years beautified, not with her talent

³³A description given by Christopher Fry to the author in 1994.

³⁴Irene Vanbrugh, *To Tell My Story*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1948 p. 185.

Figure 5: Programme for *Mrs Dane's Defence*, Wyndham's Theatre, 1900. (Author's collection)

only, but with her whole-hearted and intelligent devotion, every bit of work entrusted to her. So her head will not turn when she is told that she has reached the summit of her art, she has climbed too steadily to be deceived. (11/1/01)

All this came to an abrupt end, however, with the death of Queen Victoria on 22 January 1901. Theatres closed as a mark of respect, and, as Ashwell said later in an interview for the *Washington Herald*, “it [*Mrs Dane*] was still doing an enormous business when our dear Queen died, and that finished its career. Sir Charles Wyndham ... said it was the greatest success he had ever known” (2/12/06).

The great personal success of *Mrs Dane's Defence* was followed by a fallow work period for Ashwell. However, her rise in status³⁵ as an actress led inevitably to a greater involvement with professional organisations, charitable events and the pressure to give opinions on matters pertaining to the stage as well as wider social issues, and she was not idle. Frequently she shared the bill with distinguished colleagues, reciting poetry³⁶ rather than participating in group scenes or performing dramatic monologues, at benefit matinees for organisations such as the Royal General Theatrical Fund, the Actors' Orphanage and other charities set up to help needy members of the stage profession, as well as for various children's and medical causes and special projects related to personal or family interests such as the fund to help sufferers of the Ottawa and Hull fire in Canada in May 1901 (*Daily Express* 29/5/01). She was also a regular supporter and participant in the annual Theatrical Sports Days and Garden Parties which in the summer months brought members of the profession together for relaxation.

A long-standing member, throughout her career, of the Theatrical Ladies' Guild, Ashwell gained early experience of war-time help to soldiers and members of the profession in straitened circumstances during the Boer War. She was in attendance as a Committee member when, on 20 December 1900, the Guild reported on its work collecting and distributing essential clothing for soldiers and members of the profession, as well as stage costumes to make it possible for performers to accept engagements. In addition, during 1900 the Guild supported forty cases of special aid, surgical assistance and hospital beds. The press played a vital role in the promotion of this meeting and the Guild's activities, as was acknowledged when, “Somewhat nervously Miss Lena Ashwell proposed a vote of thanks to the Press, which she described as a most powerful and awesome body” (*South Wales Daily News* 22/12/00).

³⁵Ashwell began appearing on guest lists at civic and social occasions such as the ball given by the Lord Mayor at the Mansion House to the Lord Mayors, Lord Provosts, Mayors and Provosts of the United Kingdom on 22 November 1901 (*Era* 26/10/01), and was accepted into fashionable society, making important contacts she was to exploit later.

³⁶For her performances Ashwell earned reviews such as the following for a fund raising matinee on 17 December 1900 at Wyndhams Theatre in aid of the Marchioness of Lansdowne's Officers' Families Fund. “[She] delivered with deep and intense feeling the beautiful poem in which an ardent lover swears his admiration for his Marion ‘when riding through the broom’ ... Miss Ashwell's earnestness and tenderness in her treatment of these selections were warmly appreciated and cordially recognised” *Era* (22/12/00).

Despite initial nervousness, Ashwell became sought after as an after-dinner speaker following her success at the O.P. Club Ladies' Inaugural Dinner on 16 December 1900. She chaired the meeting and gave an address on 'Actors and Actresses'. The *Daily News* featured her statement that,

We of the stage are traditionally nervous on first nights, and as I gather that this is your first night, and as I have never before spoken in public off the stage; it is emphatically mine... I have heard your Club sometimes described as a sublime society of irresponsible orators [and] I feel both hesitation and trepidation in addressing you. In my heart of hearts I am not quite sure that it is a woman's business to lecture - in public; it may spoil her method on other occasions. And method is a thing on which I set great store, because on the stage method is our greatest gift. (17/12/00)

The *Blackburn Standard* quoted from Ashwell's speech, in which she said "We [women] are fitted for certain parts, or we are not... we can but rarely seek the adventitious aid of spirit gum... Women make up a little on stage and a lot off it. Women can only play what they can reasonably appear" (22/12/00). She apparently quoted the late Mrs Sterling's saying that "no woman could properly play Juliet until she was seventy, and then she couldn't look the part" (*Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News* 22/12/00). Throughout her career Ashwell gave considerable thought to the nature of acting – these comments indicate her approach was one of realism. It seems that early on she recognised that there were limitations to the range of roles she and others could play - "I would beg you to remember this when judging the efforts of those whose business it is to please and amuse you on the stage. An actor or an actress may not really be acting badly - he may be utterly unsuited by temperament to the particular task of the moment" (*Topical Times* 22/12/00).

At the end of 1900 there was a real sense that the world was changing and that the stage was increasingly reflecting these changes, so often brought about by war. Ashwell as an actress was reaching her peak at a time when such changes in theatre and society were providing her with the opportunity to be noticed and heard. The O.P. Club guest lecturer prior to Ashwell was Cecil Raleigh, speaking on 'The Commercial Drama'. He provided audience attendance figures in support of his argument that the balance in the West End was shifting from melodrama and "cheap clap-trappy and commercial drama" (*Era* 24/11/00), to more serious drama, influenced by developments in education and the work and commitment of people like Irving, Beerbohm Tree, George Alexander and the Kendals. These people were, in a way, Ashwell's mentors, with whose management she was familiar as she began considering her longer term career. Summing up the year, the *Era* noted the impact of the Boer War on the lives of people and the theatre and the readiness of the acting profession to help raise funds for war causes:

The stage indeed, has shown itself once more to be in close touch with the national life: and we may safely say that there never was a time when it was more deeply and universally popular... there has been a marked change in the character and quality of the plays which have been produced in the latter half of this year... the art of dramatic writing cannot be sacrificed to conventional prudery. And in all of the plays - problem and otherwise - which have been produced this year we noticed a great increase in... 'humanity' ...the mere fact of

a subject being 'painful' will not prevent its being used as the theme of a very successful play. The idea that people only go to the theatre to be made to laugh has been completely exploded by the continued success of some of the saddest stories imaginable, treated with dramatic grip and power and acted with deep, convincing earnestness. For one of the most remarkable phenomena of recent years is the number of young artists of serious aims who have arisen, and not less surprising is the facility with which those actors whose reputations were made in thinner and lighter work have adapted themselves to the modern demand of purposeful and problematic plays. Who, when Mr Charles Wyndham was best known to fame as the much-engaged Bob Sackett³⁷, could have prophesied that he would develop into the most rational of raisonneurs and the stern unbending judge of *Mrs Dane's Defence*? And who could have foretold the sort of successes that have been made in the last year or two by actresses like Miss Irene Vanbrugh and Miss Lena Ashwell? ... Taking the year as a whole, it has been commendably free from effeminate triflings and unedifying follies... to sum up... [a] year for the stage, as for the nation... of heart. It has been a time of energy and emotion.

(22/12/00)

At the same time, however, despite the move away from idealism towards realism, glamour was still an important element, epitomised by *The Stage in 1900*, an expensive, glossy, illustrated publication, featuring such luminaries as Ashwell, produced by Spottiswoode and Co.,³⁸ and purchased apparently as a souvenir by royal personages, and the titled and wealthy, who now regularly attended and supported the theatre, unlike their counterparts fifty years before.

Ashwell's next West End theatre appearance was a year and a day after the opening of *Mrs Dane's Defence*, prior to which the *Era*, by way of reminding its readers of Ashwell's forthcoming appearance on stage, reported she had holidayed in France, spending time in Paris and Dieppe, and punting on the river. She declared that when she could find the time she intended to return to the serious study of music, but that at present she spent a great deal of time responding to correspondence. Her theatrical "superstition[s] were] a belief in success indicated by the hooks of her frocks catching in the fabric as she changes her dresses during the performance" (5/10/01), and the regular wearing of a favourite diamond brooch, representing a monkey.

Mrs Dane was a hard act to follow, but Isaac Henderson's³⁹ *The Mummy and the Humming Bird*, which re-opened Wyndham's Theatre for the autumn season on 10 October 1901, did reasonably well. Ashwell played the wife of a noted scientist (Charles Wyndham), who falls under the spell of the Humming Bird (Robert Taber) but all concludes happily. The *Era* found it

'curious'. It touches two extremes - that of domestic melodrama and that of analytical and ironic comedy... the humiliation of the husband is his just punishment for not having looked after his wife better... no actor on the London boards could have borne himself with more

³⁷Wyndham played this character in the play *Brighton*, Frank Marshall's anglicized version of *Saratoga* by Bronson Howard. It was a great box office success, but considered by many, for example William Archer, to be 'unbearably vulgar' (Wendy Trewin, *All on Stage*, London, Harrap, 1980, p.59-60).

³⁸This publication received comment in the *Era*, 4/5/01.

³⁹Isaac Henderson was an American journalist (for the *New York Evening Post*), novelist and playwright, who at this time was living partly in London and partly in Rome. Another of his plays, *The Silent Battle*, produced by Charles Wyndham at the Criterion Theatre in 1892, was an adaptation of his novel, *Agatha Page*.

dignity [than Wyndham] in the extremely undignified situation... in which [he] is placed by the author in the first scene of the fourth act. Miss Lena Ashwell... evidently unnerved by the warmth and fervour of the reception... on her first entry, played Lady Lumley with that nervous intensity which she employs with so much effect; and, as an exhibition of feminine fire and 'temper', her speech and exit in the second act were irreproachable. (12/10/01)

*Country Life*⁴⁰ considered "Ashwell gave to the character of Lady Lumley that intense but wonderfully restrained emotionalism, that astonishing naturalness and reality, that suggestion of height and depth in modern passion, masked by modern impassivity, for which she is always remarkable" (14/10/01).

In November and December this production made brief forays into the regions, with a week's run at the Brighton Theatre Royal from 17 November⁴¹ and a week at the Birmingham Theatre Royal in December, (described by the *Daily Telegraph*, 7/1/02, as "a brief and very successful visit"), before returning to Wyndham's on 6 January 1902. In addition, a performance of the first act of the play was Wyndham's contribution to the annual General Theatrical Fund matinee on 21 November at Drury Lane Theatre.

After the closure of *The Mummy and the Humming Bird*, Ashwell made a brief contribution "of conspicuous value" (*Daily Mail* 3/3/02), when she stepped in at short notice to help Mrs Tree⁴², who was ill at the beginning of her season of management at Wyndham's Theatre which opened on 1 March. The programme was a triple bill of plays, the third being *Caesar's Wife*, a translation of *L'Enigme* by Paul Hervieu. Ashwell played Leonore de Gourgiran, 'a guilty wife', finally caught out after an affair with a young man staying at the chateau of her husband. Initially both wives of the two chateau owners are suspected, finally the young man is caught in a trap and commits suicide; leaving Leonore distraught and she, after defending her innocence, confesses her guilt and is made to suffer remorse by her husband. "Ashwell's depiction of bitter indignation was extremely keen and powerful;... in the scene in which the erring wife confesses her guilt this fine actress gave further evidence of her dramatic ability" (*Era* 8/3/02). The *Daily Mail* noted that Ashwell "has with rare good nature stipulated that she shall give place to Mrs Tree as soon as that lady is well" (1/3/02); this she did after ten days and the waiving of her fee.

Throughout her career Ashwell recognised the need to diversify. This, coupled with her love of poetry and the English language, led her to develop recital programmes, which she performed regularly. She considered that "It is poetry which lifts ugly actions out of the sordid because it recognises the torture and anguish of the spirit" (*Myself a Player*, p. 72). At the Royal Academy of Music in 1890 she had formed a

⁴⁰At this time there were substantial reviews of London productions in regional newspapers, often in anticipation of tours.

⁴¹On 19/11/01 Ashwell travelled from Brighton to take part in a special matinee in aid of the Lifeboat Saturday Fund (Bristol branch) at the Princes Theatre, Bristol. She appeared as Lady Teazle in a scene from *The School for Scandal*, in a programme that included Act II of *Hamlet* and a sketch, *At the Point of the Sword*. The *Bristol Times* declared: "There is no class of men who lend themselves to deeds of charity more than actors, and the same may be said of the fair sex connected with the profession. They one and all do their best to help a lame dog over the stile" (20/11/01).

⁴²Helen Maud Holt (1863-1937) was Herbert Beerbohm Tree's wife, who worked in close association with him.

long partnership with pianist/composer Stanley Hawley; a friendship which lasted until his death during the First World War.

At the time [1890], she had a light soprano speaking voice, but with help from Comyns Carr and Stanley Hawley, added an octave to the lower register, and this extra octave gave her the instrument required for emotional roles. As Miss Ashwell intoned a dramatic passage, Hawley played chords on the piano, until the actress began to respond to the harmonies and realize how thin her stage voice really was. The final discovery was that the voice which belonged to her emotional self was fully an octave lower.⁴³

The relationship with Hawley was an important one, which Ashwell acknowledged.

Later he set Elizabethan love lyrics and other poems to music and they were all published by Bosworth: lovely barred music through which the poem was increased in beauty; we used to imagine that somewhat in this way the old Troubadours spoke to their harps. It was hard work, but the result, entirely due to the help that Stanley Hawley gave me, has been that my ‘squall’⁴⁴ was changed into a controlled instrument... It is not only pronunciation and enunciation and the other technicalities so often mentioned; it is music that can make an instrument if we can feel it and work with it. All poetry is a song. (*Myself A Player* p.112-3)

Before leaving the Academy, Ashwell had recited *Bergliot*, a dramatic poem with orchestral accompaniment by Grieg, at a public concert. The success of her rendition led to her being engaged to repeat the performance at an early Sir Henry Wood Promenade Concert in 1891.⁴⁵ One of Ashwell and Hawley’s earliest recital programmes was presented in February 1894 at a Steinway Hall matinee concert when she performed Whyte Melville’s *Through the Broom*, Adelaide Proctor’s *Story of a Faithful Soul* and J. Davidson’s *Ballad of Hell*, to Hawley’s musical accompaniment. Over the years she gave many such recitals, Elizabethan love lyrics being her particular favourites.

It is likely that the non-charity events, such as their matinee recital on 1 May 1902 at the Bechstein (now Wigmore) Hall with vocalist Thomas Meux from the Royal Italian Opera company at Covent-Garden, were organised by Hawley as commercial ventures. Not everyone, however, appreciated their style.

Miss Ashwell’s beautiful voice and pathetic intensity were appreciated to the full by a large and fashionable audience; but we must confess our dislike to a musical accompaniment that is played in a manner that drowns even one single word of the text. Mr Stanley Hawley’s music is often charming and generally appropriate; but as it is illustrative, the composer, who is also the executant, should know that it must be kept well under the voice.

(*Era* 3/5/02)

This review did not deter the organisers of the Sunday Palace Pier Concerts who engaged the duo for a recital in September 1902, of which the *Sunday Times* commented: “Her perfect enunciation and artistic temperament are qualities of the highest value” (10/9/02).

⁴³Ernest Short, *Introducing the Theatre*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1949, p.284.

⁴⁴This was G.B. Shaw’s description of Ashwell’s vocal technique in the *Saturday Review*, 26/12/96.

⁴⁵Ashwell writes that at this time she sang in the choir of the Greek Church in Bayswater, earning a small salary and enjoying “sitting up in the gallery singing the unaccompanied chants” (*Myself a Player* p.56).

Ashwell and Hawley performed frequently with Royal Academy of Music trained colleagues, participating in events such as the Boosey & Hawkes' (music publishers) annual Queen's Hall London Ballad Concerts, sharing the 1903 programme on 25 April with Clara Butt and the Westminster Singers.⁴⁶ Their contacts and knowledge of the repertoire, to be put to good use later at the Kingsway Theatre and for the Concert Parties during the First World War, developed at this time. Throughout her life Ashwell was acknowledged as a successful former student of the Royal Academy and was made a Fellow of the Academy in 1901. She always maintained a strong loyalty for, and commitment to, its activities and took part, in early December 1902, in an entertainment in memory of William Nicholl, a popular tenor and Professor of Singing at the Academy, "who did so much for musical art" (*Era* 29/11/02).

Apart from participation in several fund raising events, mostly in the form of 'At Homes' organised by society women with large homes and time to rally their wealthy friends to support worthy causes, and a brief revival of *Mrs Dane's Defence* at Wyndham's in early June 1902, Ashwell was preparing for a new role and giving some thought to her longer term career. In January 1902 she was interviewed while anticipating a new play by Henry Arthur Jones. She had promised Jones she would not reveal too much about the play, except that "it is nothing at all like *Mrs Dane's Defence* and I love my part in it and am simply suffocated with eagerness to play in it."⁴⁷ At this time, when asked about her intentions of undertaking theatrical management on her own account, she "merely shook her head at the suggestion and remarked that she had no definite plan" (*ibid*).

As, in the words of the *Daily Express*, Jones' new, "strongly emotional play for Ashwell" (20/5/02), took shape, she was preparing for an eight performance revival of his *Mrs Dane's Defence* with Wyndham, which opened on 5 June. The *Lady's Pictorial* of June 1902 considered "It is a terrible study of a woman in agony - a woman far from wholly bad, who has to tell lie upon lie to prevent her faults in the past killing her present joy, and blotting out hope from her future, but it is one which stirs many emotions ...not least that of pity", while the *Daily Telegraph* thought Ashwell's "performance seems to have gained in breadth and colour and fertility of resource since it was last seen some twelve months ago" (6/6/02).

Despite this short season, Ashwell remained in the public eye, reciting at a special reception for Sarah Bernhardt at the Hotel Cecil on 23 June. Bernhardt was giving a London season, one of the celebratory events to mark the coronation of Edward VII which took place on 9 August 1902. The August 1902 edition of *World of Dress* interviewed Ashwell on her theatrical dress, claiming 'important' insights into her methodology, including her attention to detail regarding accessories. She considered it important to

⁴⁶Ashwell gave her recitations of love lyrics to music by Stanley Hawley, including *Yes, I'm in Love* by William Whitehead; *Cupid and Campaspe* by John Lyly; *Phillida Flouts Me* (traditional) and *Why So Pale?* by Sir John Suckling.

⁴⁷From an article published in an unidentified American newspaper. Ashwell scrapbook 6085, Theatre Museum.

get a character's shoes right and sought realism in her dress rather than fashion. For her it was important to avoid the obvious and she had therefore decided against wearing white for Mrs Dane's confession scene - so as not to anticipate it, she wore blue. She liked blue and white but never wore green on stage; hated wearing hats and gloves because she considered they hampered her. Clearly dress was an important key to any character she was playing and she always thought out her own costumes. From the time of her success in *Mrs Dane's Defence*, Ashwell gives the impression that she had an innate sense of exactly how far she could break theatrical conventions (including costume) without losing the respect of her audience and colleagues. Some of this would have been as a result of her growing confidence as an actress, which in turn gave her confidence off stage to challenge social conventions.

H.A. Jones read his four-act play, *Chance, The Idol*, to George Bernard and Charlotte Shaw in the summer of 1902. They were unable to attend the opening night at Wyndham's Theatre on 9 September, but Shaw wrote to Jones from Norfolk on 31 August, having enjoyed the reading but declaring

the theatre only exasperates me when I care about the play. I have almost come to the conclusion that actual performance is only advisable as the last resource of a thoroughly undramatic bungle... However, you are not so badly off as you might easily be elsewhere. Lena is a squawker; but she is a squawker of genius.⁴⁸

The *Times* considered the theme of the play - illness and disease in the form of the compulsion to gamble, which can only incite pity not sympathy in the dramatic sense, worked against its success, particularly as the playwright did not explore the inner processes of the gambler (Ashwell as Ellen Farndon). She tries to win at the gambling table to pay the debts of her former lover, Alan, with whom she had a child and who abandoned her. It was "too predictable" (10/9/02), since the Examiner of Plays, considering the moral issue, could only pass the play if the gambler on stage loses. Set in Monte Carlo, the play ends with Ellen, penniless but due some of the money she has paid out on her lover's behalf, drawn by maternal instincts to look after her child with her mother's help. The *Era* reported

Ashwell...[who] has established a 'speciality' in the depiction of neurotic, hyper-sensitive and morbid young females, was quite in her element... kept the audience in constant anticipation of an emotional outpouring on the part of the erratic and excitable erring one...[she] never faltered, flagged or failed. *Chance, the Idol* is not equal to Mr... Jones' usual clever work. (13/9/02)

The *Daily Mail* agreed. "Disappointing Play at Wyndham's Theatre. The main feature of the performance lies in the acting of Miss Lena Ashwell, whose power of conveying conviction, of earnestness and genuine feeling is not surpassed by that of any actress on the English stage" (10/9/02).⁴⁹

⁴⁸Doris Arthur Jones, *Life and Letters of Henry Arthur Jones*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1930, p.220.

⁴⁹With regard to realism, the *Era* reported on an audience member on 1 October who called out to the actor playing Alan Leversage, "You dirty cad! Marry her!" (4/10/02).

Three weeks into the season, Ashwell celebrated her thirty-third birthday, the date of which (28 September) was noted by the *Era*, in its special listing of Birthdays of the Week (27/9/02) – yet another indication of Ashwell’s celebrity status. After less than a month’s run, on 3 October, *Public Opinion* announced that *Chance, the Idol* was being taken off. However, a week later the journal advised that “the discovery has been made that the play has been showing ‘an appreciable gain’ to the treasury. Hence its retention in the bill. Sir Charles [had] thought the drama was ‘playing to a substantial loss’” (10/10/02). It continued to play until the end of October, during which Ashwell, who was absent for some performances due to illness (*Era* 11/10/02), had begun rehearsals as Emilia, in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. She had also attended the profession’s celebration of Wyndham’s knighthood at the O.P. Club dinner at the Criterion restaurant on 12 October, where Sir Charles acknowledged the friendship and support for the theatre by the Royal family, and manager Carl Hentschel highlighted the popular actor-manager’s career and involvement in the enhancement of the profession’s status and recognition (*Era* 18/10/02).

Forbes Robertson’s *Othello*, with Gertrude Elliott as Desdemona, Robert Taber as Iago and Ashwell as Emilia opened on 15 December 1902 at the Lyric Theatre. In November 1902 *Country Life* considered the casting of Ashwell as Emilia struck “one as having most interesting possibilities”, and it was she who received the best reviews.⁵⁰ The *Standard* reported “She is earnest and sincere; her denunciation of her husband; her wrath against Othello, and bitter contempt for his blindness were expressed with real vigour and truth... quite in the spirit of the tragedy” (16/12/02). The *Era* noted that Forbes Robertson lacked the physique, vigour and voice needed for the title role, and praised Ashwell for giving the finest performance; commenting on her youthfulness as “a deviation from the old method, which is, of course, justified by the text and by the age of Iago, her husband” (20/12/02). In the same edition the *Era* announced that Ashwell had been engaged to play in Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* with Beerbohm Tree in the spring of 1903, to be followed by *Dante* with Henry Irving at Drury Lane. Summing up the theatrical year of 1902, the *Era* gave Ashwell two honourable mentions:

A noticeable feature of the year has been the poor figure which has been cut by our old established playwrights. Mr Pinero has been silent: Mr H.A. Jones’ only contributions have been *The Princess’s Nose* and *Chance, the Idol*, which at Wyndham’s Theatre was only saved from immediate failure by the emotional acting of Miss Lena Ashwell... Mr Forbes Robertson’s revival of *Othello* was, perhaps, an error of judgement as far as he himself was concerned: but as an experiment in temperament it was interesting and Miss Lena Ashwell’s Emilia was certainly superb. (3/01/03)

On 31 January 1903 the *Court Circular* declared “it is very gratifying to see how Miss Ashwell’s talent is at last being recognised, and how rapidly she has come to the fore.” Prior to this, the *Daily News* had reported on early rehearsals and the actors’ progress on character development (7/01/03), while the *Globe* described Tree’s interest in Tolstoy’s novel, the scenic effects, the adaptation for the stage and the

⁵⁰Ashwell’s scrapbook for this period contains sketches and paintings of Ashwell as Emilia by various artists. Theatre Museum, London.

characters which included thirty-seven speaking parts (14/02/03). It was the first time Tolstoy's work would be seen on the London stage and there was considerable interest in the Russianness of the story, the music and the visual effects. Despite the degradation portrayed, it was considered to be a very moral play and an ideal vehicle for Tree and Ashwell. The *Anglo-Russian* featured the play in great detail over three months,⁵¹ looking at background to the production, the novel and the subject matter, followed up with cast pictures, the story as portrayed in the play and highlights from reviews from fifty-six newspapers and journals published in February.

Resurrection, adapted by Henry Bataille and Michael Morton, opened at His Majesty's Theatre on 17 February 1903, with Tree as Prince Dmitry and Ashwell as Katusha. "[Ashwell] showed herself to be our greatest emotional actress, for, taken as a whole, I do not see anyone else upon the stage at the present moment who could have rendered those varying moods of that wild soul with so faithful an intensity" (*Truth* 26/2/03). The *Sketch* considered the play did not bear much resemblance to the novel, but many aspects were effective and the acting and scenic effects were clever (25/02/03). As had occurred on the success of *Mrs Dane*, Ashwell appeared on several series of souvenir postcard sets depicting scenes from the play. At short notice, the King and Queen attended the second performance, creating a bit of a flurry because the Royal Box had been sold but "the purchaser immediately waived his rights and accepted seats elsewhere" (*Daily Express* 19/2/03).

The *Sun* considered the role of Katusha gave Ashwell the opportunity to display

the extensive boundaries of her art. We know her as the falsehearted butterfly of society, with padded movements and purring, lying tongue, such ... as she played in *Wheels within Wheels*. We have seen her display great power in 'strong' scenes... in *Othello*, but never before have we seen her as an abandoned, drunken 'fille de joie'. Voice, gestures, and a swinging dissolute stride, all contributed to a clever piece of character-acting. Unfortunately, the attempt to adapt Tolstoi has resulted in a melodramatic compromise with an unsatisfactory ending, thus robbing the situation in which Maslova [Katusha] finds herself of much of its original intensity.⁵² (19/2/03)

In early March, the *World* published an interview with Ashwell in its *Celebrities at Home* series. She was then living at 4 Portman Mansions, near Baker Street in London. The interviewer described Ashwell as being "about medium height, with a grave face and a quiet, serious, rather nervous manner" (3/3/03), finding it hard to imagine how she was capable of "such versatility." Apparently Ashwell was "pre-eminently English-looking and English-mannered", prompting the writer to praise her ability to give such a thrilling depiction of "the agony, the terror, and the shame of a life such as that of Maslova, the poor outcast of Russian society" (ibid). Given these comments, it would appear that Ashwell's preparedness to

⁵¹In Volume VI, No.8, February 1903 and Volume VI Nos.9 &10, March/April 1903.

⁵²When a French company brought their version of *Resurrection* to the Royalty Theatre, London, in the spring of 1906, critics compared it unfavourably to the English version and found Berthe Bady as Katusha less impressive than Ashwell. Reviews are included in Ashwell's scrapbook Number 6055, Theatre Museum, London.

abandon herself to her characterisation and have no need to retain her 'English-manners' obviously singled her out from many of her colleagues on the stage at the time.

By now well into rehearsals for *Dante*, Ashwell presided at a meeting of the Playgoers' Club, attended by some five to six hundred people, at the Hotel Cecil on 5 April 1903 where journalist Foster Fraser lectured on 'The Stage Siberia and the Real.'

Mr Fraser said in *Resurrection* there was generally an accurate representation of Russian life of the present day, though there were small errors, such as putting the ikon in the wrong corner of the room, or vodka drinking out of glasses many sizes too large. He was, however, most concerned with the last scene. That was the traditional Siberia, and there was no foundation for the horrors and cruelties described in Tolstoy's book. (*Era* 11/4/03)

Ashwell introduced Fraser saying "She did not want to anticipate [his] criticism, but she would remind him that *Resurrection* described life in Russia ...thirty years ago, and that probably great changes had taken place since then" (*Daily Chronicle* 6/4/03). Fraser illustrated his talk with lantern slides of Russian scenes and Siberian prisons. The evening included the singing of Slavonic songs and the Russian National Anthem by the Russian Choir (in full national dress) which also sang before performances at His Majesty's Theatre.

When the *Era* looked back over 1903, in an editorial entitled 'High Class Drama,' there were three plays which prompted the claim that "So far from being moribund, modern English drama has only just begun to live" (9/01/04). These were Pinero's *Letty*, *Resurrection* ("No one can say that Tolstoy's work is not 'of the time'. It is the twentieth century in excelsis - the twentieth century with its deep melancholy, its wide sensitive sympathies, and its relentless questioning" (ibid)), and Ernest Willett's *A White Passion Flower*.

As Ashwell represented her profession more and more, it would have been impossible for her to ignore the increased activity in the women's movement. For example, the *Anglo-Russian* for March/April 1903, which Ashwell would have seen, had a two page article, *Woman Among the Nations*, which looked at the work of woman suffrage groups in France, Bulgaria, Holland, USA, Australasia, Argentina, and India. With a new season of Parliament approaching the journal urged:

At the commencement of this new session the women of Great Britain and Ireland should be on the alert and press forward their just claim for full political representation on an equality with men. If the majority of women studied economic questions beyond their own little domain of domestic expenditure, they would realise the growing necessity for the services of capable efficient women in every department of the State.

At the same time as the women's political movement was gaining strength and notice, women were seeking recognition for their achievements in areas closer to Ashwell's experience. The previous September the *Era* had declared "The modern lady dramatist is 'coming along' in full force" (13/09/02).

Figure 6: Programme for *Resurrection*, 1903. (Author's collection)

Figure 7: Programme for *Resurrection*, 1903. (Author's collection)

Thirty women playwrights⁵³ (mostly English, some American) were listed as having written plays or pieces for the theatre and the writer acknowledged that this list may not be complete. The most recent names to be included were “Miss Martindale, whose *Sporting Simpson* is due at the Royalty, Oct. 1st, and Miss Evelyn Greenleaf Sutherland,⁵⁴ who is one of the writers responsible for *Beaucaire*, which Mr Lewis Waller will introduce to England at Liverpool early next month” (ibid). Early in March 1903, in the company of some of the women playwrights acknowledged by the *Era*, including Sarah Grand, Ashwell was a guest (with Ellen Terry and Lady Hamilton) at the fourth anniversary luncheon of the Society of American Women in Literature at the Prince’s Restaurant in London.

Henry Irving’s *Dante*, written by M.M. Sardou and Moreau and translated by Laurence Irving, was eagerly anticipated. As early as 24 January the *Era* had announced elaborate preparations at Drury Lane Theatre - the scenery was painted by three French artists who worked on it for months, and special incidental music was being written by French composer M. Xavier Leroux. Ashwell left the cast of *Resurrection* after the performance on 22 April and was replaced by Lily Brayton⁵⁵ for the remaining month of the run. There was some uncertainty about the *Dante* opening date, postponed from 23 April, as Irving was unwell. However, on this date the *Daily Express* announced that the opening on 30 April would establish a theatrical record, given that “it comprises no fewer than 49 speaking parts, to say nothing of the unnumbered hosts of ‘extras’.” There had been “weeks of unremitting rehearsals...[and] today the first of a series of dress rehearsals will be held, two rehearsals a day being the rule now that Miss Ashwell is able to take up her part ...at night” (ibid).

For the playwrights, although “Dante was a poet rather than a man of action... [they had] made [him] an active reformer, a man ahead of his time, and distinctly modern in his views and sentiments” (*Era* 2/5/03). They had decided to personify in him “a lover of liberty, a fierce hater of persecution, of oppression and of clerical domination. Our Dante is not the historical Dante; it is the moral Dante” (ibid). The play associated Dante’s personality with the most famous and popular episodes of his great poem and with the legends of Ugolino of Francesca and of Pia del Tolomei.

Sir Henry Irving’s *Dante* was a creation of surpassing power, impressive interest, and grand and noble elevation. From a purely dramatic point of view, the part is not a very strong one; it was the art of impersonation employed by the actor that made his performance such a success. Miss Lena Ashwell depicted the anguish of Pia del Tolomei and the impulsive energy of Gemma with all the striking talent which has made her so popular; but neither role exacted to the very utmost her remarkable abilities. (ibid)

⁵³These were Violet Greville, Mrs Oscar Beringer, Mrs Lancaster-Wallis, Mrs Craigie, Mrs Frank Taylor, Mrs Musgrave, Martha Morton, Mrs T.P.O’Connor, Mrs W.K. Clifford, Netta Syrett, Constance Fletcher, Mrs Ryley, Harriet Jay, Mrs Hodgson Burnett, Dorothy Leighton, Mrs William Greet, Mrs Hugh Bell, Lady Colin Campbell, ‘Michael Field’ (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Florence Warden, Sarah Grand, Gertrude Kingston, Mrs Herman Merivale, Alicia Ramsay, Estelle Burney, ‘Risden Home’, Margaret Young, Miss Martindale and Evelyn Greenleaf Sutherland.

⁵⁴In 1926 Ashwell premiered Sutherland’s one-act play, *His Own*, with the Lena Ashwell Players.(Appendix Six).

⁵⁵ Reviews of Brayton’s performance are included in Ashwell’s scrapbooks in the Theatre Museum, London.

Dante played eighty-two performances in London, closing on 18 July. On 10 October, after a summer break and regional tour, the sixty-five year old Irving embarked on a gruelling twelve month tour of America. Ashwell was replaced by Nora Lancaster for this tour (*Era* 18/7/03). *Dante* was not successful in America, and Irving was obliged to abandon this “vast production”⁵⁶ early on. However, it lived on in the memory in London, featuring prominently in the *Era*’s summing up of the past dramatic season. “The fact that, despite the difficulty of making a dramatic play out of the life of the Italian poet, Sir Henry Irving was able to draw thousands to this immense theatre proves the marvellous spell exercised by his genius and his personality” (15/8/03), alongside Beerbohm Tree’s *Resurrection*,

[a]...bold and fearless enterprise... the performances of himself and Miss Lena Ashwell made an indelible impression on all who saw them. By the presentation of this great work - thrilling, impressive, and human - Mr Tree conferred a benefit upon London playgoers and proved that courage is often the best policy in theatrical management. (ibid)

For this season the *Era* considered that actors rather than playwrights were the major contributors to its prosperity.

As the London season of *Dante* drew to an end, Ashwell appeared in the Casket and Trial scenes of *The Merchant of Venice*, with Irving as Shylock and Ellen Terry as Portia, during a special Actors’ Association benefit matinee at Drury Lane on 14 July. A once-in-a-lifetime event for the fans of many well-known actors, it raised over £1000 to help needy actors (*Era* 18/7/03). In contrast, at another benefit occasion - the Testimonial and farewell matinee at the Haymarket Theatre, on 6 October 1903, for John Billington,⁵⁷ who was retiring from the stage after fifty years, Ashwell played an old woman in the first performance of a short play, *The Monkey’s Paw*. This dark, but dramatically intense little tale about the power of a monkey’s paw to grant wishes, was adapted for the stage by Louis Parker from a story by W.W. Jacobs. Ashwell, who performed it on this occasion with Cyril Maude and Sydney Valentine⁵⁸, revived the play in later years as a curtain raiser.

About the same time as she was cast in her next West End production, Ashwell was the guest speaker, on 7 November, for the New Vagabond Club at the Criterion Restaurant. Indicating her growing awareness of issues needing to be raised and identifying the matters of most concern to her, but not necessarily on completely safe territory, she apparently stated that

‘only a few years ago theatres were much larger and much more dimly lighted.’ We [the *Era*] should like to know the names of the ‘much larger’ theatres to which Miss Ashwell alludes. We fancy their size is as imaginary as the ‘general feeling of dissatisfaction with plays and actors’ which she has discovered. (*Era* 14/11/03)

⁵⁶Henry Irving: *The Actor and His World*, op.cit p.653.

⁵⁷In May 1908 Ashwell organised a similar benefit occasion at the Kingsway for Billington’s actress wife.

⁵⁸Sydney Valentine (1865-1919), a popular actor who accompanied Wyndham and Irving on their American tours and had an extensive career on the London and New York stages. He was an important player in the activities of the Stage Guild and largely responsible for the Valentine Touring Contract drawn up in 1919, shortly before his death.

She went on to speak of the difficulties for young women seeking work in the theatre and looked forward to Mr Tree's proposed school of acting⁵⁹ to improve standards and to provide early opportunity for talent to be developed or for another career to be sought. "It seems to me... we would all prefer a little more technique and a little less of that vague thing called personality that irritates us as much oftener than it satisfies us. If an actor gets swamped by technique, it is simply a proof that his personality is ultimately not strong enough to rise above it" (ibid).

She also talked about ways to deal with audiences needing to eat before performances and being punctual; in Paris one act plays were successful, and allowed for suitable breaks to let audiences in. She expressed the opinion that the theatre was in a period of transition and thought better theatre lighting had brought the stage and audience into a much closer relationship, making it possible to present plays of a more delicate and real nature. This was what the modern stage was grappling with. She looked forward to better training, and to "a municipal theatre, built by the County Council on the banks of the Serpentine" (ibid). From these points, it is clear that by the end of 1903 Ashwell was embarking on a direction that would take her beyond the merely interpretative role of the actress.

When, in November 1903, Beerbohm Tree was planning his production of the David Belasco/John Luther Long five-act drama, *The Darling of the Gods*, which had premiered in New York in December 1902, *M.A.P.* reported that there was much discussion over the casting of the leading actress – the well-known Mrs Brown-Potter, who had performed in Japan, was a strong possibility, until "it was finally decided that the Tosca part should be offered to the heroine of *Resurrection* - to wit, the brilliant... Lena Ashwell...[and it is] likely to be another sensational success for [her]" (28/11/03).

The production opened at His Majesty's Theatre on 28 December 1903 and was still drawing crowded houses after its hundredth performance in late March 1904 (*Daily News* 25/3/04). The play tells the story of the love between the daughter of the Prince of Tosan and Kara, leader of a band of outlaws, sought by the Minister of State, Zakkuri (Tree). Yo San (Ashwell) conceals Kara (Basil Gill) for some time, deceives the Minister as to his whereabouts, but is eventually discovered by her father, who betrays Kara to his enemies. He is tortured and Yo San, to save his life, reveals the gang's hideout. They are destroyed, Kara commits suicide and Yo San is condemned to purgatory, before she too, commits suicide. However, the final scene shows her ascending (after one thousand years) to Heaven to join her beloved Kara.

Critics were divided on Ashwell's contribution. *Black & White Magazine* felt that "Cold print cannot convey an adequate idea of her admirable work in a distinctly difficult part. Whatever pathos the piece possesses is wholly in her hands, and [she] rises above the part to heights of womanhood where, perhaps,

⁵⁹Beerbohm Tree established the Academy of Dramatic Art in Gower St, Central London, in 1904. Now the Royal Academy, many of its graduates have made important contributions to the British theatre in the ensuing 95 years of its existence.

no other actress today could follow her” (2/1/04), whereas *Queen* was convinced that Ashwell’s “picture of this poor little product of the land of the chrysanthemum is thoroughly Western in treatment [and like] a Japanese vase made in Birmingham” (2/1/04). The *Standard* thought Ashwell presented “A notable and skilful study of the young Japanese Princess”, becoming “a deeply sympathetic figure” (29/12/03) when her fate begins to overwhelm her. *Vanity Fair* was more concerned with the impact on Ashwell’s performance of the necessity “to keep at least half her mind concentrated upon the considerable physical difficulty and doubtless acute physical discomfort of waddling across the stage with her knees close together and her feet spread out” (7/1/04).

Just as *Resurrection* had provoked interest and discussion on the veracity of the portrayal of things Russian, *The Darling of the Gods* did the same for things Japanese. Douglas Sladen posed the question, Is *The Darling of the Gods* Japanese?, answering that

With the exception of the dumb manservant’s, Miss Lena Ashwell’s is the most Japanese personality in the piece. Gaiety, tragedy, and devotion are stamped on her life from the outset. But she is often not Japanese at all. One of the most repellent features about the Japanese is that they have no love-making to tone down the crudeness of the relation between the sexes; and much of the charm in Miss Ashwell’s acting consists in the beauty and good taste of her love-making. It was almost a misfortune to have been in Japan and know how utterly un-Japanese was that display of the sunny generosity of her nature, which warmed the whole theatre as well as the heart of the outlawed Prince.⁶⁰

Arthur Diosy, however, was less sympathetic, declaring the production, particularly the scenic, botanical objects, misrepresented Japan, provoking an *Era* editorial, *Dramatic Japan*, which considered other representations of Japan on the London stage and quoted responses from Japanese people (23/1/04/). The *Daily Mirror* declared that

Mr Roger Pocock, the writer brother of Miss Lena Ashwell, informed me that his sister’s make-up and dress were accurate copies from those of the sister of Mr Markimo, the Japanese artist, and that Mr Markimo, himself a ‘Samurai’, or gentleman, carefully superintended every detail of the production. (25/1/04)

Much of the debate was related to the developing realism in the theatre and the seeking after authenticity in design as well as acting. However, *Yo San’s Song* for Acts 3 & 4⁶¹ is much more authentic American musical than anything Japanese: “There are fleet loves and sweet loves and love of all season and loves without reason and great loves like mine when the heart aches, the heart breaks, that vows can be slighted, when love has been plighted, red roses can never make wine.”⁶²

⁶⁰Quoted from an unidentified article in Ashwell’s scrapbooks in the Theatre Museum, London.

⁶¹These are on a handwritten page of music in Ashwell’s scrapbook, TM6063, Theatre Museum, London.

⁶²In Ashwell’s scrapbook, TM 6063, there are copies of sheet music, dedicated to Ashwell. These include the YO SAN WALTZ by Antonia Doring (from *The Darling of the Gods*) with a picture of Ashwell as Yo San, published by E. Donajowski and William Furst’s waltzes and Yo San’s theme and other tunes ‘as played at His Majesty’s Theatre’, published by Charles Sheard & Co., Anglo-American Music Publishers. Theatre Museum, London.

Figure 8: Top: Lena Ashwell in *Madame X*, 1909 and *Resurrection*, 1903. Bottom: Lena Ashwell in *Leah Kleschna*, 1905 and *The Mayflower*, 1899. (Author's collection)

THE STATE OF THE THEATRE

As Ashwell grew in confidence and stature as an actress and as a leading member of the theatrical profession, she developed a strong interest in the professional concerns of the time. Given her almost inevitable path towards becoming an actress/manager, she would have followed developments and problems as discussed in professional forums and reported in the *Era*. Prior to 1900 Ashwell was concerned with finding work and gaining recognition but by the turn of the century she had acquired a public profile and a strong commitment to improving conditions for all in her chosen profession.

Issues such as municipal theatres as part of a wider concept of a national theatre, theatre regulations including licensing and censorship, and the status and conditions of employment for theatrical workers began to be discussed in earnest and were to pre-occupy Ashwell and her colleagues for the next fourteen years, up to the outbreak of the First World War.

Actors' salaries would always be an issue of concern and although Ashwell reached a high position in her profession relatively quickly (within nine years) she had known struggle and the need for financial independence and, from this time on, became increasingly involved in improving conditions for professional actors. In 1900 the range of salaries paid to actresses was generally between twenty shillings a week and three pounds. In what was rapidly becoming an overcrowded profession, the 'moneyed amateurs', often society women who felt they could act, undermined the value of others by working for nothing or very little. There were very few checks and balances on the profession. With no union fighting for a basic minimum wage, managers could exploit an over-populated profession, and they did (*Era* 29/9/00).

Ashwell's vision for the future of theatre was much wider than just the desire to continue to develop her acting career. Colleagues were learning more about German municipal theatres - how they operated and were funded from local and state government and endowments from the wealthy. It seemed to be a difficult concept for the English to grasp. The *Era* could not envisage County Council committees working with theatre managers and was convinced that ratepayers would be very reluctant to contribute. From an artistic point of view, it was thought the repertoire would be limited and would reflect work already being done in West End theatres and on tour (30/11/01). The *Era* reflected the London-centric nature of theatre at this time. Most touring productions originated in London or ended up in London after provincial tryouts. This continued to be the *Era*'s point of view throughout much of the decade. In November 1905 it was still difficult for the journal to conceive of successful publicly funded local theatres. The arguments persisted that audiences would be insufficient and lack of competition would undermine energy; ratepayers would not be interested in supporting such places with their rates; municipal organisers were amateurs in this field and the repertoire was likely to bore the average

theatre-goer (25/11/05). This was clearly not the case in other European countries, but this was ignored, with assumptions made that publicly funded theatre must by definition be dull and worthy.

Linked with the municipal theatre idea was the issue of a national theatre, along the lines of the Comedie-Francaise in Paris. This was not embraced wholeheartedly, either. On 1 February 1902 the *Era* ran an editorial that made no attempt to support such an institution.

Like the prevailing epidemic of smallpox, the 'movement' in favour of an English National Theatre must, we suppose, 'run its course'. There is no vaccinator protection possible against the contagion of misguided enthusiasm; and the advocacy of a National Theatre must occupy its allotted period before it is replaced by some fresh proposal for the elevation and improvement of the British drama... It may appear a paradox to say that the best reason for our never possessing such an institution is the fact of our not having one already... An establishment like the Comedie-Francaise cannot be inaugurated by the raising of a subscription or even the passing of a Parliamentary Bill. It must be the growth of years of national life and development... The tradition must create the institution... subsidy should be the crown of the edifice, not its foundation stone... the very essence of a National Theatre is that it shall be the expression of national aspiration.

The argument continued with the advice that it is already possible to see good, serious plays, to have them published and that poets were recognised and performed on stage. The writer considered that agitators for a national theatre were those who sat at home and grumbled and who would not support it anyway. "The result would be that the National Theatre would become the home of conscientious failure. Its name would be a synonym for respectable dullness; and it would share with the pulpit an unenviable reputation for the cure of insomnia" (ibid).

From the turn of the century, London County Council appeared to become more active in the introduction and implementation of new regulations for theatre licensing and safety. The *Era* considered the Council's Theatres and Music Halls' Committee to be unsympathetic to theatre managers, citing the very rapid passing of stringent regulations on evacuation exits in the summer of 1901, a time when theatre managers were traditionally on holiday, as an example of their approach (20/8/01). In December 1901 the County Council announced that the Lord Chamberlain (responsible for the licensing of stage plays) was considering incorporating the theatre licensing regulations into the regulations of his department, making for a more co-ordinated approach which would make it harder for defaulters to continue operations (*Era* 14/12/01). Predictably, in September of the following year, the *Era* advised that the Lord Chamberlain, previously a buffer between theatre managers and the County Council, had written to advise managers that from now on licences would not be granted for the performance of stage plays in theatres unless managers produced "a representation in writing from the London County Council that [their] theatre was, in the opinion of that Council, 'properly safe' from the danger of fire, or the decision of an arbitrator to that effect, appointed in the manner provided in the Act of 1878" (6/9/02).

Figure 9: Theatres at which Ashwell performed. Drawings by Nick Charlesworth. (Badger Press, England)

The editorial noted that after Henry Irving had spent many thousands getting the Lyceum up to regulation standard, the owner (Comyns Carr) was now being asked to undertake £20,000 of work in alterations and improvements. Other managers were similarly affected and the *Era* urged managers to unite against this situation, otherwise unsympathetic, inexperienced and changing councillors and officers would make their lives a misery. In July 1902, there was further pressure on managers with the obligation to post for audience viewing (generally in published programmes) many of the regulations relating to licensed theatres, so that audiences could also be vigilant (*Era* 26/7/02). Such developments were significant in the gradual shift from a purely commercial theatre to one in which the public had a more active involvement.

In March 1904 there were further new regulations issued by the County Council covering fire and panic in places of public entertainment (*Era* 5/3/04), while by late 1906 attention had shifted to increased regulations concerning electric lighting and heating installations and operations (*Era* 17/11/06). Costs continued to rise for theatre managers – new rate charges were set in January 1904, remaining at similar levels until at least 1906. As Ashwell began to consider management possibilities, she would have been interested in the *Era*'s list of rate charges for various London theatres. The Great Queen Street Theatre, which became Ashwell's Kingsway a year later, was charged £500 a year for rates, whereas Wyndham's paid £2500, the Savoy (where Ashwell managed a season in April and May 1906) paid £2914, the Coronet (where Ashwell presented her season of *Marguerite* in September 1904) was charged £875, and the Adelphi, £5000 (6/10/06).

At this time, the seeds were sown for the 1909 debate on censorship and the respective roles of the Lord Chamberlain and the County Council – a debate in which Ashwell was an active participant. The *Era* consistently urged managers to resist the idea of the County Council taking over the role of the Lord Chamberlain in relation to censorship, arguing that constant changes to requirements, brought about when officers of the Council changed, meant managers were at the mercy of officer ignorance and lack of understanding about theatre buildings and audiences (11/10/02).

MOVING INTO MANAGEMENT

On 12 March 1904, during the run of *The Darling of the Gods*, the *Era* announced the death, in America, of actor Robert Taber, aged thirty-eight. Ashwell had been planning to go into management in London with Taber, a stage partner in 1900, and at the time of his death they were preparing the first production, *Leah Kleschna* by C.S. McLellan. Presumably the aim was to present their productions in both England and America. Taber was an important friend and support for Ashwell, particularly as her marriage to Arthur Playfair began to fall apart. In *Myself a Player* she writes that Taber had “encouraged me to believe in my work, saying that I ‘might do much’. He was a very brilliant actor and taught me many of my parts, showing me line by line the effects that could be made, so that the technical side of the art was revealed to me” (p.115-6). She describes how in the previous year they had worked with McLellan in

Scotland on *Leah Kleschna* but when they returned to London “our dreams were smashed like an egg-shell... it was found that he had advanced tuberculosis of the throat and could never act again... One of those very rare souls; one of the very brave, the very true” (p.129). Taber’s death left Ashwell with many problems and the feeling that she had reached a crucial point in her career. While still a supporter of the system of the actor-manager, she recognised the disadvantages:

When I had been ill and unable to play the public had asked for their money to be returned. There was nothing ungenerous or unreasonable in the fact that the actor-manager needed to keep the attention of the public on himself as the centre of attraction. For that reason - or perhaps at the moment there were no criminals ready for me to act - I bought a French play, re-named *Marguerite*,⁶³ and took the plunge into management alone... I was afraid of London and went on tour, thinking that I should gain the experience I needed cheaper, as all touring is on sharing terms. There I made a mistake as I was known and loved by many in London but was practically unknown in the provinces... The tour was a failure and I lost my money... I had tried to get Charles Frohman to produce *Leah Kleschna*, but he laughed at the idea that a thief could, as a heroine, prove of interest ... [The] play was sold to that magnificent actress, Mrs Fiske. Mr Frohman had to buy the English rights for a very large sum, and later I played the part at the New Theatre in 1905. (p.131-2)

From 30 July 1904 when the *Era* announced Ashwell’s cast for *Marguerite* at the Coronet Theatre, the journal began a series of progress reports on her management plans. From early September there were a number of interviews and articles about Ashwell, summing up her career to date as an actress, stating that she had reached a peak in her ability and was highly regarded by audiences, critics and managers in general. The *Pall Mall Gazette*’s journalist, in *Our Latest Actress-Manager, An Interview with Miss Lena Ashwell*, found her

rehearsing energetically... advising, superintending, giving a hint here and making a suggestion there, as though she had played the difficult part of actress-manager for years instead of only for a few weeks. ‘Rehearsing is hard work, of course, but I feel ever so much better for my short trip to America⁶⁴ ... I love rehearsals. For me they never lose their interest and fascination.’ When asked about being her own manager, she replied, ‘I like it immensely. So far, it has been the most delightful experience of my life, and I sometimes wish that we could go on rehearsing like this for weeks, and put off that dreadful first night indefinitely. I cannot tell you how terrified I am when I think of it... apart from that, I love my work intensely, and am never so unhappy as when I have nothing to do. In fact, one of my chief reasons for going into management... was my wish to avoid those long and weary periods of resting, from which I have suffered as badly as anybody. It seems to me that to be one’s own manager is the only way to be constantly employed.’ (3/9/04)

On the same date, G. Spencer Edwards in the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* elaborated on this view in *Miss Ashwell’s New Departure*:

Under the prevailing system I cannot get the characters I am ambitious to appear in, and my ambition will not be satisfied until I have a theatre in London at which I can produce serious

⁶³The *Era* announced this on 23 April 1904, presumably from a press release issued by Ashwell.

⁶⁴ This visit is likely to have taken place in July, the first opportunity Ashwell had to pay her respects to Robert Taber’s family.

works, and prove that there is as big a public for them, when they are of the right sort and properly presented, as for the lighter and more frivolous productions that have ruled so long.

The *Manchester Courier* added: “She is convinced that long runs exercise a baneful influence upon dramatic art. As a manageress she intends to strike out on fresh lines, giving the public plays in quick succession” (6/9/04). Given this intention, there was considerable interest in her planned repertoire and it seemed she might be looking to the French for her second production when the *Era* announced she had secured the English rights (with Michael Morton adapting) to *Les Oiseaux de Passage* by Maurice Donnay and Lucien Descaves which played at the Theatre Antoine, Paris, for over one hundred performances in 1903-4 (10/9/04). However, the *Northern Star* advised, while Ashwell was on tour in October, that she “professed no marked fondness for... plays of any particular country. ‘But I like good plays, wherever they come from’” (19/10/04).

Frank Curzon, commenting on the current state of theatre in the *Era* under the heading *Theatrical Prosperity*, struck a note of caution which would not have encouraged Ashwell at this time. He considered there were too many theatres with not enough good plays to fill them. He wrote also of the thin line between success and failure, which was dependent on so many factors including the siting of theatres, production costs and ticket prices (3/9/04). Undaunted, Ashwell described *Marguerite* as having a strong appeal for her. As a friend of Victorien Sardou, the father-in-law of one of the authors, she had read the manuscript and secured the English performance rights before Rejane produced it in French (*Nottingham Express* 12/10/04). Michael Morton, a young playwright encouraged by Ashwell, whose later plays her company performed during the 1920s, adapted *Marguerite* for the English stage, but the result differed “in many essential details from that recently produced by Madame Rejane” (*Era* 20/8/04), convincing Ashwell that the retention of the original title of *La Montansier* (by M. G.A. de Caillavet, Robert de Fiers and Jeoffrin), “would be misleading” (ibid). Morton described the atmosphere of the play as anticipating

the coming of the [French] Revolution. In the second act Marguerite’s ambitions are satisfied. She is a woman of the world, an actress of importance, with an assured position, at the head of her own theatre, managing her own company ...the first deep note of the drama is struck when the woman reveals the stronger elements of her character, and proves her loyalty to her friends.
(*Pall Mall Gazette* 3/9/04)

Presumably it was these qualities that attracted Ashwell to the role. However, with its historical setting, *Marguerite* was a demanding and probably expensive piece to stage. It contained a battle scene, with gunpowder smoke and other effects. Marguerite is an ambitious actress in the reign of Louis XVI. Her company’s leading actor, Neuville and an old comedian, St Phar, are both in love with her. She soon has a theatre of her own and shelters a Royalist, Phillippe, Marquis De Pommeuse, whom she loves, when Robespierre and St Just are in power. St Just discovers her secret and offers her the choice of becoming his mistress or being guillotined. To avoid this, she induces her company, and Phillippe, to volunteer to

join one of the Armies of the Republic. Phillippe, however, deserts and Neuville demands that he be shot. Marguerite threatens to run in front of the guns, but Neuville threatens suicide and Marguerite is forced to order the attack in which Phillippe is wounded. Eventually, Marguerite and Neuville are reconciled through rehearsing a love scene.

Marguerite opened on 5 September 1904 in the presence of many colleagues including Beerbohm Tree and Constance Collier. The *Daily Telegraph* declared Ashwell had made

a brilliant debut at the Coronet Theatre in her new career as manageress. Everyone will wish her well in her enterprise, and if last night's audience, with their cordiality, their continuous applause, and their generous enthusiasm, afford any omens of the future, she is assured of popularity and success... the play went smoothly because it had been well rehearsed, and the general mounting of the piece reflected great credit on the superintendence of Mr Morton and the control of Miss Ashwell... it might have been wished that her first appearance under her own management might have been in some stronger, more real, more human character. Marguerite's emotions are more or less on the surface; they do not touch those deeper elements of personality to which Miss Ashwell often appeals so triumphantly... [however] she is, thanks to a clever and artistic impersonation, feminine and charming, a woman of flesh and blood, and not merely an artificial and theatrical puppet, hung on obvious wires, as we found her to be in the French version.⁶⁵ (6/9/04)

Generally the press praised her initiative but the play was not considered to be of great import although it was well presented. By this stage in Ashwell's career the critics had somewhat typecast her as the 'serious, modern woman' and would not allow her to diversify. Critic William Archer, writing in the *World*, thought the role was not specially suitable for her. "It demands brightness, versatility, even volatility of expression, whereas Miss Ashwell's gift lies rather in the direction of suppressed intensity of feeling. No one can rival her in portraying the anguish of a tortured soul; but there is very little of that order of emotion in the part of Marguerite" (13/9/04). The *Tatler*, acknowledging that Ashwell was nervous as she made her debut as an actress/manager, thought she should not have chosen *Marguerite* for such an occasion. Arguing that as her own manager, she could choose her roles ("though it is notorious that an artist generally likes to do that which he does least well", 16/9/04), the reviewer thought

Marguerite is a showy piece made for Madame Rejane who is essentially a comedienne. Now among many excellences Miss Ashwell's forte is not comedy.⁶⁶ Temperamentally she is nothing if not a modern woman of almost neurotic earnestness... The play is a hotch-potch of caprice, tragedy, comedy, burlesque; in fact all the features in which a player can shine have been selected and planted as it were in a pot (boiler)... Miss Ashwell was quite at her best in the second act when she... forgot to be so yearningly tender. She was, in short, herself. (ibid)

Land and Water did not want to disparage Ashwell's abilities by saying she was

⁶⁵Madame Rejane had presented the French production to London in June 1903.

⁶⁶Happily, however, Ashwell was not unduly influenced by the critics, given that in 1908, with *Diana of Dobson's*, her comic skills and lightness of touch were highly praised.

incapable of playing comedy... Her voice, her appearance, her manner, her atmosphere - all strike the note of tragedy. She needs some strong emotional stimulus to bring out the best ...in her... If she be wise, she will chose always those parts which give scope for this wonderful talent of hers. Nature designed her for tragedy. (10/9/04)

The London season of one week was followed by a non-stop ten week provincial tour.⁶⁷ Unlike many of her colleagues at the time, Ashwell had not toured very much in the provinces, although some remembered her from the 1894 *Sowing the Wind* tour, so it was a risky enterprise; and as she recognised later, probably a mistake. For the first four venues, she played *Marguerite* for the full week, adding *Mrs Dane's Defence* in Nottingham, then giving three or four performances of both plays in a schedule that involved six evening performances and Saturday matinees, as well as occasional Flying Matinees. Nottingham welcomed *Mrs Dane's Defence*: "Since her first appearance under her own management, she has frequently been requested to appear in this play and we take it as a compliment... that this is the first town in which she has put it into the evening bill" (*Nottingham Weekly* 8/10/04). Given Ashwell's comments on the failure of the tour, this 'compliment' may have been prompted by necessity if *Marguerite* was not able to attract sufficient audiences for a full week. Even for the one-off matinee performance of *Mrs Dane's Defence* in Belfast, despite the *Era* report (5/11/04) of an apparently crowded house, the *Irish News*' account is likely to be more accurate. "The higher priced portions of the Palace Theatre were very well filled yesterday afternoon... but the other parts of the house were sparsely occupied... perhaps the enthusiasm... was to some extent prompted by admiration of her pluck and enterprise" (3/11/04).

Reviews for her performances and the rest of the company were good throughout the tour, the *Nottingham Guardian* congratulating her on "the manner in which, through all her varied work since the days of Mrs Dane (original production in 1900), she has retained touch with her famous character" (13/10/04). The *Sunderland Weekly Echo* was pleased she was "not one of those short-sighted managers who hold that their own ability justifies them in engaging unknown or incompetent artists for the lesser parts, so that her company will be found to include several tried and trusty favourites" (22/10/04).

Ashwell continued to be featured in reviews and articles about her work, with the *Sunday Chronicle* providing an insight into her method of selecting new plays. In *Waiting for the Good Play* Ashwell admitted that although there were hundreds of playwrights, there were very few "who can write the acceptable work... She reads and reads many manuscripts, but is obliged, after hours of wearying labour, to reject the ambitious efforts of the unknown author... she is waiting for the play which shall combine amusement for the masses and instruction for the serious"(18/9/04). Although initially Ashwell had been

⁶⁷The itinerary was Manchester Theatre Royal, week commencing (w/c) 12/9/04; Leeds Queens Theatre w/c 19/9/04; Glasgow Royal w/c 26/9/04; Liverpool Royal Court w/c 3/10/04; Nottingham Royal w/c 10/10/04; Newcastle Royal w/c 17/10/04; Sunderland Avenue Theatre 3 nights commencing on 24/10/04; Middlesbrough Royal 3 nights commencing on 27/10/04; Dublin Royal w/c 31/10/04; Bristol Princes w/c 14/11/04. Flying matinees were presented in Manchester on 5/10/04 and Belfast on 2/11/04.

optimistic about finding good plays (until she went into management she had not received or had to read so many manuscripts), she was not alone in this quest. In June 1904 the *Era* editorial had focussed on *The Dearth of Plays*, giving evidence of discussion, an increasing awareness and changing attitudes towards unknown playwrights and new plays; advising that managers were taking more time to consider new plays, and that fewer plays were experiencing long runs, creating demand for more plays. However, critics were still rather cynical and off-putting, presumably impacting on the confidence of young playwrights (11/6/04).

The *Liverpool Echo*, in *A Chat with Miss Lena Ashwell*, advised that she was considering

‘several plays and hope[d] to produce several new works before long... [she has] designs on Shakespeare...[and was] more than anxious to appear as Rosalind and as Juliet. The former character especially appeals...[she] should hate to play Lady Macbeth.⁶⁸ No one appreciates its great possibilities more than I, but ...the role of Rosalind appeals more to me than any of Shakespeare’s characters.’ Miss Ashwell is disposed to take a very cheery and optimistic view of the present state of the theatre in England, and she rejoices in the broader spirit of tolerance now extended to the traffic of the stage. She agrees that the public... are a little too prone to patronise musical comedy, but she recognises that they, after all, are the real arbiters of what shall or shall not be the vogue. (5/10/04)

The *Nottingham Express* described Ashwell as “very interesting - straight, sincere, and thoughtful, with an eye for the lighter side of the *comédie humaine*; and a calm commonsense outlook on the facts of life, particularly theatrical life” (12/10/04). Ashwell was quoted as stating

I have entered upon my present undertaking with serious intention... I want to extend my outlook, to face a wider public than ever before... I want to hazard my fortune to make or mar it... In the autumn of each year I hope to make a round of the big provincial cities. In January, London and the Metropolitan season... I have discovered a good deal. The insularity of some of the big provincial centres amazes me. Their reserve, their haughtiness, their coldness towards strangers, their self-reliance. These are qualities supremely English I know: they are qualities which have made England what she is; but I felt, at first, like an adventurous traveller in a foreign land, unknown, unwelcomed, and viewed even with suspicion... But the public is to be won. (ibid)

She spoke on the impact of music halls competing with the theatre, considering that this went in cycles and that the public would have a surfeit and return to the theatre. She also thought the present structure of the drama was effective in allowing actors and audiences to deal with tension and strong scenes but she preferred short intervals rather than the French practice of long intermissions. The writer also “learned that Miss Ashwell had read 40 new plays during the time she had been on tour; that she managed her own business affairs; that she answered some two score of correspondents that day” (ibid). Seeking a different angle, the *Bristol Western Press* asked her about the stage as a career for women and Ashwell indicated she felt it was important the hardships were made clear from the beginning: “the very obstacles in one’s path are a sort of insurance against waste of time. The girl who has sufficient patience and enthusiasm and grit to surmount the difficulties of the first year has probably something of genius - assuming that genius

really is an ‘infinite capacity for taking pains’” (16/11/04). She considered the provinces a better training ground for the young actor - in London one ran the risk of becoming an imitator. She observed that audiences in the country were very different from those in London, and they differed from town to town and night to night.

At the end of the *Marguerite* tour in mid November 1904, Ashwell was obliged to acknowledge that her first experience of management “was a failure and I [had] lost my money; so I returned to London with experience and nothing else” (*Myself a Player*, p.132). Although for the next six months, before the opening, on 2 May 1905, of *Leah Kleschna*, she appeared in a number of charity events, reciting poetry and lending her support to worthy causes, as she writes in *Myself a Player*, it was a difficult time. “Between the failure of the tour and the production of Leah there were months of worry and anxiety... There were three of us to keep, myself, my sister Ethel, and a small child [Honor Stevens⁶⁹] that I had adopted” (p.132). Ashwell describes how this provoked much gossip and the assumption that the child was illegitimate or born to Ashwell out of wedlock (she was still married to Arthur Playfair at this time, although they were not living together). “It is always more amusing to say shocking things about people than humdrum ordinary ones” (p.133). The child was the orphaned daughter of a cousin, Charlie Stevens (on Ashwell’s mother’s side of the family), and when he “and his wife died within a month of each other ...no one wanted the child. We were neither of us really capable of bringing her up...[but] without any legal formalities, we sent for the baby” (ibid). It is interesting to note that either no mention of this child was actually made in the press, or else Ashwell destroyed any articles as there is no reference to Honor Stevens in her scrapbooks. She never mentioned the child in her care in interviews about her personal life, but by 1936 in her autobiography she obviously felt confident enough to record the circumstances, without giving any details of Stevens’ adult life.

LEAH KLESCHNA

Following what to Ashwell would have been the frustrating success of *Leah Kleschna* at the Manhattan Theatre, New York, in December 1904, the *Era* confirmed that Charles Frohman had (at last) bought the English rights and hoped to produce it in London around Easter with Sir Charles Wyndham (11/2/05). The *Era* hoped the title role would be played by Ashwell. Soon after, the *Sketch* reported there had been rumours that Minnie Maddern Fiske would come from New York to play the role again although McLellan, having written the role for Ashwell, was pleased she was to play it. It was now known that

⁶⁸Lady Macbeth was one of the few Shakespearean roles Ashwell did play, during the First World War.

⁶⁹Honor Stevens married the actor/production manager Harley Merica, who worked with Ashwell in the 1920s as a member of the Lena Ashwell Players; however, not much else is known about this couple. An Honor Cole was a member of the Players in 1922-3, at the same time as Harley Merica. She played fairly minor roles. It is likely she was Honor Stevens, taking the stage name Cole, from her ancestors, once again on Ashwell’s mother’s side of the family (*Myself a Player* p.18).

Ashwell will defer her own managerial scheme until the autumn, which is what she has always desired to do, though she might have been forced to take on the direction of a West end theatre during the spring. When she does open, it may be taken as a foregone conclusion that her first play will be *Birds of Passage* which Mr Michael Morton has adapted for her from M. Donnay's play. (15/2/05)

On 9 March the *Daily Express* announced that after *Leah Kleschna* Ashwell would go into partnership with William Greet. While Ashwell would control the artistic matters, Greet would run the business side. "Their choice of plays will be catholic and Miss Ashwell will not invariably play the nominal leading part. The partners have commissioned Mr McClellan to write them a play."

Rehearsals for *Leah Kleschna* were underway by late March, with plans for an Easter Monday opening at the New Theatre. Anticipation was running high, with the *Era* hopeful "that the powerful character of Paul Sylvaine will prove one of the finest dramatic treats of the many which Sir Charles has contributed to the contemporary stage" (23/3/05). However, in April Wyndham was injured in New York and unable to work for some time. In a press release published generally on 15 April, it was announced that Leonard Boyne would replace him and that the play would be directed by Dion Boucicault. The opening night was delayed until early May, creating an unusually long rehearsal period for Ashwell. It appears her familiarity with the role paid off - she "acted with all the quiet naturalness and wonderful reality which are her own particular gifts. She suggested throughout the unknown longings of the girl; there was a spirituality about her, shining through her every look and action" (*Standard* 3/5/05).

The story is set in Paris. Leah is the daughter of a professional burglar, trained by him to break into houses; in this instance to take jewels from the home of Paul Sylvaine, a kind and reforming French deputy, admired (from a distance) by Leah since he rescued many people, including the Kleschnas, from a shipwreck. Leah does not know it is Paul's house until he apprehends her and then lets her go. Meanwhile Raoul, the worthless brother of the woman Paul is to marry, steals the jewels. Paul suspects Raoul, not Leah, and is forced to tell Raoul's father of his son's guilt. The proposed marriage does not take place. Leah is reformed by Paul's words and actions, and when threatened by her father after Raoul comes to him offering to share the proceeds of the stolen jewels, threatens suicide rather than continuing a life of crime. Leah escapes and three years later she is discovered happily working in the lettuce fields of Austria with Paul seeking her out, presumably with a view to eventual marriage.

The success of this production was a vindication of Ashwell's strong commitment to the play over a number of years. The *Freelance* critic could "say no more than this - it is a masterpiece and beyond all criticism (May 1905) while for the *Daily Mirror* Ashwell had "long been recognised as a fine emotional actress, but never has she had a better chance [than in this play] to make good her claims to the foremost place among actresses of this type" (14/5/05). For *M.A.P.* she was no longer Lena Ashwell but

Figure 10: Top: Lena Ashwell in *The Shulamite*, 1906 and *Mrs Dane's Defence*, 1900. Bottom: Lena Ashwell in *Diana of Dobson's*, 1908 and *Leah Kleschna*, 1905. (Author's collection)

a fierce, abandoned, daring woman, finally softened by love into humanity but prepared even then to end her life by a revolver if that great deed be requisite to her new purpose. The sensation of terror and pity which this very marvellous young girl is able to produce in this part is an imperishable memory. (June 1905)

Perhaps the *Era* best summed up the ingredients of the production's success:

Leah Kleschna is a 'safe success'. It combines all the strong, close construction, and tense sensationalism of a melodrama, with the deep human interest of a modern 'social regeneration' play. The union is irresistible... Intelligent melodrama, well written and grandly acted, seems to be as high as we can expect to get at present... The elevation, the imagination, and the humanity of Paul Sylvaine were as well shown by Mr Boyne as were the manliness, the tactfulness, and the polish of the personage... the keen delicacy of [his] touch was irreproachable... Mr Charles Warner's Kleschna had all that famous actor's best qualities... Miss Ashwell, so to speak, has been in training for this role for some time. She was, it seems, born to play the part. The passion, the sadness, and the fury of the mixed and warped nature of the girl are all shown by the actress, now in the prime of her artistic development, with marvellous force, freedom and sweetness... its subtleties are in danger of being overlooked in the very intensity of its sensation. (6/5/05)

The *Tatler* billed Ashwell as "The Dramatic Success of the Day,"⁷⁰ while The *Play Pictorial*⁷¹ featured forty production photographs, including a cover picture of Ashwell. She received many fan letters⁷² and reviews reached American newspapers⁷³ (more than two months after the opening) in Boston, Pittsburg, Philadelphia and New York, where Alan Dale, writing in the *New York American*, compared, disparagingly, the London production with the New York version. The review is virtually an indulgence of his admiration for Mrs Fiske, who "would smile in a luxury of humor if she could see the almost burlesque imitation of her own work that is offered by Ashwell...[who was] quite unintelligible... She talked in a sort of graphophonic snappiness with a blur to it... Miss Ashwell's performance... was a whole bunch of feathers in Mrs Fiske's cap" (27/7/05). Dale conceded that the play and production had been well-received in London, but denied the enthusiasm of the English response. This had no apparent impact on the London audience and by early August one hundred performances had been given. The *Era* was enthusiastic, declaring "The success of the play in the face of the hot weather is a valuable testimony to its dramatic power and deep interest" (29/7/05). The journal reviewed the production again on 5 August 1905:

It says much for the staying powers of Mr McLellan's clever play that it has survived the 'nipping air' of an exceptionally depressed and depressing theatrical season, and has entered upon its fourth month at the New Theatre... An intensely interesting story is cleverly developed, and the audience are brought face to face with a social problem of the highest importance.

⁷⁰The *Tatler*, Volume XVI, No.202, 10/5/05 p.1.

⁷¹The *Play Pictorial*, No. 36, Volume 6, 1905.

⁷²These letters are included in the Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester.

⁷³Ashwell included these reviews in her scrapbooks, Theatre Museum, London.

Such a major dramatic production could not be missed by royalty and a letter⁷⁴ from King Edward's representative indicates the King's presence at a performance and his appreciation of Ashwell and the work of the whole company. In September the *Era* recorded the one hundred and fiftieth performance and a slight change in the final act, previously considered to be the weakest. Leah was now discovered, at the rise of the curtain, working on her knees in the field, rather than entering to meet Paul (23/9/05). Reviewers attended and most papers printed brief comments, further boosting publicity for the season. However, in early October Ashwell was unwell and was replaced by Lillian Waldegrave for a number of performances (*Era* 7/10/05). This may have affected audience numbers, for the production did not continue for much longer.

Ashwell was to live with Leah for another year, however.⁷⁵ On 18 May, 1905, Charles Hannan published a letter in the *Stage* complaining that McLellan had plagiarised his novel and play, *The Coachman with the Yellow Lace*, claiming McLellan had seen a copy of his play before *Leah* was written. Hannan was seeking the withdrawal of *Leah Kleschna* or payment per performance if it continued to be played. McLellan, Ashwell, critic J.T. Grein and Hannan were called to give evidence at the Court of King's Bench on 22 May 1906 following McLellan's charge of libel against Hannan. The Court heard the process whereby *Leah Kleschna* took shape; the original idea came to McLellan on a trip to Paris in 1901, he began to write in November 1902, discussed it with Taber and prepared a synopsis for him and Ashwell in March 1903 and sent the finished play to them in June. As neither liked the fourth act, it was subsequently re-written. It wasn't until Hannan read a critique of the play early in 1905 that he recognised his story. Ashwell argued that the character she played was different from that written by Hannan. In the play Leah was not in love with Paul at the time of the burglary, the character's love grew gradually over the course of the story. Hannan's female character was in love from the start. The court found that McLellan had not infringed Hannan's copyright (*Era* 26/5/06).

On 13 October 1905 Henry Irving died after a performance of *Becket* in Bradford. The profession was plunged into mourning and the following day at the end of theatre performances across the country, acknowledgement was paid to his great contribution to the stage. The *Era*'s tribute was an elaborate supplement on his life and work, in which Ashwell is quoted – “What tribute can be worthy when the greatest artist of our time, the truest gentleman, the kindest, best, and most wonderful friend has gone, except to pray that we may not forget the great artistic lesson of his life?” (21/10/05). She was also quoted as saying, “Personally, I feel the only fitting tribute is at least an effort towards a municipal theatre” (ibid). Ashwell, while on tour with *Marguerite*, had attended the Sunderland Town Hall reception in honour of Irving the year before his death. The event, in the presence of many local dignitaries and with an elaborate tribute from Irving's manager Bram Stoker, commemorated his first ever appearance on

⁷⁴This letter, dated 14 August 1905 is included in Ashwell's scrapbook, Theatre Museum, London.

⁷⁵Ashwell revisited *Leah Kleschna* when she revived it with the Lena Ashwell Players in 1920.

stage, at the Sunderland Lyceum on 29 September 1856.⁷⁶ Laurence Irving describes Irving and Ashwell's last meeting in Sunderland.

She found him frail and very tired. Yet he talked to her earnestly and prophetically. The decay of the theatres in the provinces was inevitable. Already commercialism was threatening to debase a great art into a catch-penny industry; the theatre they loved would soon become a disputed field for avaricious speculators. He urged her to believe in the spiritual power of the theatre in a changing world to educate the hearts of men. In the course of that brief meeting, he so imbued her with a sense of mission that thereafter she devoted the greater part of her theatrical life to bringing the higher drama to the poor and hitherto neglected districts of London and to provincial towns where normally the theatre no longer thrived.⁷⁷

During her American tour in November 1906, the *New York Telegraph* quoted Ashwell as always carrying a portrait of Sir Henry Irving with her - "I can never forget the noble, big souled artist who gave me such generous inspiration" (4/11/06).

There were 50,000 applications for 1200 places in Westminster Abbey for the funeral service on 20 October, described in great detail by the *Era* (28/10/05). Ashwell, who was performing in Newcastle, sent a floral wreath, and no doubt agreed with the sentiments expressed in the *Era* editorial, *The Great Dead*:

It is not only in the dramatic profession that the great loss has been felt. From the King upon his throne to the mechanic in his two rooms... Sir Henry's death has affected all classes of the community. It is a common sorrow that is felt; and the funeral... yesterday was but an expression of the national regret. (21/10/05)

Awareness of Irving as a national personality beyond the theatre was further demonstrated at the Christie's sale of his relics. Ashwell and many of her well-known colleagues attended, but were mostly outbid by dealers in the scramble for mementoes (*Era* 16/12/05). The following month the *Era* observed the drama to be in a state of transition. The passing of Irving was the end of an era – the actor/manager was no longer a dominant force. At the same time, playwrights were also responding to change.

The position of the modern actor of genius is a difficult one. Dramatic authorship is at present in a transition state. Under the old dispensation, there were a certain number of dramatists writing plays with which everyone was completely satisfied. A leading manager could nearly always rely upon Mr A.W. Pinero or Mr H.A. Jones to supply him with a suitable piece; and there was the French stage, then so fertile in 'adaptable' material. The modern desire for actor-management is easily accounted for. In the old days each actor had his line of business and it did not matter very much to him if he played in a company or was his own director. But the modern actor of eminence is forced by circumstances to be an experimentalist. He is absolutely driven out of his groove by change... The modern playgoing public is unspeakably difficult to cater for. They are just advanced enough to feel the old fashioned method of playwrighting is insipid, and not yet educated up to the point of appreciating reality for its own sake. Criticism is in many cases misleading, giving the

⁷⁶Ashwell's scrapbook in the Theatre Museum, London, has a souvenir programme and menu for the reception and luncheon on 28 October 1904.

⁷⁷*Henry Irving: The Actor and His World*, op.cit p.656.

manager, who is always - and here is his danger - far more intelligent than his public, an erroneous idea of what his patrons really want... the necessity under which an actor of genius lies of being an actor- manager, and the danger of his semi-extinction if he is not. For if he join a company he becomes, in these experimental times, a cipher. In the old days it was sufficient to play a certain line of parts perfectly to satisfy the most cultured section of the public. Nowadays parts can be only classified as more or less important... In the last generation people were satisfied with the outsides of individuals shown on the stage; or, at any rate, with the revelation of the top stratum of their souls. Now they want to go right down to what the Americans call 'bed-rock'. And they demand at the same time that 'serious' plays shall be as interesting in action and as brisk and smart in dialogue as the old artificial dramas and comedies. A good deal of the trouble which our modern playwrights find in meeting the demand arises, we think, from the fact that they are, so to speak, converts to realism, and, like all converts, are inclined to fanaticism. On such an assumption only can one account for Mr Pinero's comparative failure with *Iris*... It was being more pessimistic than the pessimists. The coming dramatist will be all-wise, but at the same time all-merciful; so intelligent as not to want to show it, and so strong and sapient as not to be cruel or cynical... The development of the English stage in the next ten or twelve years will be extremely interesting; full of variety, impulse, adventure - and uncertainty. (18/11/05)

As is often the case with the death of a person at the top of his profession, attitudes to that profession are changed, for the better, reflecting well on its other members. Irving had done much to change the public perception of the theatrical profession and with the sorrow at his passing came respect and increased status for members of the profession at a time when Ashwell was emerging to take on a wider public role. It was a subdued time for all his friends and colleagues and for a nation which had only relatively recently begun to treat its theatre practitioners with respect. Meanwhile, Ashwell continued to develop her role as a leader of her profession, proposing a toast and making a short speech to distinguished colleagues and guests at the December O.P. Club Ladies' Dinner at the Criterion Restaurant.⁷⁸ She supported the British Empire Shakespeare Society, reading Hermione and Perdita for a matinee presentation of *The Winter's Tale* at St Peter's Institute on 25 January 1906. In February, with Sir Squire and Lady Bancroft, she examined and presented prizes for blank verse recitations, of Shakespeare and Marlowe, by women students at Tree's Academy of Dramatic Art (*Era* 24/2/06).

She gave her own matinee recital, of poetry set to music, at the Aeolian Hall, London, in mid February, accompanied by singer Gleeson White, Spencer Dyke (violin), Lionel Tertis (viola), W. Wolstenholme (organ) and Stanley Hawley. "Clad in a severely plain black velvet gown, relieved at the throat with a patch of creamy lace... Miss Ashwell's triumph was purely an elocutionary one... With splendid variation of vocal tone and keen study of the value of words" (*Express* 16/2/06). From the reviews in most London papers, the highlight of the hour long programme, in which Ashwell recited fourteen poems to a crowded auditorium, was Edgar Allan Poe's famous *The Bells*. In its review, the *Daily News* made a detailed statement on the speaking of verse in relation to music, recognising that Hawley had worked hard and experimented with this form for some time, with Ashwell as his principal exponent (16/2/06). With

⁷⁸The programme for this event, in Ashwell's scrapbook, Theatre Museum, has a picture of Ashwell on the front.

Ashwell's knowledge of music and love of poetry, this form of entertainment was something for which she displayed considerable talent and enthusiasm and she gave many such recitals.

SECOND MANAGEMENT ATTEMPT AT THE SAVOY THEATRE

As Ashwell prepared for her second management attempt, the *Era* considered the survival of actor/managers in the current climate, under the heading Theatrical 'Bad Times'. Work was still being produced, but there was a constant worry of financial viability. Ashwell was obviously determined, and not deterred by the editorial's concluding statement.

When we think of the never-ceasing, Sisyphus-toil of the London actor-manager, when we realise how he has to be play-selector, rehearsal, producer, and leading actor, besides giving 'an eye to the box-office', and an occasional hour to society and speech-making, we feel what an arduous existence is his, and how dull a place London would be without him and his enterprises. Surely it is enough that, with all the fluctuations of theatrical business, these bold adventurers are not driven from the field. (17/2/06)

Perhaps the *Daily Telegraph* most effectively sums up Ashwell's position at this time.

Sooner or later Miss Lena Ashwell was bound to enter upon West-end management on her own account; the brilliant work she has accomplished in the past few years, the popularity she has won by virtue of a very rare and exquisite talent, the appeal she never fails to make to those who delight in powerfully emotional acting, all these things rendered her appearance in a theatre controlled by herself only a question of time. (20/4/06)

On 10 March 1906 the *Era* announced that Ashwell had secured London's Savoy Theatre as a manager and that by arrangement with J.H. Leigh, would begin her season on 19 April in the comedy, *The Bond of Ninon*, by Clothilde Graves. "The change from the emotional order of role in which Miss Ashwell has won fame to that of comedy is a marked one, but her artistic gifts and her rapid rise in the dramatic scale would prepare one for her success in any character, however divergent," the *Era* declared confidently. The play was set in Paris, in 1662, when Louis XIV was twenty-four. The heroine, for whose hand there was keen competition, was Ninon de L'Enclos, to be played by Ashwell. Henry Ainley was cast as the young soldier of fortune who comes to Paris in order to establish his claim to title and property, which have been unjustly taken from him. The *Era* quoted Ashwell as stating:

All the members of the company⁷⁹ have worked so loyally together that they have made my position as manageress very easy and pleasant... it has been a delightful experience, and we have all greatly enjoyed the rehearsals... I like the role immensely, and after having endured on the stage so many tragedies I simply revel in a comedy part... you will be relieved to hear that I do not commit murder this time. Nor do I burgle, nor become intoxicated... nor seriously misbehave myself as it has been my fate to do in many plays of late. (14/4/06)

⁷⁹Ashwell's company at this time included H.V. Esmond, Edward Sass, (also the production's director), Helen Ferrars, Beatrice Terry and Vincent Sternroyd.

In the same paper, it was reported that Graves, contradicting a rumour that her play was not original, had found a small volume of stained pages, entitled “Lettres de Ninon... once the property of the Earl of Eglinton”, from which she had “built up the character of Ninon.” She advised that preparations had involved “great pains to make the costumes historically correct... [and we] ransacked the British Museum for old prints of the period” (ibid). As well as original music composed by Percy Fletcher, Ashwell commissioned Stanley Hawley to write a song sung during the performance, but the reception was not as Ashwell had hoped. The *Pall Mall Gazette* reported regretfully some booing at the end which it attributed to the play being too short (curtain up was at 8.15pm and the performance concluded by 10.30pm) and to “some periods of boredom and of several ineptitudes that had provoked titters” (20/4/06). The reviewer recorded Ashwell’s popular reception and was supportive of Graves, apparently “plucky... despite her indifferent health”, but thought both the booing and some cheering were in some ways justified:

Gladly would we record the triumph of both ladies. But, to be frank, neither quite hit the mark. Probably the qualified success was due to the fact that both author and manager were ladies. We can hardly imagine any male author writing *The Bond of Ninon*... [or] producing it... The result is a show characteristically feminine. Ladies are fond of dress... chosen a most picturesque period, that of Louis XIV... Miss Ashwell has left nothing undone that could bring the beauty of the period before our eyes... Chevalier de Bellorme... before going (to the wars) asks [Ninon] to execute a matrimonial ‘bond’ in his favour. He gets her to write ‘a chit’ declaring that she will love nobody but ‘the bearer’ which he wears as a decoration... The audience expresses its incredulity, and when the eccentricity of the ‘bond’ was commented on by various stage characters afterwards, the audience expressed no dissent. We are at a loss to know why Miss Graves invented this remarkable document.
(20/4/06)

The outcome was that Ninon falls in love with the King and the chit was destroyed. The reviewer considered there were too many characters (seen as a female failing of wanting to entertain) and that the play did not serve Ashwell as an actress. This male chauvinism was taken up by B.W. Findon, opining on *The Choice of Plays, Should Manager-Actors Choose?* He declared that “had Miss Ashwell had a man of keen intelligence to direct her - one who knew her limitations, and how far it was safe to trade on her powers - he would never have allowed her to choose a style of play for which she had never shown any predilections, and in which her talent was an unknown quantity” (*Morning Advertiser* 5/5/06). While some of the production’s critics felt Ashwell did well in a light comic role, others considered it was not her forte - there were conflicting responses to the play but the best gauge was obviously box office income. This was not good enough for Ashwell to keep the play running for more than three and a half weeks (too short to recover all costs) and *The Bond of Ninon* closed on 10 May. The *Sketch*, however, was determined to be supportive and declared that while “the playgoer will regret that Miss Lena Ashwell failed to find an attractive play for her first managerial venture... he will congratulate her on the business acumen which has induced her to look facts straight in the face and prepare another and, it is to be hoped, a more successful piece” (9/5/06).

Edward Knoblock⁸⁰, who dramatised *The Shulamite* by well-known serial romance authors Claude and Alice Askew, became involved with the project on Ashwell's recommendation after the Askews had sent her a first act draft. "It was a simple production with only six characters... The cheapness of producing my play luckily attracted her syndicate. So *The Shulamite* was put on... at the Savoy Theatre on May 12th, 1906."⁸¹ While the play differed in some aspects to the Transvaal set novel, the story remained "morbid, feverish, overstrung" (*Era* 19/5/06). Simeon Krillet, tyrannical husband of a beautiful second wife (Deborah) considers he has the right to beat her. She comes to hate him, falling in love with a young Englishman (Waring) who is learning farming from Simeon. Waring, with an alcoholic wife back home, attempts to leave in an effort to conquer his passion for Deborah, but a lightning strike kills his horse and forces his return, by which time Krillet has found his diary declaring his love. Deborah is to die, but is saved by Waring who kills Simeon in self defence. They take his body to the horse and he is buried, assumed killed by lightning. When Waring learns his wife is dying and plans to return to England, Deborah is so jealous that she reveals to Simeon's sister the real cause of her husband's death. Silence is bought with the promise that Deborah will swear to never see Waring again, thus condemning them both to lives of misery. Waring departs while Deborah prays for strength to keep her oath.

One of those plays that hold the audience in a pincer-like grip, that wring the heart and strain the nerves... few, if any, actresses on the English stage could have so well rendered the indignant revolt, the mad passion, and the intense agony... the way in which the power of [Ashwell's] performance grew and culminated was as admirable as the sustained and collected intensity of the conception ... Norman McKinnel⁸² gave a grandly simple and nobly rugged impersonation of the stern, cruel, deeply serious Boer... impressive, acted with tremendous fervour and intensity. (*Era* 19/5/06)

The same night the successful American comedy *Raffles*⁸³ opened at the Comedy Theatre. However, Ashwell must have been heartened by the *Morning Post* comment - "There is no doubt in the world that Saturday's audience thought more highly of *The Shulamite* than any other first night audience has thought of any seriously-intended play produced, say, within the last two years" (14/5/06), while the *Evening Standard* of the same date would have given personal satisfaction:

Lena Ashwell is a great actress. She fills the stage. You can look at nothing else but her pale face. And you must not let your attention wander from that for a moment, or you will lose the play. It is all told in her face. The story comes out in the little smile of pleasure, the quiet, unhurried voice, the face of pain, the paralysis of torture that is choked in silence. There is no noise, no rant. The tangled hands tell the tale - the sharp, violent bit of lightning gesture, the spasm of clenched teeth, then silence! No one gets so much out of silence as Lena Ashwell... You get all that in *The Shulamite*... Young actresses should go and sit at Miss Ashwell's feet.

⁸⁰Also known as Edward Knoblauch – in this thesis will be referred to as Knoblock.

⁸¹Edward Knoblock, *Round the Room*, An Autobiography, London, Chapman & Hall, 1939, p.80-81.

⁸²Norman McKinnel was described by Frank Vernon as "the typical great actor of the naturalistic school... a Galsworthy actor... a symbol of the time's acting. It was virile and natural acting. It aimed at truth as opposed to effect." *The Twentieth Century Theatre*, London, George Harrop & Co., 1924, pp.101-107.

⁸³For details on this play, see Appendix Six.

There was another point of view from J.T. Grein - "Whether it is wise to give a certificate of greatness to an actress [Ashwell] whose elocution and deportment are not beyond reproach may be fitly left to the conscience of those who indulge in this extravagance" (*Ladies Field* 26/5/06). Grien was apparently never in agreement with other critics as to Ashwell's abilities and it seems inevitable he would find the piece too melodramatic and in poor taste.

The third act, considered by critics to be the play's weakness, was re-written, as was often the case with new plays, during the first month of the run, replacing the original act for the performance on 12 June. The new act had a happy ending. Although Simeon's sister forces the truth from Deborah, when her son takes sides with the lovers, she decides to keep silent. "Waring ...receives news of the death of his wife, leaving him free to wed Deborah... The acting... remains remarkably impressive and real" (*Era* 16/6/06).

In the *Sketch's* series on *Actor-Managers as Their Own Dramatic Critics*, Ashwell was given the opportunity to comment on the play, particularly in the light of the revised ending. She provided a very articulate statement about

the criterion of a play: It interests the public because of the truth it contains. It interests the actors for the same reason, not for the opportunities ...it offers them in exhibiting a certain strenuousness of which they may be capable... [this] is the fundamental difference between the old plays and the modern. The old plays held the stage because of the prestige of the actor in the part... A modern play holds the stage in such measure as it reflects life, but it must reflect life dramatically. That is quite different from reflecting it theatrically.(13/6/06)

This point of view had been expressed in the *Era's* lament, in May 1906, for the lost period of Victorian 'innocence' embodied by Ellen Terry in the 1870s. The writer considered that plays, actresses and audience expectations had changed greatly, towards greater sophistication. Ashwell was a representative of this change, despite Terry's great influence on her.

At present the stage is 'struggling between two worlds'... We make an experimental dash into the analytic, then we have a revulsion of feeling for the merely interesting and picturesque... Miss Terry's truly feminine charm, her wayward, winning ways, her nervous but not neurotic temperament, her bright, eupeptic, amiable individuality, her fine physical organisation, and her technical excellence are qualities which were commoner in the 'seventies' than they are at present, and are growing rarer year by year. (5/5/06)

During the London season of *The Shulamite*, Ashwell did not neglect her duties or commitment to the profession. She was one of some fifteen hundred actors who pledged support for an annual Actors' Day, initiated by the Actors' Association, to support actors' charities. The third Thursday in October was set aside as the day that actors, authors and managers be asked to donate their earnings for that night and if not working, if possible, to make a donation (*Era* 26/5/06). This move was an example of the prevailing attitude of self help and, in retrospect, a process that had to be gone through before achieving the support systems now in place, be they government led or private insurance. At this time, the State took very little

responsibility in the provision of help for the needy, putting the onus on individuals and charitable organisations.

As usual in the summer, Ashwell helped out at various charitable events, including an Elizabethan Fair & Fete in late May in aid of King's College Hospital and at the Theatrical Garden Party for the Actors' Orphanage on 6 July. For the Legion of Frontiersmen on 10 July she recited at the Botanical Gardens, in a programme directed by Norman McKinnel. In 1906 the theatrical profession celebrated Ellen Terry's fiftieth year as an actress with a special Jubilee matinee and other tributes. Ashwell was on the general committee for the Jubilee Fund and she took part in one of the twelve all-women *Tableaux Vivants* (V. Beginners for the First Act - A Hundred Years Ago) in a special programme at Drury Lane Theatre on 12 June. Each tableau was specially arranged by different men with scenery based on paintings by artists or on the lives of famous people (for example, Joan of Arc) or poems. The centre piece of the occasion was the first act of *Much Ado About Nothing*, with twenty-one members of the Terry family taking part, including Ellen as Beatrice.

Early in June, the *Era* announced that the entrepreneurial brothers, Lee and Jacob Shubert, had obtained the American and Canadian rights to *The Shulamite*. Ashwell would appear in the role of Deborah Krillet throughout the United States, travelling there in September after a short regional tour in England (2/6/06). In this, Ashwell was not only fulfilling an ambition to perform in America; she was conforming to fairly standard practice at the time. As the *Era* pointed out, much of the finances of commercial theatrical management were wrapped in mystery. Many managements subsidised their London seasons with provincial and American tours where success was more predictable than in London. In the provinces if things were going well business-wise, people had money and went to the theatre; London was much more capricious and some shows could run to half full houses for weeks and then suddenly pick up (19/5/06). Ashwell would have been aware of this, but she was not very well known either in the provinces or America, as most of her activities were London based. Being promoted by an American management was the only viable option for her if she wished to act in America. However, it was not an easy time for Ashwell. In *Myself a Player* she writes,

When acting in *The Shulamite* a great sorrow befell me. Ethel [her sister] became ill. The strain of the double curvature of her spine, the suffering that she had gone through in helping me through my afflictions and difficulties brought about a collapse in her health, and she had to spend the next few years in hospitals and nursing homes. I went to America to get away from myself, and gave up my flat so that I might get away from memories which accentuated my loneliness.⁸⁴ (p.142)

The English tour of *The Shulamite*, managed by William Greet, began with a week's season at the Plymouth Theatre Royal on 20 August. This was followed by performances at Brighton, Marlborough and the King's, Hammersmith, after which, in late September, Ashwell sailed for New York for a planned

twenty weeks engagement with the Shuberts. The role of Deborah for the English tour, which continued, was taken over by Evelyn D'Alroy.

FIRST AMERICAN TOUR

Ashwell sailed to New York on the US Mail Steam Ship *Philadelphia*. In early October an unidentified New York paper⁸⁵ announced that Ashwell, a “leading emotional actress”, had arrived, and would open in Chicago on October 15, in *The Shulamite*, with a mostly American cast. She was quoted as “looking forward for years to coming here...[This is the] first play I have had I can do in both England and the United States... It is the biggest success I have ever had” (ibid). She was accompanied by her sister Hilda Pocock and Beryl Mercer who was playing the Kaffir slave girl in *The Shulamite*. The company rehearsed at the Majestic Theatre, New York, where Ashwell was interviewed by the *New York Times*.

‘I am what might be called “imperial” ...born on a training ship on the North Sea’ ... Though she speaks of her art with the utmost earnestness, she is notably a woman with an active interest in current affairs. She possesses a spontaneity, and her range of thought is not confined to matters of the stage...[She was] not in a position to make any valuable comparison between English and American offerings... ‘[I] have only seen two plays during the few days that I have been in the city... *The Girl of the Golden West* [Belasco] and *The Hypocrites* [English]... I liked the Belasco piece very much.’ (7/10/06)

For the two-week season at the Garrick Theatre, Chicago, Ashwell was billed as ‘The Great English Emotional Actress in the Latest Success of the English Stage in American debut.’⁸⁶ The city gave her the best reception of the tour, despite an inauspicious start. Perhaps as a publicity ploy, the Shuberts opened the production on a Sunday night, 14 October 1906. From the critics’ comments, Sunday night traditionally attracted a rowdy and uncouth, pleasure seeking audience, for whom *The Shulamite* would have been unsuitable fare. Ashwell managed to win them over, but it must have been a stressful start to her debut as well as an indication of her ignorance about the American stage.

Miss Ashwell paid a bitter penalty in yielding to the greed and bad taste of her managers and submitting the beautiful message of her art to an assemblage dominated by ribald fools who have made the phrase ‘A Chicago Sunday night audience’, a by-word and a scandal throughout the land. For these dunces, recruited from loafersdom, the loveliest, subtlest moments of this fiery poetess had no meaning. The passion and beauty of her acting were as the pearls of proverb. The arrant brutality which has often moved English audiences to vulgar booing when our players faced the ordeal of a London debut was avenged at the Garrick last night by the hopeless silliness and stupidity of an American assemblage of playgoers who missed every delicate point in an evening that was made gracious and memorable by many such points, who heeded not the hisses of the furious minority and who inflicted upon that minority a sense of shame and pain that was almost unendurable. Nobly the actress from England, now seeking the verdict of our country, finally beat down the cackle and the guffaw. At last she silenced the oafs, never seeming to lose a grip on herself -

⁸⁴Ashwell makes no mention of what was done with the young Honor Stevens at this time.

⁸⁵This article is included in Ashwell’s scrapbook for the period. Theatre Museum, London.

⁸⁶Quoted from the programme and playbill in Ashwell’s scrapbook. Theatre Museum, London.

though she must have been suffering - and she sent the people away impressed. It was an unmistakable and a beautiful triumph. (James O'Donnell Bennett, *Record Herald*, 15/10/06)

The *Chicago Daily News* was fascinated by her voice:

She speaks with a slur of tone most musical and touches her trainante voice with a sharp, high nasal minor full of choked-back tears and tragedy. It is a peculiar voice, but eloquent in sadness and stary in prettier moments of tenderness and content ...makes all her points through clearly intelligent gracious mental suasion. She neither hammers ideas at her audience nor obviously acts, but in delicate elegance of technique thrills and touches, influences and stirs her audience (15/10/06),

while the *Chicago Daily Journal* considered "This actress is unlike any other who has come to us from abroad. We have none at home with whom she may be compared, although she does not excel the greatest of our own actresses" (15/10/06). This was probably closer to the truth as to why Ashwell ultimately did not succeed in America - she was too unusual, too much an individual and therefore a threat to more conventional actresses. However, perhaps in an attempt to describe her acting in a way American audiences would understand, aspects of her work were likened to American or well-known actresses. The *Chicago Daily News* (15/10/06) found similarities with Minnie Maddern Fiske; the *Inter Ocean* (15/10/06) with Mrs Patrick Campbell and Margaret Anglin. Much space in reviews was given over to descriptions of her acting, with less emphasis on the play and its story. Back in London, the *Daily Express* reported that

Chicago has showered all its endearing adjectives upon Miss Lena Ashwell. Both she and *The Shulamite* have taken the fancy of the Chicagoese to such an extent that the theatre has been crowded nightly with men and women who cheer her and weep with her. One Windy City critic declares...[she] brought the first big thrill of the season - the thrill of poetry and passion. (7/11/06)

The company played a month at the Lyric Theatre, Manhattan, New York, opening on 29 October, and transferred to the Shubert Theatre, Brooklyn, for a further week on 4 December. While the Chicago press included the word 'triumph' in most of their review headings for Ashwell's performances, the New York press stressed 'gloomy'. The *New York Evening Journal* began with "For those who care to take their theatrical pleasures sadly and seriously *The Shulamite* will suit" (30/10/06). The *Hartford Chronicle*⁸⁷ recognised that the critics did not agree on Ashwell's abilities and impact and quoted conflicting views. However, Ashwell was generally praised, but the play was obviously too depressing for New Yorkers:

For no better reason that I can discover than the fact that Chicago liked the play, New York has refused to accept Lena Ashwell in *The Shulamite*. The reviewers urge that the piece is gloomy - a fault that, with equal justice, might be found in *Hamlet*. I can't help wondering if they expected Edward Knoblauch's powerful story of illicit passion to be eked out by an Irish comedian and a pony ballet.⁸⁸

⁸⁷Quoted from an undated cutting in Ashwell's 1906 scrapbook, Theatre Museum, London.

⁸⁸Quoted from an unidentified newspaper from Houston, Texas in Ashwell's scrapbook, Theatre Museum.

On 31 October, presumably after swift negotiations based on the box office advance for New York, it was announced that there would be two special matinees at the Lyric. Obviously, *The Shulamite* was not drawing the hoped for audiences and two ‘impromptu’ performances of *Mrs Dane’s Defence* were presented on 15 and 16 November with Ashwell and Margaret Anglin⁸⁹ alternating the parts of Mrs Dane and Lady Eastney. Guy Standing⁹⁰ played the Wyndham role in *Mrs Dane*, and then took on the character of Robert Waring for the tour of *The Shulamite* after New York. Standing was English, but well known in America. The *Washington Times* explained that Anglin had the New York performance rights to *Mrs Dane’s Defence* with a contract that stipulated “she must appear in the cast wherever it is presented save for one week, when the play is used by the Proctor company in Harlem” (13//11/06). Anglin had offered to play the comedy role, Lady Eastney, so that Ashwell could play Mrs Dane in New York. “Miss Ashwell returned the compliment. Neither actress has ever before played the role of Lady Eastney” (ibid).

The press generally expressed greater praise for Miss Anglin, partly because her Lady Eastney was more appropriate than Ashwell’s. The New York critics were polite, recognising that Ashwell had created the role of Mrs Dane, but on tour out of New York she was highly praised. They considered it a much better vehicle for her than *The Shulamite*. Henry Arthur Jones, coincidentally in America on a lecture tour and in Boston just before Ashwell’s visit, attended the rehearsals and performances and said “Miss Anglin gave a much better performance as Lady Eastney than Miss Ashwell did, but...God made Lena Ashwell for Mrs Dane, just as he made Mrs Pat Campbell for Mrs Tanqueray.”⁹¹ The *New York Dramatic Mirror* identified the differences in style - “In both characters Miss Anglin appeals most strongly to the sentimental human side of her audience... Miss Ashwell on the contrary, makes her appeal to the intellect of her hearer” (24/11/06). After these matinees, a full production of *Mrs Dane’s Defence* was hastily prepared for Ashwell to take on tour. At the Shubert Theatre in early December and in Boston, *The Shulamite* was performed for the first half of the week, and *Mrs Dane* for the second half.

At this stage in her visit, Ashwell was much sought after, for opinions, interviews and guest appearances. The *New York Herald* ran a full-page interview with Ashwell, ostensibly on the subject of male cruelty towards women, as depicted in *The Shulamite*, which it described as “an unpleasant and rather grewsome [sic] play which is only saved from popular failure by Miss Ashwell’s clever art” (4/11/06). The interviewer did not take Ashwell or her point of view very seriously, missing an opportunity to give New Yorkers an insight into her character as understood by the English. With such lack of understanding and the extra rehearsals for *Mrs Dane* with a largely American cast, the pressure was on. In addition, as the *Daily News* reported, there was the social and promotional side to her visit. Ashwell “has been so winned

⁸⁹Margaret Anglin had played Mrs Dane in the American production five years previously.

⁹⁰Guy Standing (1873-1937), a London born actor who spent his early career in America, then played leading roles on stage in London between 1909 and 1913 before returning to New York. He had a short film career in America from 1933. He was awarded the KBE for war services as a member of British War Mission to USA 1914-1918.

⁹¹*The Life and Letters of Henry Arthur Jones*, op.cit. p. 21.

and dined and feted since she came to this country ...she has not quite been able to make up her mind whether she is a theatrical star or a pink tea prize.”⁹² This followed a large reception given by the actor Edward Hugh Sothern and his wife. It seems Ashwell was obliged to decline, with thanks and thoughtful consideration, a large number of invitations “for receptions and other revels” (ibid), in order to maintain her energy for her rehearsal and performance commitments.

She was interviewed by women’s journalist, Marie B. Schrader, who painted a somewhat contradictory portrait:

She possesses remarkable pluck and that purely American quality described as ‘nerve’ ... Off stage she is as delightfully democratic as an American, though preserving at all times that unmistakable refinement of presence and language which seems the birthright of the majority of English actors and actresses. I have frequently heard the latter classed as cold, unsympathetic, and possessing as much a lack of histrionic talent as their fellow players had abundance. Miss Ashwell does not drop her personality when at home... She is hospitably aided in her entertainment of new-found friends by a charming, pretty and thoroughly congenial little woman, Miss Beryl Mercer, who as the Kaffir maiden... made a conquest only second to that of the star... it is Miss Mercer who reads possible plays and interviews strangers who have appointments with the English star. (*Washington Herald* 2/12/06)

Ashwell was very dependent on Mercer,⁹³ who was an important support during this tour and throughout their friendship.

On many occasions when my heart failed me for fear I was pulled through by... Beryl Mercer. She was a strange and highly sensitive creature and had second sight...[she] was a kind of Ariel to me in times of confusion and uncertainty, for she would suddenly tell me quite definitely and circumstantially the events which were about to happen... There would have to be a book to describe the many occasions that her visions prevented me from taking hurried actions which would have landed me in difficulties. (*Myself a Player*, p.135.)

The *Washington Herald* interview continued with various observations by Ashwell:

What an amazing country this is. Everything must be done in a hurry. In England we take time sufficiently to digest our plans... One doesn’t seem to have time to think, and yet nothing could be better. Perhaps we think too much in London...I have never played in Ibsen. You know he is nothing like as popular in England as in this country. Neither is Bernard Shaw. These two are never played to make money, but their plays are always put on at the Court Theatre, at which such psychological dramas are to be found... None of the modern impressionistic school are greatly popular in London. We are surprised that America has developed such a fondness for this class of dramatic literature. (2/12/06)

After New York, the Majestic Theatre, Boston, was home to the company from 10 December until Christmas. Outside of New York, audience and critical response was much warmer. Perhaps Ashwell took comfort in the *New York Everybody’s Magazine*:

⁹²Undated article in Ashwell’s 1906 scrapbook, Theatre Museum, London.

⁹³Beryl Mercer, born in Spain on 13 August 1882, was a child actress from the age of four. She understudied Ashwell in 1904 and lived and worked in America from 1916 until her death in July 1939.

Ashwell is the greatest English-speaking actress, the only one on the stage who can be compared with Duse without suffering... so quiet are her methods that she never seems to be acting at all. And this is the reason why Miss Ashwell made no stir in New York... A taste that has been debauched by ladies who act all over the stage, act by main strength from the rise of the curtain to the going down of the same every minute they are before the footlights, has difficulty in recognising the value of anything else. It is interesting and significant to record that outside the metropolis Miss Ashwell was far better understood and appreciated.⁹⁴

Between Christmas and opening at the Belasco Theatre, Pittsburgh, on 31 December, Ashwell gave performances in Worcester and Springfield. The week in Pittsburgh opened with *Mrs Dane*. The *Pittsburgh Post* considered that, given *Mrs Dane's Defence* had been performed there before, a grave error was made in opening with this play, although:

Miss Ashwell's *Mrs Dane* was, nevertheless, a revelation. Heretofore, especially with Miss Anglin, we have seen the part acted in a theatrical manner... the actress dominated... while Miss Ashwell got beneath the mere speeches and gave us the real, hunted creature over whose head was always suspended by a hair the double-edged sword of her past... It was real emotional acting that Miss Ashwell gave us. (6/1/07)

Ashwell returned to Chicago, opening at the Studebaker Theatre on 7 January 1907, and received positive reviews for *Mrs Dane* and *The Shulamite*. On 13 January the *Chicago Tribune* announced that in the following week she would premiere a comedy by Hartley Manners entitled *The Wooing of Eve*. Three days later the same paper announced this play "will not receive presentation (on Thursday evening) and probably not during her engagement here. The demand for *The Shulamite* has been so unexpectedly brisk that the management has decided to retain that play throughout the present week" (16/01/07). However, on the same date, the *Chicago Post* announced that Victor Mapes'⁹⁵ new play, a drama of the West and originally called *Pete's Baby*, but now *The Undercurrent*, would be produced by Ashwell, to open on Tuesday 22 January (16/1/07). Confusion and uncertainty compounded what was obviously a busy and stressful time for Ashwell. *The Wooing of Eve* must have had some rehearsals before it was decided not to proceed. The switch in play at short notice meant rushed rehearsals, as well as sustaining evening and matinee performances of the existing repertoire. Ashwell's lack of understanding with regard to the rigours of American theatre was beginning to create problems.

"*The Undercurrent* proved to be neither very bad nor very good nor very important. It was merely a mediocre and illogical story excellently told by Miss Ashwell and Mr Guy Standing" (*Chicago Post* 23/1/07). It was clear the play would not run and the tour was becoming ever more disheartening. Then the *New York Mail* announced that the Shuberts were planning the continuation of her visit with a speedily put together production of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (25/1/07). Some papers also mentioned she was planning a production of *Magda*. On 29 January the press (including the *Chicago*

⁹⁴Undated article in Ashwell's 1906 scrapbook, Theatre Museum, London.

⁹⁵Victor Mapes, a lecturer on theatre and supporter of American plays, had written some plays in French for the Comedie Francaise and was the former director of the New Theater.

Chronicle, Chicago News and *Cincinnati Post*), announced that Ashwell had collapsed, was ill with exhaustion, the tour abandoned and that she would return to England when well enough to travel. The press had a field day - "While the excuse has been given out that Lena Ashwell is in ill health, the fact of the matter is that she has been grievously disappointed over her American tour" (*New York Dramatic News* 9/2/07). The *Chicago Journal* considered she had set herself a handicap that could not be overcome; that of bringing only one play, "which, only half succeeding, left her in a dilemma" (2/2/07). It appeared she needed to come better equipped with the roles in which she had proved incomparable. "Unfortunately she came to America without the roles" (*ibid*). Other papers reported that she had abandoned the tour on the direction of her doctor and was resting with friends in New York or in her apartment in Chicago. The rumour machine worked overtime. In *Myself A Player*, Ashwell described it:

It was when again in Chicago that my health collapsed and with it the tour. Narrowly escaping brain-fever, I was taken into the home of Henry Holt, the well-known publisher, where Florence, his wife, sister to Robert Taber, nursed me back to health. So I returned to England and the most interesting period of my life. (p.140)

THIRD MANAGEMENT PROJECT – THE KINGSWAY THEATRE

Ashwell arrived back in England on 27 February 1907, on board the White Star liner, *Majestic*. The *Era* reported she had "happily recovered health and after taking a prolonged rest purposes introducing to London some of the plays she acquired in America" (9/3/07). However, in late April she was in a nursing home to undergo an operation following her illness in America and "though there is no reason to fear any grave results, some little time must elapse before she can hope to resume work" (*Era* 20/4/07). It was at this time that Ashwell met her future husband, Dr Henry Simson, to whom she was sent on her return and who recommended her subsequent operation. She writes that she knew almost immediately that Henry was her soul mate (*Myself a Player*, pp.143-5). It was also at this time, while convalescing at a friend's house, that her future plans took shape. In the light of the outcome, in *Myself a Player* Ashwell refers to the two main protagonists in this period of her life by names other than their real ones.⁹⁶

Jane [Emerson] I had known the longest. She was an American and a millionairess, a sensitive idealist, delicate, intelligent, anxious to use her power wisely, not at all willing that her great wealth should smother her personality. Before she met Lady Caroline one would never have thought that she was even a rich woman... I used to go to lunch and babble about all the wonderful things which could be done in the theatre: co-operative companies working together for years... producing plays by unknown authors to break down the commercial ring. Full of the ideals of democracy as promulgated by... George Bernard Shaw, I would sweep the profession clean of all artificial standards of value, all inhibiting control by the aristocracy of the profession. (p.141-2)

⁹⁶ It has not been possible to identify these women.

Figure 11: The Kingsway Theatre. (*Theatre Notebook*, Volume 54, Number 1, 2000)

Ashwell discovered much later that Jane had sent her an anonymous gift of £500 when she was experiencing difficult times at the end of 1904 following the tour of *Marguerite*.

Lady Caroline belonged to a different world. At our first meeting I disliked her...[but she] was so kind to my much-loved sister, Ethel, that ... my uneasy feeling left me... She was definite, shrewd, and obsessed with the desire for power...over people, to direct and arrange their lives, most kindly and generously, but, in helping them, they must follow the course which seemed best to her... Jane Emerson and Lady Caroline first met at my flat. They disliked each other, but soon we were meeting frequently, all very happy and jolly. (ibid)

Ashwell returned from America to find a dominant Lady Caroline installed with Jane (her companion of many years had left) who had apparently arranged the lease on a house in Cowley Street, near Westminster Abbey, for Ashwell to take up residence. After her operation, Ashwell convalesced at Jane's house and later she felt the schemes put to her and the behaviour of Lady Caroline were intended to part her from Henry (ibid p.145-9).

The prospect that Jane laid out for me was like a fairy-tale. I was to take a long lease of a theatre, engage a company which would be the nucleus from which to cast any play, engage these actors by the year to do away with the casual labour method and give the sense of security so necessary to sound work. I was to produce plays by unknown authors, finding the young writers, the poets, the thinkers ...I was to be allowed to create with her money behind me... I was to have the opportunity of freeing the theatre from the domination of the mass-mind, 'what the public wants', and of giving some vision of what the artist wanted, which seemed saner and wiser, for art should lead, not be led. What a dream to try to fulfil! The first installment, £3000, was to purchase a lease and redecorate a theatre and work out all the details to perfection. A fund in the hands of trustees was created to provide for my sister. A definite income was to be paid to me so that, whatever my earnings in the theatre might amount to, I would not have to use my brains for the sordid details of existence. (ibid)

While embracing the sense of security and freedom offered on the one hand, Ashwell writes about her fear of obligation, especially when she signed the ninety-nine year lease on the Penley's Theatre. While re-decoration was in progress, Ashwell "was sent to Madeira to get strong" (p.147). When she returned to London, however, she discovered the house in Cowley Street was actually owned by Lady Caroline and that all the money for the theatre was Lady Caroline's, not Jane's. "All the arrangements came through her, and the accounts rendered began to arrive. Although I had so much work to do at the theatre, I must go when called for to the country, to recite, to lunch or dine... I was in her debt and expected to pay in full" (ibid). Ashwell tried to leave the house but only managed to pay outstanding bills and have her name restored as the owner. She was not permitted to see Jane again and her solicitor was also prevented from speaking with her.

All communications... were to be made direct to Lady Caroline, the excuse being Jane's indifferent health... She made her terms very definite, and they amounted to my being a slave, a puppet, a kept creature. The alternative was equally definite, for if I dared to refuse she would ruin me socially, financially, and artistically. (p.148)

Ashwell refused to bow to her terms and “To the outer world I was made to appear all that she said I was; ungrateful, dishonest. But it is useless, to my mind, to be influenced by ‘what people will say’” (p.149). No published evidence was found to verify this statement, so this aspect of Ashwell’s situation may not have reached the general public or was suppressed by supportive newspapers.

As Ashwell began to embark on the kind of thinking man’s theatre inspired by Shaw, who, in turn, had been inspired by Ibsen, the *Era* sought reasons for “The theatrical ‘bad business’, of which everyone, except a few fortunate actor-managers, have been complaining of late,” attributing it “to the general want of money” (6/4/07). The editorial was prompted by the publication, in a two-volume collection, of Shaw’s *Saturday Review* theatre essays from 1895 to 1898, the years when Ibsen was just beginning to be performed in England. At that time, Shaw saw Ibsen as a kind of great white hope for the future drama:

What Mr Shaw expected to see was Ibsen elevated in English opinion into a classic; a new school of Ibsenian actors equivalent to the old school of Shakespearean actors... As Mr Shaw’s opinions had very little influence on the ways of the public, it may be asked what on earth they had or have to do with the present slump in theatrical entertainments. Such a question would show an imperfect understanding of the springs and wheels of the theatrical machine. The origins of dramatic success are the dramatic authors. The dramatists of England in the early nineties were doing remarkably well. They were satisfied with themselves, and their patrons the playgoers were satisfied. (ibid)

The writer argues that when English playwrights tried to emulate Ibsen and other Europeans, “As a rule they only succeeded in being slightly improper” (ibid). Henry Arthur Jones and Pinero did not do well with these new style plays. “The ‘progress’ in public taste merely existed in the imagination of the advanced critics. If the playgoing public cannot get what it likes at the dramatic theatres, it simply patronises the musical play” (ibid).

Other European theatres, and even some in America, had a greater success with Ibsen than was ever the case in England. The Vedrenne-Barker management at the Court Theatre,⁹⁷ which ran from October 1904 to June 1907, was nearing its end without having impacted on a wider audience as Shaw, who had eleven of his plays (a total of 701 performances) given at the Court, had hoped. Only two of Ibsen’s plays, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Wild Duck*, had been performed for a total of thirteen performances during this period. Although Ashwell was seeking new, young authors, the impact of her personality as an actress/manager was a more important ingredient for success than the plays or playwrights she produced. Perhaps she was more realistic than Shaw, or more understanding of the educative process that lay ahead. Ashwell would soon share suffrage platforms with Annie Horniman, some of whose experiences were similar to her own, and she would have been aware of Horniman’s work in Ireland. As Ashwell’s plans took shape at the Kingsway, Horniman was setting up, initially in July 1907 at the Midland Hotel Theatre,

⁹⁷Desmond MacCarthy, *The Court Theatre 1904-7: A Commentary and Criticism*, London, A.H. Bullen, 1907.

a repertory theatre in Manchester, with similar vision and determination. So Ashwell was not alone – there were examples of attempts to establish a people’s theatre as a non-commercial enterprise.

There were many opportunities at this time for Ashwell to understand the implications of her undertaking; for example when the *Era*, along with George Alexander, considered who were the present patrons of the drama - apparently not the aristocracy (“Even if a play appealed especially to ‘smart society’, and it filled the house night after night, the numbers of paying patrons would be exhausted in a month or six weeks” 8/6/07), but

the vast well-to-do middle-class are the real supporters of the theatre... They have neither the audacity nor the motive to be mean (they don’t beg for free tickets or pay only for the Pit)... As a domestic emollient, a visit to the theatre has no rival; and, as it is usually undertaken for the sake of the ‘female element’, the influence of that element on the fortunes of a playhouse is very great indeed. (ibid)

While this was encouraging, Ashwell also learnt she would join the ranks of managers trying to find ways, such as musical ‘overtures’, curtain raisers and publicising an earlier start time than actually happens, to stop latecomers, who disturbed other playgoers and the performers. Actor/ manager Martin Harvey at the Adelphi had recently forbidden latecomers to enter the auditorium until a suitable break, and this had not caused problems. The *Era* thought that “on the whole, the manners of London audiences have improved in the last few years. There is less talking in the course of a performance, and more respect for the management and the entertainment on the stage. What offence remains is chiefly caused by thoughtlessness” (29/6/07).

In early July 1907 the *Era* announced “Miss Lena Ashwell is in negotiations for a lease of the Great Queen Street Theatre, the little house owned by Mr W.S. Penley, which during late years has been devoted to intermittent periods of German seasons⁹⁸ and special performances” (6/7/07). Built in 1882, the theatre had had a somewhat chequered history as the Novelty, the Joddrell and Eden Palace of Varieties before it was known as the Great Queen Street Theatre⁹⁹ (*Glasgow Herald* 4/10/07). Actor W.S. Penley had taken on the management and renovated it in 1900, “with the money [he] made out of *The Private Secretary* and *Charley’s Aunt*, and up to now [it] has proved a white elephant” (*Gazette Times*, Pittsburgh, USA 1/9/07). The *Referee* noted it was “the theatre which will be remembered chiefly as the place where with *A Doll’s House* [in June 1889] the Ibsen worship began; and as the theatre which through long years possessed the ugliest and the most comical-classical... act-drop that ever was hung” (6/10/07).

⁹⁸“Mr W.S. Penley’s cosy little theatre in Great Queen Street was opened under the management of Hans Andresen and Max Behrend. This is the fourth season of the German theatre in London, and, it is hoped, will prove successful” (*Public Opinion* 28/11/02 p.691). The opening night play was about Heidelberg university life, *Alt-Heidelberg*, by Wilhelm Meyer-Forster, and played to a crowded house.

⁹⁹It remained the Kingsway until it was damaged by bombing during the Second World War (having closed in May 1941) and was finally demolished in the late 1950s.

The theatre was slightly off the beaten West-End track. However, Ashwell, ever the pragmatist, renamed the theatre the Kingsway, to clearly identify it with the recently constructed and opened main thoroughfare in London, off which the theatre was situated. Early on, she took pains to promote its geographical position and accessibility by public transport.

Within a few yards of the Theatre... [run] L.C.C. trams and a fine service of horse and motor 'buses. Another line of 'buses running from Victoria to Kings Cross passes the very door. The Theatre can be reached on foot in two minutes from the British Museum station on the Central London Tube Railway, or in one minute from the Holborn Station of the Piccadilly Tube. The cab fare from nearly all the principal hotels and railway stations is 1s.¹⁰⁰

Having acquired a long lease, Ashwell set about the major task of renovating and managing a theatre at the age of thirty-eight when most of her colleagues were consolidating their careers as actresses. She had plans drawn up by Frederick Foster and made an application to London County Council, which was considered at the Theatres and Music Hall Committee meeting on 30 July.

The alterations¹⁰¹ in question consist of the provision of a new stalls buffet; the enlargement of the orchestra; and the re-arrangement of the steps and alteration of the screen doors in the entrance vestibule. The Committee recommended that no objection be offered to the arrangements shown on the drawings submitted by Mr Foster, provided that certain stated conditions were complied with. (*Era* 13/8/07)

Work began almost immediately, with the *Era* reporting on 10 August that

the Kingsway is in the hands of workmen, who have already done wonders in the little theatre, which is fast assuming a very pretty appearance.¹⁰² White, with gold scroll work, is to be the prevailing colour, a contrast being effected by the carpets, hangings, and seats, which are all to be in red. The large foyer is being converted into a pleasant lounge for visitors to stalls and dress circle, the spacious entrance hall (on dress circle level and including the box office) has been greatly improved, and there is every indication that the theatre will be among the cosiest and best appointed in the metropolis.

It appeared that a major transformation was taking place. "In fact, new everything but the site, the entrance and the roof... The rearrangement of the seating in all parts of the house is a feature of the reconstruction... the gallery seats are also designed for comfort, while the boxes are nooks of sheer snugness" (*Standard* 4/10/07).

No matter how apprehensive Ashwell may have been, the mood was positive.

¹⁰⁰Quoted from a manifesto issued by Ashwell on 23/9/07 in Mander and Mitchenson, *The Lost Theatres of London*, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968, p.232-3.

¹⁰¹These alterations were not as extensive or radical, certainly on the exterior, as Ashwell claimed although the interior was altered to be more comfortable and according to Mander and Mitchenson, the proscenium was set back a few feet improving the proportions of the house.

¹⁰²"The style of the decorations is Louis XVI, and the impression created is that of artistic simplicity, the prevailing tones being cream and terracotta. The handsome central hall is approached by a flight of white marble steps, and everything has been done in detail that can add to the comfort and convenience of Miss Ashwell's audience" (*Era* 5/10/07).

The wholesale clearance of sites throughout the immediate neighbourhood has wrought so searching a transformation that not only masonry but memories have vanished. The Great Queen Street Theatre never did 'find its *voie*,' in an artistic sense. The Kingsway... has its *voie* definitely marked out by Miss Lena Ashwell in advance; and what is of importance to everybody, it will be a road and a way that will be easily found by the public... The tiers of seats from the front row of the dress circle to the uppermost row of the gallery rise one behind the other in degrees sufficiently abrupt to baffle the most fatuous of females capable of imagining that her misnamed 'picture' hat is an object of interest equal to the stage. Elegance and simplicity characterise the scheme of decoration... a clear view of the stage is to be obtained from even the seats at the extreme side. (*Morning Advertiser* 4/10/07)

Patron comfort was a priority for Ashwell and besides offering free cloakroom facilities, as the *Star* advised, "There is a magnificent foyer, and as Miss Ashwell intends to cater for the matinee girl, she has retained the refreshments under her own control, and will specially cater for afternoon teas there for ladies" (3/10/07). Other features included a flat stage,¹⁰³ "a distinct slope being given to the floor of the auditorium" (*Era* 5/10/07); a new electric light installation ("four lamps, their rays softened by ground glass" *Era* 5/10/07), and "stage equipments [which] are as complete as any in Europe... The concealed lights in the roof are certainly a great improvement on the methods adopted in other theatres" (*Sportsman* 4/10/07). The theatre was not a large one, with a capacity for "nearly 550 exclusive of the boxes [an additional 50 seats]. There will be 84 gallery seats, 144 [tip-up seats] for the pit, 64 upper circle, 96 dress circle and 154 stalls" (*Cork Times & Echo* 6/10/07).

When the *Era* remarked upon the fact that every seat in the auditorium "is numbered and reserved, and may be booked in advance" (5/10/07), it did so because this was not the usual practice, although the Scala and Playhouse theatres were at this time selling Pit seats in advance. Most other theatres continued a long-standing practice of the daily queue, in all weathers, for these seats. When commenting on this phenomenon in 1904, the *Era* was aware that, in consideration of audience comfort, Irving had tried in 1885 at the Lyceum to offer numbered pit seats a week in advance, but patrons were not interested. He found that the nature of the audience in that part of the theatre changed, with people in carriages getting servants to go in to buy tickets in advance. The Pit was traditionally the reserve of those who decided to go to the theatre at the last minute and did not want to plan ahead. People did not complain, and they even seemed to like the challenge. "At present the occupation of one of the seats in a front row of the pit on a first night is a proof of endurance and staunchness of which the occupant may well be proud... the reward of stamina, of unalterable resolve" (10/9/04).

As the theatre building took shape, Ashwell's artistic plans were gradually released to the press, the *Era* advising she would "inaugurate a series of short runs, producing plays of the class with which her reputation is associated" (6/7/07). In August the journal announced the first play, in October, would be a new one, by

¹⁰³This was an American and European style, rather than the raked stage of many British theatres.

an anonymous writer [and] entitled *Irene Wycherley*. The piece presents a powerful study of a woman forced by the brutality of her husband to leave him, a tragic denouement being reached when the two are by accident brought together again. Miss Ashwell, it may be added, is sufficiently well equipped with new pieces to enable her to put public taste fully to the proof. (10/8/07)

In early October the *Daily Chronicle* described how a young Irishman, A.P. Wharton,¹⁰⁴ on a trip to London, saw Ashwell in *Leah Kleschna* and wrote a one-act play which he sent to her. Apparently Ashwell sent it back as unsuitable but advised him to write “something more ambitious. *Irene Wycherley* is the result. Miss Ashwell describes it as a strong serious modern comedy of *The Walls of Jericho* type. Inevitably there is in it something of a battle between a strong willed man and a woman with a temperament” (4/10/07). Meanwhile, the *Daily Mail* observed that “constant rehearsals of her new play and endless attention to details seem not to tire her. Her efforts are all directed to establishing a theatre that shall have a distinctive as well as artistic character” (12/9/07). The writer noted that Ashwell hoped “later in the season to give high class Sunday concerts but that scheme must remain in abeyance until the dramatic season has advanced” (ibid).

As the opening night approached, press releases were distributed and published throughout the country. Much was made of her stated intention

‘to alternate plays of serious interest with comedies, and to produce at matinees pieces which, while worthy of production by reason of their artistic merit, would not perhaps interest a sufficient number of the public to warrant their being placed in the regular evening bill... I hope to form a repertoire of plays likely to appeal to the varied tastes of my patrons.’ This, it will be noticed, is an endorsement of the Vedrenne-Barker¹⁰⁵ policy, which will be good news, both to the public, who like to see them, and to the authors who yearn for the production of, interesting plays which do not necessarily appeal to the box office. Miss Ashwell’s consideration for the comfort of her audiences extends to the orchestra. There is to be no resounding brass; it will be composed solely of stringed instruments, and the music [Musical director Stanley Hawley] is to include ‘selections from the works of younger composers, who are struggling for a hearing.’ (Globe 3/10/07)

Within a few months of opening, the *Daily Telegraph* noted that the Kingsway had “a well balanced little orchestra” (2/11/07), playing music by Dvorak, Grieg, Schumann, and Percy Pitt, and hoped that “other theatre conductors may take the excellent hint” (ibid). Further press comment, from, among others, the *Morning Post*, suggests that the Kingsway musical programme was rather unusual: “The orchestra ...has now a programme of thirty-six pieces, all of distinction, and those played are indicated by their numbers exhibited over the orchestra” (21/12/07).

¹⁰⁴Anthony P. Wharton (a nom de plume for Alister/ Alexander P. McAllister, as evidenced in letters he wrote to Ashwell and advised by the *Yorkshire Telegraph & Star* 21/10/07), was a 27 year old Dubliner, working in a business capacity at the Royal University, without previous experience of working in a theatre. He had written other plays, but this was the first to see the light of day in London, supposedly written in three weeks.

¹⁰⁵John Eugene Vedrenne (1867-1930) and Harley Granville-Barker (1877-1946) formed a joint management team which had success at the Savoy Theatre, presenting new plays in repertory, including works by Shaw.

Ashwell made it clear she wanted to maintain at least the nucleus of a permanent company of actors and directors as well as musicians. With Edward Knoblock (in a role now called 'dramaturg'), Stanley Hawley and Norman McKinnel (head of production) as her creative team, they worked hard. McKinnel was an important member of the team – a respected actor and producer (director), he had a considerable following and strong credibility, and his contribution on stage and behind the scenes was significant and fully recognised and acknowledged by Ashwell. "We were all young still but had had experience in our profession, and we were whole-hearted in what we wanted to achieve" (*Myself a Player* p.149). Again the press responded positively:

In truth, with Mr Norman McKinnel as producer and Miss Muriel Wylford, Miss Frances Ivor, Mr Henry Vibart, Mr C.M. Holland and Mr Dennis Eadie, she has already around her as intelligent and capable and clever a band of players as could be chosen from the London stage... Every care will be taken to make the productions scenically choice, though, of course, the smallness of the stage will give but little opportunity for anything very ambitious in a spectacular way.
(*Daily Chronicle* 4/10/07)

News of her plans reached the Pittsburg (USA) *Gazette Times*, in an article, *American Plays By Lena Ashwell*, which declared that despite the problems of her last tour, she was hoping to get back to America soon. "When she goes back, however, she hopes to head her own company and be her own manager and before attempting this in the United States, she proposes to have another try for what are known as 'stellar honours' in her own country" (1/9/07).

Readers were reminded of her not so successful past management attempts, and advised of her plans for the Kingsway, which included a three hour private view 'At Home' on the afternoon of 3 October 1907, six days before the opening performance. To the accompaniment of the Band of the Coldstream Guards, "Miss Ashwell welcomed the endless stream of visitors... Social, theatrical and musical London gathered in hundreds to give the popular lady lessee and manager a hearty 'Send off'" (*Standard* 4/10/07). The *Birmingham Post* noted that also present (it would have been perilous to ignore them), were members of three playgoers' clubs – "the O.P., the Playgoers' and the Gallery First Nighters - and others without whom no first-night audience in the capital would, in these times, appear complete" (4/10/07).

There were many comments on the transformation Ashwell had achieved in the theatre; the welcoming, positive atmosphere was made much of in the press, as was the encouragement and support of Ashwell's colleagues and the profession in general. Ashwell was obviously a popular and well-liked actress and there is a great sense that everyone was willing her to success and prosperity. It is interesting to note that there was no mention of her benefactress in the press, nor of Lady Caroline's response to Ashwell's refusal to play the game any longer. In *Myself a Player*, Ashwell writes that

London was plastered with new and original advertisements, a striped pink and white background¹⁰⁶ with a miniature frame inserted to hold my portrait... All the time we were planning and rehearsing I did my best to keep Jane and Lady Caroline in touch with our efforts, but without response. The Kingsway opened on Friday, the thirteenth, with thirteen in the cast.¹⁰⁷ (pp.149-150)

As money was no longer forthcoming from Lady Caroline; the initial amount being used for the lease and re-decoration, all other expenses had to be met from the box office receipts. It was not going to be easy. The *Sportsman* noted that, “packed to its utmost capacity the new house will hold not far short of £200” (4/10/07). Although no information appears to have survived on box office receipts for Ashwell’s seasons, with eight performances a week, the maximum income would be approximately £1600, not a great deal to break even, let alone operate a profit on short runs of plays.

On 9 October the curtain raiser was Alfred Sutro’s one-act play, *Maker of Men*, with Edyth Olive in her original role. However, it was the three-act *Irene Wycherley* that drew the audience and critics. Irene has left her brutal, degenerate husband and lives in London where she is romantically pursued by Harry Chesterton. When Philip Wycherley is blinded in a shooting incident, Irene is obliged to return to her former country home to look after him. Feeling nothing but revulsion for him, she unwittingly sets in train his retribution by inviting, at his request, one of his former mistresses and her new husband to visit. It transpires that the husband, suspicious of Philip, was responsible for his injury and when Irene realises who the woman is, she orders her from the house. The husband, his suspicions confirmed, shoots Philip and then himself. At the end of the play, Irene is defending herself against the entreaties of Harry who wants her to run away with him and leave the wretched Wycherley family to its fate. The *Era* wrote that Ashwell had

secured a strong play for the opening of her Kingsway Theatre. Mr Wharton has given us a ghastly but deeply impressive tragedy of domestic life, which, though it shocks and horrifies, still tends towards righteousness... The piece was written and played throughout with relentless, but irresistible, realism... Every trait of emotion, every passing cloud of sorrow, were shown by Miss Ashwell with an elevated art... an impersonation on the highest plane of histrionic art. (12/10/07)

There was high praise for the rest of the cast, particularly for Norman McKinnel as Philip, but the *Yorkshire Post* heard,

‘Disagreeable’, ‘ghastly’, ‘awful’...[from] many in the audience... when the curtain fell on the second act... Yet no one could gainsay the truth underlying the actions of the principal characters of this modern society drama... [it] started well, the dialogue possessed a certain smartness... but... developed into mere drawing-room melodrama of the most virulent type, and ended in the commonplace manner of the shilling shocker... The applause diminished with the fall of each curtain, and the audience was evidently disappointed with the development of the play. (10/10/07)

¹⁰⁶The same colours and design were used on her programmes. These were picked up by the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* in its review (23/11/07) which included sketches of the actors in character in ‘miniature’ frames on striped backgrounds.

¹⁰⁷It actually opened on Wednesday October 9 - the 13th was a Sunday, but there were thirteen in the cast!

Figure 12: Ashwell and C.M Hallard in *Irene Wycherley* (The *Bystander*, 30 October 1907).

The *Manchester Dispatch* admitted,

It was not a play for all markets, but its power, its truth, and its sincerity were manifest despite its obvious weaknesses, and the fact that, from lack of experience, the author has not yet acquired full mastery over his resources. Still, his feeling for the theatre and its needs, his capacity to depict character, and to tell a moving modern story in vivid and natural dialogue, give high hopes of his future. (10/10/07)

It was Ashwell and McKinnel's acting "which thrilled last night's audience to its centre" (*Pall Mall Gazette* 10/10/07). In the scene, which "constituted one of the most painful experiences we have ever sat through in a theatre" and which was featured pictorially and in many comments on the play, Irene, initially, in dazed submission, endures "a sudden hideous love-making on the part of her husband", before "a cry and movement of disgust puts an end to it, leaving him a roaring beast again... discomfort was soon lost in admiration of the acting of ...Ashwell as the wife and ...McKinnel as the husband" (*ibid.*)¹⁰⁸

Clearly *Irene Wycherley*¹⁰⁹ was an ideal vehicle for Ashwell and she had chosen well. She was indisputably an emotional actress, capable of expressing the existence of an intense inner life, and at the peak of her career, under pressure and given extra impetus by off-stage difficulties and the very real need to succeed. As the *Bristol Daily Mercury* recognised, "In the portrayal of a highly-strung woman, Miss Ashwell has, perhaps, no equal on the English stage of today" (10/10/07).

It is not possible to assess the extent of Ashwell and Knoblock's contribution to the final script of the play, but given her enjoyment of the rehearsal process and experience with new plays and the opportunity and incentive to influence the outcome, it is fair to assume she played an active role. Some reviewers certainly implied this was the likely scenario.

The really thrilling event of the week has been the discovery of a new dramatist. Miss Lena Ashwell is the discoverer... a bold play, the author of which... belonged to the great army of the unacted... So sure is the dramatist of his grip that he ventures upon reticences that seem like the experiments in technique of an old hand. (*Sketch* 16/10/07)

There was even some speculation about the true identity and sex of the author. "The wicked husband is painted as black as possible - so black that one is inclined to believe a woman responsible for his creation... In a play so admirably written and beautifully acted it is difficult to say exactly how much the actress owes to the author, the author to the actress" (*Brighton Standard* 22/10/07). Ashwell wrote in *Myself a Player*,

¹⁰⁸On 23/10/07 the *Sketch* featured the play under the heading 'The Most Criticised Moment in a Much Criticised Play' with a picture of Ashwell as Irene sitting stiffly on Norman McKinnel's knee. "Philip Wycherley seeks to renew relations with his wife. Philip: 'Let's have a second honeymoon.' The incident here depicted, when the brutal Philip Wycherley, blinded by a gun-shot wound and beast rather than man, seeks to resume his former relations with his wife, has aroused a great deal of comment and a good deal of discussion." Apparently Ashwell's reaction of revulsion was realistic and dramatic - and was something not previously depicted with such force on the stage.

¹⁰⁹It is only available in manuscript form in the British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Collection of Plays.

He... sent me the play in parts at a time, and I had written making suggestions as to the advisability of some scenes and alterations of others. I had great faith in it for it was so full of vitality and sparkling dialogue, and contained much humour... when I was in New York [I] offered it to the Shubert Brothers; but they had no time to read it. After production the American rights were valuable... the theatre benefited.¹¹⁰ (p.150-1)

Ashwell received warm praise from distinguished friends, including William Heinemann¹¹¹ who offered to send her his foreign touring manager to discuss possible tours for *Irene* abroad. It appears from an extant letter that Wharton (to his regret and still retaining his admiration for her) and Ashwell fell out over the artistic and financial success of the play. While there is no evidence of the terms they agreed, it is likely Ashwell bought the rights from Wharton, benefiting the Kingsway in both London and elsewhere. Wharton, using his real name (McAllister), wrote to Ashwell from Dublin on 6 April 1908.¹¹² He protests that Ashwell snubbed him in a London restaurant where he heard her saying “its mine”, presumably in relation to his play. He thought she was “behaving generally in a most uncalled for and high handed manner” (ibid). He was, however, seeking continued success as a playwright, but having difficulty with ideas for his next work.¹¹³

However, *Irene Wycherley* certainly created interest. As usual, J.T. Grein in the *Sunday Times* was not overly impressed with Ashwell. “As a rule she rises to a great scene and slurs the smaller ones,” but he admitted that “despite its flaws, [it] is a play worth seeing, because it indicates the drift of the young generation: because it shows an ambition to cut the cables to insular convention” (13/10/07). This was endorsed by Henry George Hibbert in his article, *The Nude in Art* (“The nakedness of a brute’s passion; the nakedness of a woman’s soul!” *Mammon* 16/10/07), in which he argues that puritanical critics, in this case those who dismissed *Irene Wycherley* “with the remark that it contained passages of such impropriety as to impose silence” (ibid), were misusing the responsibilities of journalism. He considered this play should be seen, not censored and that mostly the censor got it right, rejecting plays,

by their dirt; but usually, also, by their dullness. It would have been a calamity had not *Irene Wycherley* appealed to him... it would be a disgrace to the playgoer were he to be diverted from a proper admiration of the play... by the yappings of puritanical critics... There is no situation on the London stage at the moment comparable in strength and sadness with that expounded in *Irene Wycherley*¹¹⁴...I have no belief in criticism as a dominant force in the

¹¹⁰No evidence was found of an American production but it may not have been mainstream or in New York.

¹¹¹Letter dated 21/10/07 in the Rush Rhees Collection, University of Rochester.

¹¹²Letter to Ashwell, in the Rush Rhees Collection, University of Rochester.

¹¹³Wharton’s next success appears to have been *At The Barn*, premiered at the Prince of Wales Theatre on 11 April 1912 and performed by Ashwell’s company in 1928. In contrast to *Irene Wycherley* it is a light and conventional love story.

¹¹⁴There was further observation on the play’s heightened realism and break with conventional behaviour, when Lady Kate, writing on ‘Stage Frankness’ in *Brighton Society*, commented that in real life “it is an uncommon thing for a woman to state her age after she has reached twenty-five, but on the stage there is not the same reluctance shown. In *Irene Wycherley* you hear Miss Lena Ashwell mention the fact that she is twenty-nine, though the character is made up to look much older; and I hear that Mr Somerset Maugham, in his new play, *Lady Frederick*, makes his heroine confess to thirty-five. This is a nasty jar to one’s feelings, considering that such a thing could not possibly happen in real life” (30/11/07).

Figure 13: From Act III of *Irene Wycherley*, Kingsway Theatre, 1907. (Production souvenir, author's collection)

shaping of a theatrical fortune. The playgoer usually makes up his own mind quickly... ninety-nine visits to the play are a weariness of the flesh - there is the hundredth night, potentially bearing that triumph of the playwright or the player which pays for all; which gives... a sense of delight to which all other pleasures of the imagination are incomparable.
(ibid)

Despite the bleak realism of the play, Ashwell and the Kingsway were newsworthy and immediately fashionable, with three Royal visits, including those of the Prince and Princess of Wales (on 18 October) and Queen Maude of Norway, within the first five days of the season. King Edward attended a performance in late November. This was important for Ashwell's initial success, as the London correspondent of the *Dublin Evening Telegraph* pointed out.

The booking for Mr Wharton's play... shows that the favourable reception accorded to the piece on its first production is fully endorsed by the playgoing public in general. So large is the demand for the higher-priced seats that Miss Ashwell has now found it necessary to add an extra row of stalls and there is every indication of the run being a long one. Many prominent members of the fashionable world were noticed at the theatre during the past week.
(22/10/07)

The personal touch and attention to detail were paying off, with interest in Ashwell as a manager and as a personality:

Besides her exquisite acting... Ashwell must be congratulated upon her start as a manager. She has done it in a businesslike and ambitious style, providing comfort and luxury in her theatre, and promising us enterprises on truly artistic lines. Even her little programme is a novelty; of a small handy size, prettily got up, full of information and free from advertisements, it is worth the sixpence charged for it, and which seems an outrageous charge for the usual inartistic piece of pasteboard.
(*Hour Glass* 23/10/07)

The *Daily News* was pleased to interview her, surrounded by her menagerie of dressing room mascots collected as mementoes in relation to different productions. Ashwell declared,

I don't take the pessimistic view of the English drama that Mr Henry Arthur Jones does. I believe a big revival has set in. People are thinking more. There are more theatres devoted to the legitimate drama of thought than ...five years ago. Managers have tried the inane or the insane drama, call it what you will, and it has spelt ruin. And I believe in British brains. Dramatically, there are more brains in our own country than in any other in the world - if you only take the trouble to find them. I believe there are still many undiscovered geniuses who can write a strong, intense, human play. It is a fallacy to suppose, as many of our managers do, that the humble author of a curtain-raiser cannot expand his talents to a three or four act play. If a man has the true dramatic instinct, surely he can sustain it through three acts.
(30/10/07)

However, this view changed the more she sought appropriate new plays for her theatre. At this time, Ashwell had also to find appropriate curtain-raisers to precede *Irene Wycherley*. Audiences demanded a lot for their money and were not content to be sent home too early. After five weeks of Sutro's *A Maker of Men*, she presented a new work, *A Stroke of Business*, by Arthur Morrison and Horace Newte, adapted from a short story by Morrison, *Divers Tales*. A story of mean mindedness and greed, reviewers generally

considered it to be unworthy of the main production; the *Tribune* noting, “the applause at the close was scarcely cordial” (19/11/07). This in turn was replaced on 20 December with a revival (directed by the author) of Norman McKinnel’s one act play, *The Bishop's Candlesticks*, a version of the well-known incident in Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, which had premiered at the Duke of York’s on 24 August 1901.

The company did not perform during Christmas week, but resumed performances on Boxing Night. Throughout this period *Irene Wycherley* continued to be mentioned and praised in the press. “*Irene Wycherley* seems to be doing almost as well as it deserves. It is a wonderfully able play, and one of the things which may be seen and studied several times with advantage” (*Westminster Gazette* 21/12/07). When asked during the *Daily News* interview for her thoughts on censorship as a discouraging aspect for young playwrights, Ashwell responded, “I have no particular quarrel with the Censor... I would prefer him to a committee of experts or any substitute which the dramatists themselves might suggest” (30/10/07). This question was part of a growing debate¹¹⁵ on the role of the censor, as Philip Carr’s article in the *Manchester Guardian* three weeks later pointed out - plays were still considered by the Lord Chamberlain’s department, before performance was permitted, on the basis of a Parliamentary Act last revised in 1843 and there were many who felt the system needed consideration and change (24/10/07). The *Era* devoted an editorial to ‘The Question of Censorship,’ pointing out that it was possible to publish a play rejected for production by the Censor, an example being Edward Garnett’s play, *The Breaking Point*, published by Methuen. This publication provided the opportunity to read an example of the Censor’s reasons for rejection. Having read it the *Era* considered it would be rejected by audiences: “highly respectable and undoubtedly moral persons are willing to swallow a good deal of immorality in plot and action provided verbal decency is observed” (19/10/07); obviously not the case with this play. This was before the major 1909 debate on the censorship, in which Ashwell was involved. The *Era* considered that for theatre managers it was better to have a censor so the manager knows where he stands:

Without a Censorship every production would be a dangerous experiment: and, after laying out money and labour on a production, the manager might find them both utterly wasted when the play had to be withdrawn by the order of the police or at the decision of a British jury. Already in Paris this inconvenience is being felt, and entrepreneurs are regretting the abolition of... the Censorship. (ibid)

This was Ashwell’s argument in 1909 when she defended the existing process.

Nightly performances and theatre management did not preclude Ashwell from involvement in wider concerns regarding the theatre business. The *Era* quoted her when debating whether the Lord Chamberlain’s clause in licences, forbidding smoking in theatres but not music halls, would stand up in law, especially as some managers in the competitive situation vying for audiences, wanted to be able to introduce smoking as a facility for their audiences.

¹¹⁵To be examined in more detail in the following chapter.

The question, in the case of London managers, is rather one of feeling; and Miss Lena Ashwell may be believed to express the general sentiment of her class when she writes: 'I do not see why smoking should be prohibited in theatres if it is allowed in music halls. The presence of the clause in the Lord Chamberlain's licence may be accounted for by the anxious care of those in authority for the safety of the public; but if it is safe to allow smoking in music halls I cannot see that it is any more dangerous to grant the same privilege in a theatre. I should like to think, however, that the Lord Chamberlain and his advisers are actuated in their retention of the non-smoking clause not only for prudential reasons, but also by their innate sense of the artistic fitness of things. Personally, I should very much object to smoking in the auditorium during the performance. In the plays with which I have been, and hope to be, associated, complete absorption in the performance on the part not only of the actors, but also of the audience, is almost an absolute necessity. Theatre-goers will easily recall situations in many plays when even such a small matter as the sudden striking of a match in the auditorium would completely destroy the illusion of the scene, and incidentally the enjoyment of the entire audience, besides being distracting to the artists. I do not believe playgoers want to smoke during the performance.'

(12/10/07)

The rest of her letter, originally published in the *Morning Leader* (from which the *Era* quoted), went on to say,

if they do it is the fault of the play, or the performers; but I do think that every facility in the way of wide gangways, giving easy access to the saloons and foyers, should be given to smokers between the acts, and at the Kingsway I have endeavoured to make such arrangements. I have the greatest sympathy with smokers - I rather like a cigarette myself - but no smoking during the performance, please.

(4/10/07)

In principle, managers were opposed to restrictions imposed on them, specially if it appeared to work against their financial benefit, but in practice, smoking was not the most appealing issue to fight such a principle on. However, in December 1907, following various deputations, including one from the Suburban Theatre Managers' Association, the County Council decided to remove the no smoking clause from theatre licences already issued and not to include it in the future, leaving the smoking in theatres issue to the discretion of individual managers. West End managers were not keen to have smoking in their theatres and the *Era* quoted many of them including Ashwell as saying, "smoking would 'simply be horrid'" (17/12/07), but suburban managers saw it as an opportunity to compete with music halls who had no such restriction.

As Ashwell developed a good working relationship with her company, particularly as they energetically sustained a punishing schedule of eight performances at the Kingsway plus flying matinees around the country, the *Era* reported on Granville Barker's address to the Oxford Fabian Society at Balliol College in November 1911, when he declared the theatre to be in a state of disorder. While she may not have agreed with all his sentiments, he was someone whose opinion she would have valued. "Art cannot be competitive in the best sense, and therefore they (managers) must not buy their ideas in the cheapest and sell in the best market" (9/11/07). Within the profession Granville Barker considered that the Actors' Association had been most concerned with the dignity of the actor while the breakaway group, the Actors' Union, had confined itself mainly to the question of the minimum wage.

Two things militate against successful trade unionism, the intimate association between the employer and the employee, and the fact that acting is a profession of snobs. He did not say this unkindly but they hamper themselves by their extraordinary feeling concerning their dignity. They prefer to be regarded as members of a profession rather than of an honest trade... If anything was to be done for the theatre it must be organised as a State affair... a municipal theatre should be similar to a hospital. It must be in the charge of an expert, but should be free from rent, rates, and light charges. (ibid)

It was an Italian, Mario Borsa, who appeared best able to sum up the situation in 1907. On 16 November the *Era*, in advance of the publication of the English translation of *The English Stage of To-day*¹¹⁶(which had been published in Italian in 1906), quoted Borsa on the causes of the decay of British drama. In his opinion,

The system of long runs, of actor-managers, and restaurateurs-proprietors, the competition of the music hall, puritanism, the censorship, the middle-class and conventional customs of playgoers, the want of interest displayed by the state, explain up to a certain point - if they explain anything at all - the lack of serious, refined, and artistic drama. (p.39)

He considered that for a full and satisfactory explanation, it was necessary to look at the public itself which is “the creature of the modern industrial civilisation, with ideas, sentiments and tastes moulded by its environment” (p.40). Borsa argued that general conditions of living had been raised, diffused wealth and brought comfort within the reach of the masses while at the same time creating a uniformity of behaviour and ideas. It seemed to him that “none of the great questions which have agitated the Continent during the past fifty years has made an impression, even skin deep upon the ‘great British public’ ... [demonstrating an] incapacity for feeling or appreciating serious and thoughtful art, uniformity and banality of its tastes” (p.46). Borsa examined the developments and changes in British drama in recent years, including Shaw and other playwrights of serious purpose, identifying the circumstances and issues, as indicated above, which Ashwell was planning to confront.

At this time, Ashwell did not neglect her charitable duties, which included an appearance on the same platform as the legendary Sarah Bernhardt, whose company gave a special performance in French of *Adrienne Lecouvreur* in aid of the Lord Mayor’s¹¹⁷ Fund for Crippled Children at the Shakespeare Theatre, Clapham Junction, on 8 November 1907. Ashwell, “one of the most charming of London actresses, read an address [subsequently presented to the French actress] expressing in poetic form ‘the sentiments’ of South London playgoers to Mme Bernhardt” (*Morning Leader* 9/11/07). The afternoon was one of sentiment during which “The golden voiced Sarah was at her best and brightest, and died in a manner which brought tears to the eyes of [a crowded house and] numberless youngsters who were learning French in its newest style” (ibid). As the *Morning Post* enthused, “such an event as the appearance of two so highly distinguished artists as Madame Sarah Bernhardt and Miss Ashwell together

¹¹⁶Mario Borsa, *The English Stage of Today*, trans. Selwyn Brinton, London, John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1908.

¹¹⁷The Lord Mayor of London, Sir William Treloar, serving the last day of his term, was an example to Ashwell given her later activities, as he raised over £64,000 for the fund during his year of office.

on a south London stage is unprecedented, and it is gratifying testimony of 'l'entente cordiale'" (9/11/07).

Not content to conquer the West End, Ashwell undertook a series of 'flying matinees' to centres outside London. The first was to the relatively close coastal town of Eastbourne in late October.

Miss Lena Ashwell, encouraged by the signal success of her flying matinee to Eastbourne, has now arranged to give similar representations of *Irene Wycherley* at Birmingham¹¹⁸ on Tuesday, the 19th, at Richmond on Thursday, the 28th [where she played to "a crowded audience", *Surrey Comet* 30/11/07], and at Cardiff on Thursday December 12. The last mentioned is a bold adventure, but by dint of utilising two dressing saloons attached to the 5.0pm express and a service of motor cars at the Paddington terminus, Miss Ashwell is confident of reaching the Kingsway without delaying the rising of the curtain at the advertised time. (Era 9/11/07)

Theatrical commentator and critic, B.W. Findon, did not consider the Cardiff flying matinee a bold adventure. He believed the combined travel and performing, no matter how good or 'painstaking' the actors may be, adversely affected the evening performance back in London and considered Ashwell's motives were not to give the people of Cardiff the opportunity to see the play but were due to a record-breaking spirit and an attempt to emulate rivals in management. While he considered Brighton within reasonable distance to undertake a flying matinee, Cardiff was too far and it would be more appropriate for Ashwell to go on tour there in due course (*Morning Advertiser* 9/11/07). Ashwell, however, was very conscious of not being well-known in the provinces and in anticipation of later Kingsway tours, was obviously intent on generating awareness and creating demand. The newspapers, presumably on the basis of press releases from the Kingsway, did make it sound record-breaking and entered into the spirit of the occasion. The *Daily Graphic* called it 'A Record in Stage Annals', advising that

A director of the Great Western Railway will accompany the artists, special printed notices will be circulated a day or two beforehand to the officials all along the line, instructing them to keep the line clear, and four racing motor cars will convey the company from Paddington to the Kingsway Theatre along a route which will be specially watched by the police. Every second is precious to make this record breaking performance a complete success. The fourteen artists and five assistants will change the dresses and makeup in a specially fitted saloon while travelling at sixty miles an hour. It will be one long, nerve straining, strenuous struggle which only the highest physiques could endure. But it will be done - unless fog makes quick travelling impossible. (20/11/07)

¹¹⁸*M.A.P.* reported *à propos* the Birmingham matinee, under the heading 'An Actor's Spoiled Face', "Miss Lena Ashwell just had an amusing experience with her printers but she does not, in this particular respect, lay claim to originality. Proofs of the illustrated bills she had ordered for Birmingham and which she wanted posted in that city a fortnight or so before the day of the *Irene Wycherley* visit, had not arrived at the Kingsway at the promised hour, and she telephoned to know the cause of the delay. The printers phoned back to say that the delay was not their fault at all, but was caused through the difficulty they had had with the photograph of Mr McKinnel, whose forehead was all over scratches, and they had been obliged to 'paint them in', "in order to get a clear reproduction"! And after the whole world - the whole playgoing world at any rate, had been discussing the wounds on Philip Wycherley's brow!" (16/11/07).

The *Daily Express* announced breathlessly that Ashwell intended “to break all previous records for ‘flying matinees’ today... the following is the timetable:- Leave Paddington 8.45am, Arrive Cardiff 11.35am, Matinee begins 2.0pm, curtain falls 4.20, Leave Cardiff 5.5pm, arrive Paddington 8.30pm, Arrive Kingsway Theatre 8.45pm” (12/12/07). The following day, the *South Wales Daily News* reported that, after playing to a full house,

there was a large crowd at Cardiff... Station... the London express, due at 4.57, was in three minutes before time, and the special saloons and dining car in which Miss Ashwell’s company were to travel were speedily run on behind the train. All the company had entrained by 5 o’clock, and hearty cheers were raised when the train started. Miss Lena Ashwell smilingly bowed her acknowledgements. (13/12/07)

As if to answer Mr Findon, Ashwell reportedly “told an *Express* representative who accompanied her on the flying trip, that, far from being fatigued, she felt as if she had taken a tonic” (*Daily Express* 13/12/07).

During the fourth month of the run, Ashwell undertook a further ‘flying matinee’ of *Irene Wycherley* to the Coventry Empire Theatre on Thursday 16 January 1908, when once again the itinerary and details of elaborate planning were released to the press.

The success of *Irene Wycherley* gave Ashwell time to settle into the Kingsway and consolidate her position. The box office was doing well, so she did not need to rush to find her next play and begin rehearsals. However, as she had made it clear she did not intend to settle into long runs, by early December there was speculation as to what she would produce next. After hoping to be the first to break the news, the *Tribune* was obliged to write that

yesterday, under the title of ‘Theatre News’, we reprinted from an American paper a report that Miss Lena Ashwell had secured the English rights to *Paid in Full*, a play of American life, which... was to be put into rehearsal at the Kingsway Theatre within the next few weeks. We are informed by... a representative that this is incorrect. ‘The facts are that the play was submitted to Miss Ashwell and declined by her within a few days of its reception’. We regret that we should have been misled in the matter. The present play... which has been so conspicuous a success, is likely to run for some time to come at the popular playhouse. (11/12/07)

The *Daily Express* was no closer when it listed a number of plays ostensibly being considered including *The Wooing of Eve* and *Clothes* by Hartley Manners; a comedy by Sutherland and Dix; a modern play of Russia by J.B. Fagan and *Paid in Full* by Eugene Walter (11/12/07). Biding her time, Ashwell was not to be drawn on specific future plans and the press waited until January 1908 for more information.

During the first couple of years at the Kingsway, Ashwell submitted a number of applications to the London County Council for improvements and alterations to the building, in response to the demands of her audience and the need for smooth running of the theatre. This implies she had sufficient funds from the box office to cover production and maintenance costs and was able to afford building work. In 1907

she submitted a plan seeking consent to retain a projecting shelter in front of the theatre, and another, drawn by “Messrs. J.S. Henry Limited, showing a proposal to reduce the height of a barrier behind the gallery seating, and to fix two seats in recesses at the back of the pit and gallery” (*Era* 7/12/07); both of which were agreed by the Council’s Theatres Committee. More radical changes were made in 1908 and will be detailed in the following chapter. Given her active involvement in the theatre building and its operating costs, it is likely she was part of the deputation formed by theatre managers in December 1907 which confronted the Metropolitan Water Board with regard to high charges made to theatres. At a meeting on 20 December it was decided that theatres and music halls should be charged on the same terms as schools, flats, police and fire stations, paying five percent on the rateable value, less twenty-three percent rebate (*Era* 28/12/07).

By the end of 1907, with praise ringing in her ears, Ashwell was firmly established in the eyes of the press and public as a celebrity whose opinions were sought on a variety of issues. As well as noting her success, the *Morning Advertiser* comment provides an interesting insight into audiences of the day.

Miss Ashwell has shown courage and sound discrimination in choosing a work by an unknown man, and it goes to prove how little the public is concerned with the writer of the play. It is always pleasing to see a new management - more especially when the head of it is a young and popular actress - make a lucky hit, and Miss Ashwell has the best New Year wishes of all genuine playgoers. (28/12/07)

She faced a daunting financial situation with the withdrawal of her backers, but artistically she was in the ascendant. The *Daily Express* included *Irene Wycherley* in its best six plays of the year, in the company of Hubert Henry Davies’ *The Mollusc*; Somerset Maugham’s *Lady Frederick*, Granville Barker’s *Waste*; Sutro’s *John Glayde’s Honour* and Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra* (30/12/07).

Figure 14: Background information on the Kingsway Theatre, from the Magazine Programme. Mander & Mitchenson collection).

CHAPTER TWO: 1908 to 1914 ‘Actress and Pioneer’

MANAGEMENT STYLE AND INNOVATIONS

The years 1908 to the outbreak of War in the summer of 1914 were some of the busiest and most productive of Lena Ashwell's life. Significantly, perhaps, the chapter in her autobiography relating to this period is given the title *Wider Vistas*. Now in her late thirties, she was beginning to achieve considerable success as a manager, and with personal happiness in a second marriage (which took place quietly in late October 1908), these years saw her achieve an important position in a society facing great changes. She was a tireless worker for many causes aimed at improving the lives of many and it was at this time the foundations were laid for her post-war work of taking theatre into the community. A consistently independent personality, she nevertheless recognised the importance of working with others to achieve results, and following the foundation, by Adeline Bourne, Gertrude Elliott (Lady Forbes Robertson) and Winifred Mayo, of the Actresses' Franchise League in November 1908, she became a committed and active supporter in the suffrage struggle which (although having its origins in the previous century) dominated the political scene leading up to the First World War.

On January 7, 1908, at the Kingsway, Ashwell celebrated her one hundredth performance in *Irene Wycherley*, possibly her most successful role to date. In late January a second company, performing the same repertoire, began a long spring tour in Folkestone. Throughout her management at the Kingsway there were usually two or three companies on the road at any time, taking the successful Kingsway productions as far afield as Dublin. For this she was reliant on the skill and commitment of production manager and popular leading actor, Norman McKinnel and various tour business managers, including Lawson Lambert and H.B. Fitzgibbon, engaged to oversee all arrangements. These were appointed in addition to the Kingsway business manager, Walter Maxwell.

The Press was interested in Ashwell as a new, female theatre manager and particularly in her attention to detail and consideration of theatre patrons. Innovations and noteworthy activities included a special ‘Souvenir’ night on 24 January 1908 when all members of the audience received a presentation folder containing ten production photographs of *Irene Wycherley* together with portraits of the author and Ashwell, which must have been an expensive gesture. The Kingsway had distinctively designed, informative programmes which were worth purchasing (and which contained useful travel information for patrons to and from the theatre); the safety curtain was lowered during a break in the performance (now a compulsory regulation but not necessary in 1908); Ashwell made a polite plea, via a notice on the curtain, that ‘The Management desires to thank those ladies who have kindly removed their hats, so that those behind them may obtain an uninterrupted view of the stage’ (*Home Chat* 28/3/08); she was making clear attempts to develop a stock company used to working together as well as actively encouraging new writers; overall the Kingsway was pleasantly comfortable, with a clear approach to ticket pricing and free

lists. In January 1908 the issue of ‘deadheads’¹, people who only attended the theatre when given free seats, was causing concern for some managers who proposed a united approach to abolishing free lists and ‘papering’ - the giving out of free seats to ensure a full house. Ashwell was included in those who agreed to support such a scheme (*Daily Mail* 24/1/08), but inevitably each theatre had to deal with its own circumstances and no formal scheme was introduced.

Success and support were encouraging and in April she obtained London County Council approval to enlarge the Kingsway box office to accommodate three booking clerks to handle increased ticket sales. She successfully introduced numbered, bookable seats at five shillings each, positioned between the pit and the stalls, intended for playgoers “who, while finding it inconvenient to go home and dress (for example, men who work in the City), are unwilling to appear unconventionally attired” (*Daily Express* 9/4/08). The number of seats thus allocated, more expensive than the pit but cheaper than the stalls, was to be flexible, dependent on demand. It was considered by some managers to be a slightly risky practice, open to abuse by those wanting to sit near the stalls while paying less, but dress in the theatre was still an important indicator of class. Ashwell ensured that the Kingsway was constantly in the news and from her scrapbooks it is clear that she was a good publicist distributing press statements throughout the United Kingdom, never missing an opportunity to promote her work.

As a female manager at a time when theatre management was a male dominated business - both the Theatrical Managers Association and the 1908 breakaway group, the Society of West End Theatre Managers², led by Sir Charles Wyndham, appear from their membership records to have virtually excluded women – Ashwell’s ‘difference’ was often noted by the press and it would seem she relished her reputation as an individual. She was never a member of either of these organisations despite very active participation in other professional associations. As an indication of her success during the 1908 spring season, when the *Daily Chronicle* commented on the unsuccessful present London theatrical season, with twenty-four new productions achieving less than ninety-five performances, *Irene Wycherley* (140) and *Diana of Dobson’s* (141) were in the top ten longest running productions³ (25/6/08).

¹Arthur St John Adcock was inspired to write a poem, *The Moan of a Theatre-Manager*, about this in 1903. The first verse is “Who gets, by hook or crook, from me, Admittance free, though well knows he, That myriads turned away will be? The Deadhead.” (*The Methuen Book of Theatre Verse*, compiled and edited by Jonathan and Moira Field, Methuen Drama, London, 1991).

²The Theatrical Managers’ Association was founded in 1894, with Henry Irving as the first President, and is still in existence today. Its first woman President was Prue Skene, elected in 1991. Its membership is open to theatre managers throughout the United Kingdom. The Society of West End Theatre Managers also continues to exist, working closely with the TMA and dealing specifically with London’s Theatreland area.

³Other productions in this list included *Miss Hook of Holland*, Prince of Wales, 462 performances, *Brewster’s Millions*, Hicks, 323, *The Girls of Gottenburg*, Gaiety, 307, *The Gay Gordons*, Aldwych, 229, *The Earl of Pawtucket*, Playhouse, 223, and *The Thief*, St James, 186.

Her response to this continuing success was further improvement to the Kingsway,⁴ closed in late July to install a ventilating fan in the roof of the auditorium. However, it was not until September that the full extent of the summer conversion work was revealed, together with Ashwell's increased commitment following the transfer of W.S. Penley's share of the theatre to her - the lease was now entirely her responsibility. The gallery had been made into a commodious upper circle, entailing a slight increase in the price of admission. As the *Bolton Evening News* reported, Ashwell used the direct approach, coupled with an eye for what was surely a necessary increase in ticket income if she was to make the theatre pay.

In place of the shilling seat on a 'knife board', there will be two-shilling tip up seats... she [Ashwell] always takes her patrons into her confidence about her plans. She does so on this particular occasion with her accustomed grace - 'I am sorry I have had to abolish the gallery. During my whole career I have received nothing but kindness from "the gods". The theatre is small and the old gallery was not comfortable. There I hope that "the gods" will recognise that, although I have raised my prices, I have provided a quid pro quo in the way of increased comfort, and they will continue to look down benignly upon me in the future from the upper circle.'⁵ (21/9/08)

The Gallery First Nighters' Club, however, did not look benignly on the changes and recorded a strong vote of disapproval for the alterations, claiming the increased prices disadvantaged their members and suggesting a boycott of the Kingsway (*Referee* 11/10/08). Despite this, Ashwell was confident and began her autumn season addressing her audience with a positive introduction in *The Sway Boat* programme.

During the past year I have experienced nothing but encouragement at your hands; so great indeed has been your kindly interest in our venture that I feel justified in believing that the little Kingsway Theatre has gained a warm place in your affections, and I can assure you that I shall leave no stone unturned to make that feeling permanent.

With her strong musical background and early training at the Royal Academy of Music, Ashwell was an active promoter of music in her theatre; her music policy attracting press attention as she experimented with the convention of musical interludes normally performed by a theatre's resident orchestra. The *World* noted her encouragement of young composers to submit their work for performance by the Kingsway orchestra (13/10/08), and from early November under the musical direction of her old friend Stanley Hawley, musical selections replaced the one act curtain raiser. At the end of the year she experimented further, introducing a small ensemble of eminent musicians to perform chamber music on stage before the play.

⁴In the Public Records Office, London, there are plans showing the theatre layout in January 1898 (which had a narrow frontage in Great Queen-street with the depth of the stage and auditorium running along the parallel Parker Street at the back), together with Ashwell's request, submitted by E.W Temple on 26 September 1908, to put in a new hot water boiler and connections. Stamps dated early October 1908 indicate Fire Brigade and County Council inspections and clearance.

⁵This statement was presumably copied from the Kingsway printed programme for *The Sway Boat*, which contains the same message (Author's collection). In most of her Kingsway programmes Ashwell addressed a letter to her patrons about her plans and the current play as well as thanking them for their patronage.

When, however, on February 15, 1909, the current production, *The Truants*, was preceded by Coleby's one act play, first performed in May 1908, *The Likes O' Me*, with Beryl Mercer in her original role, this was interpreted by the press as the Kingsway abandoning its musical experiment. The *Truth* commented,

The average theatre-goer wants to be able to chat freely between the acts. This can be done without offence when light orchestral music of the ordinary kind is being given; with a high class string quartet playing Beethoven or Schumann, however, it was quite different. People thought they ought to stop talking and listen, and to the unmusical at any rate, this was rather tiresome. (17/2/09)

The string quartet, subsequently known as the London Quartet, left its residency at the Kingsway to perform on the concert platform and Ashwell continued to provide the usual background music pre-performance and during the interval, performed by the theatre's orchestra.

THE KINGSWAY REPERTOIRE 1908-1909

When assessing Ashwell's management style, her selection of plays is significant. It is important, therefore, to consider the repertoire she presented

Miss ...Ashwell has the reputation of being a marvellous feeler of the public pulse, and people have striven to account for the secret of her successful judgement in various ways. In the first place ...she allows the [initial] reading to be done for her, and then makes a choice that will suit herself, while other managers and players attempt to choose entirely 'off their own bat'. Selecting merely a piece that will afford good display for a 'star' is found in nine cases out of ten to be a failure, while an all-round, well-knit work comes not only to stay, but runs along into the provinces, and somehow or other plays itself and lives on for many seasons. (Manchester Courier 15/10/08)

Some of Ashwell's most successful work as an actress was during the years when she was also a manager - while an advocate of the old style actor/manager in charge of a theatre and in control of the choice of roles, she nevertheless enjoyed working with young playwrights whom she could influence and encourage to exploit her particular qualities. This process enabled her to find and build characters which influenced the public perception of her on stage as well as subsequent casting of her by other managers. Undoubtedly these characters gave her off-stage confidence in her management and community activities. There is also no doubt that happiness in her personal life at this time was a contributing factor to her energy and courage as an actress, manager and active member of society. Following the finalisation of her divorce from Arthur Playfair, on 31 October 1908 she married Dr Henry Simson, an eminent Scottish obstetric surgeon.⁶ She described her years with him as "complete happiness... however battered and weary I felt, I came home to absolute harmony, safety and love" (*Myself a Player*, p. 160).

⁶Sir Henry John Forbes Simson (1872-1932), studied at Edinburgh University, was Hon. Consulting Surgeon to the Hospital for Women, Soho Square, London, where Ashwell first met him when she went for a medical consultation.

The production of *Irene Wycherley* indicated clearly that she was looking for suitable roles for herself as well as thought-provoking drama that would bring a certain amount of box office security. Her most significant and successful roles were those portraying strong or troubled women, women who broke convention emotionally or socially. In *Myself A Player* she described many of these women as ‘criminals’:

Whatever the degradation of the life, the emphasis was placed on the imperishable beauty and indestructibility of the human soul. It was always with this in my mind that I played the range of criminals that came my way. For years I played criminals and broke all the commandments ...having so many illegitimate babies that at last I felt I would have to murder one or two to get even. (p.122)

Regardless of her personal reputation, she sought new plays and those expressing the concerns, interests and spirit of the time. Given these two criteria and her personal beliefs, it is inevitable that she would present plays dealing with women’s issues, of which suffrage, financial independence and equality of status were central concerns at this time.

Cicely Hamilton, an ardent supporter of the suffrage cause, journalist, reader of plays and a young actress with the Play Actors⁷, sent Ashwell her one-act play *The Sixth Commandment* in 1907. Ashwell returned it as unsuitable, suggesting Hamilton write something else for her consideration. Originally licensed as *The Adventuress, Diana of Dobson’s*, Hamilton’s first full-length play to be produced, opened at the Kingsway on 12 February 1908. Ashwell played the exhausted but rebellious shopgirl, Diana, who, on receiving a legacy of £300, decides to leave her job at the drapery for which she receives “Five bob a week for fourteen hours’ work a day - five bob a week for the use of my health and strength - five bob a week for my life. And I haven’t a doubt that a good many others here are in the same box,”⁸ and to live life to the full for a month, knowing full well she will have to return to a life of drudgery once the money runs out. It was described by Ashwell as a “very, very light comedy... the story is a slight one, with... a beautiful love interest... [however] the authoress can hit hard when she likes, and some of the scenes are written in a spirit that can only be described as exceedingly sarcastic and satirical” (*Pall Mall Gazette* 8/2/08).

Despite Hamilton’s declaration that “Although I take a great interest in the social and industrial questions of the day, in so far as they affect women generally, I had no serious object in writing *Diana of Dobson’s*” (ibid), the play created much discussion about conditions of work for women such as Diana, having to live-in at their place of work, enduring unpleasant conditions and low wages with little hope of

⁷“The Play Actors’ Society was founded in May 1907, by members of the Actors’ Association, for the production of original works by English authors, Shakespearean plays, and other classical works, including translations, and to benefit the position of the working actor and actress” (*Era Annual*, London 1918 p.115).

⁸Cicely Hamilton, *Diana of Dobson’s*, in *New Woman Plays* edited by Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner, London, Methuen Drama, 1991, Act One, p.39.

Figure 15: Programme for *Diana of Dobson's*, Kingsway Theatre, 1908. (Author's collection)

change in their circumstances, except through marriage⁹. Hamilton subsequently published a serious and lengthy statement of her thoughts related to this in *Marriage as a Trade*.¹⁰

The play attracted many favourable reviews, with much praise for the scene in which Diana, after a month of playing the role of a wealthy widow visiting Switzerland, issues a challenge to her would-be suitor, an unemployed ex-Guardsman unable to live on £600 a year and seeking his livelihood through marriage to a wealthy woman - to see if he can live as she will have to on her return to England.

I cannot understand how you and your like have the impertinence to look down on me and mine? When you thought I had married an old man for his money, you considered that I had acted in a seemly and womanly manner - when you heard that, instead of selling myself in the marriage market - I have earned my living honestly, you consider me impossible. And yet, I have done for half a dozen years what you couldn't do for half a dozen months.¹¹

Of Diana's speech in this scene, *Sunday Times* critic, J.T.Grein, declared: "If there had been nothing more in this remarkable play than this one speech, which is one of the finest and sincerest to be found in the literature of the modern English drama, I should hail the advent of Miss Hamilton with unbounded joy" (16/2/08). The lovers' affection for each other is genuine, and when they meet again in the fourth act, on London's Thames River Embankment, both out of work and hungry, he is a changed man, having taken up her challenge and realised he could live on his allowance, which he proposes to share in marriage with Diana.

Diana of Dobson's is exactly the type of play which we have been yearning for, it depicts life of today, it cuts into the lower stratum, it is hallowed by a touch of romance... the greatest merit of all... is the veracity, the simplicity, and the directness of the play... [it] will rank in the life-work of Miss Ashwell; she rises to every situation; she is touching in her scenes of emotion; she is the woman who battles, and in her hour of glory never forgets the inherent sadness of her life. (ibid)

Diana of Dobson's, which played until late June 1908, was the Kingsway's most successful production, which Ashwell brought back for a return season in 1909. Companies emanating from the Kingsway took it on the road throughout the United Kingdom and other managements subsequently bought the production for touring right up to the outbreak of war in 1914. Ashwell repeated her role in August 1911 when she was invited by the manager John Halpin, who was re-opening the little Coronet Theatre in west London, to present a two week season commencing on 18 September, with a week of *Diana of Dobson's*, preceded by *The Likes O' Me* and followed by a week of *Madame X*, with a number of the original cast members taking part. Both plays were well reviewed, with the *Referee* commenting:

⁹Sheila Stowell, in *A Stage of their Own, Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*, Manchester University Press, 1992, Chapter III, gives a detailed analysis and account of the writing of *Diana of Dobson's*, its production and impact.

¹⁰Cicely Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1909.

¹¹*Diana of Dobson's*, op.cit. Act Three, p.69.

Miss Hamilton is always entertaining even when she is most in earnest. And if she has loaded the dice in woman's favour that must be forgiven her for her enthusiasm in a good cause... Miss Lena Ashwell has improved on her cleverly conceived and vividly executed study... she no longer lets her temperament run away with her tongue. In other words, she has checked that propensity to gabble that threatened to become a marked mannerism of one of our most accomplished actresses. (24/9/11)

Votes for Women congratulated her on the revival and considered "full justice is done alike to the wit and pathos and common sense of... [this] delicious comedy" (22/9/11).

Diana is the role Ashwell is most identified with in accounts of both her career and that of the play, which was later made into a film. Hamilton sold the rights to Ashwell for £100 at the time of the original production and did not share in the royalties Ashwell received over the years. In her autobiography Hamilton blames her lack of confidence in her work for this unfortunate financial decision.

The Kingsway management read its plays with a commendable swiftness, and I think it was only a week or two after I had sent off my manuscript that I received a letter asking me to call at the theatre. I remember that my first reaction to that letter was incredulity... It was impossible that any one should think that play, that bungled play, was good enough to put on - and in London! ...so I fell to the temptation of £100 down - which was more, far more than I had ever earned in a lump. With more sense I should have made some thousands out of Diana.¹²

Ashwell did, however, share the film royalties and they remained friends and close working colleagues during the suffrage struggle, the First World War and the Lena Ashwell Players during the 1920s.

During the run of *Diana*, the Kingsway presented six special matinees, between 19 and 29 May, of new one act plays, another move by Ashwell to encourage playwrights and to diversify her activities. The first programme included a comedy by Judge Edward Parry; a 'fantastic play' by Anthony Wharton; a 'serious comedy' by the Hon. Mrs Eva Anstruther and a tragedy by the novelist Mrs W.K. Clifford. She may also have been looking for new curtain raisers, such as Wilfred T. Coleby's new work, introduced into the repertoire in early May, of which the journal which frequently quoted other publications in its summary of events, *Public Opinion*, asked

How does Miss Ashwell do it? Here is another new play, *The Likes O' Me*, by a new author, which is [says the *Evening Standard*], 'fresh, unconventional, amusing, pathetic and technically right'... If this most wonderful actress-manager is not very careful, she will cut the ground from under the feet of the agitators for an 'intellectual theatre', added to which she is making her intellectual theatre pay, which they don't profess to hope to be able to do. (15/5/08)

"What a nursery of new ideas the Kingsway has become" *London Opinion* (30/5/08), declared. Reviewers generally praised the mostly serious new plays, finding interest in the idea and the overall concept of

¹²Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant*, London, J.M. Dent & Sons, 1935, p.62.

Figure 16: Act I, *Diana of Dobson's*. Kingsway Theatre, 1908. (*London Sketches*, 7 March 1908)

encouraging writers while attempting a mixed bill. However, regular programmes of short plays were not considered likely to draw audiences or sustain a theatre in the West End.

Besides new writing talent, Ashwell was seeking new actors as members of her regular company, with a commitment to working together and developing a stock company style. At the 1908 Academy of Dramatic Art Prize Giving a young actress, Athene Seyler, won the Gold Medal (*Era* 30/5/08). Ashwell and playwright Alfred Sutro were the judges and Seyler obviously impressed, as Ashwell invited her to join the company early in 1909 and they remained strong supporters of each other's work in the years to come. Another prizewinner was actor Wilfred Fletcher who worked with the Lena Ashwell Players during the 1920s. At Ashwell's memorial service on 20 March 1957, Seyler paid tribute:

I speak of Lena as my greatest theatrical friend, as one who as an actress, I realise now, formed in me any taste I had, any feeling of responsibility about the theatre, any feeling that my job was in any sense a calling. People do not speak much about her acting now because they say she was before their time. I feel like a contemporary. She gave me my first job on the stage.¹³

Seyler's career was a long one (she died in the early 1990s) and included many highly praised comic roles on both stage and in film.

In 1908, perhaps with Athene Seyler's success fresh in her memory, a 'hopeful' Ashwell was quoted in the *Westminster Gazette's* article, *The Stage for Girls*:

I think the stage is a very good profession - for some girls. For the kind of girl who wishes, or is obliged to make her own living, who is possessed of considerable personal attractions, charm or manner, a good voice, an iron constitution, a determination to 'get there' in spite of all difficulties and above all, a sense of humour. Of course she must have some histrionic talent... granted the above qualifications, a girl may make quite a good living on the stage, so why shouldn't she adopt it as a profession? (10/6/08)

This followed an article by Ashwell in the *Daily Chronicle*; a brief but sensitive analysis of her craft, responding to the frequently asked question, *Is an Actress Influenced by Her Part?* She argued that an actress must be able

to separate her private self from the character she is impersonating... but not her personality. For her purpose is to represent through her own personality a particular kind of woman under certain definite dramatic circumstances and that it was absurd to suggest that an actress became the person she was playing. I act what I feel. The characters I represent are very real... to me while I am playing them. If they were not, they would cease to convince. (1/5/08)

She elaborated on the art of the actor in Chapter 3 of her book *The Stage* (1929), using examples from her experience to illustrate, in very practical ways, how to deal with rehearsal and performance situations.

¹³Transcript in the Moral Re-Armament Archives, courtesy of Aline Faunce, West Kirby, Wirral, England.

While Ashwell prepared for the main company's August tour of *Diana* to nine regional centres (Buxton, Harrogate, Bristol, Liverpool, Southport, Newcastle, Glasgow, Dublin and Birmingham) alongside a smaller scale, small town and seaside resort tour of the London repertoire opening on August Bank Holiday, she collected excellent reviews for the two Kingsway companies already on the road. She was planning the autumn season, to include Coleby's new full length play, *The Sway Boat*, rehearsed while the company was touring and opening in London on 9 October, exactly a year since the Kingsway's first performance. Ashwell described Coleby as "a most brilliant and delightful schoolmaster who wrote his plays in French. It was, I feel, a remarkable play [*The Sway Boat*], most tragic too, unhappy perhaps, but undoubtedly true" (*Myself a Player*, pp.153-4).

The Sway Boat, the title intentionally signifying an up and down movement, depicted the tragic story of Lady Kilross (Ashwell), previously married to a man who drank himself to death and whose young daughter had also died. A former victim of drug dependency and desperate for children, she had married the fussy Lord Kilross, swayed by an imperious mother, who is in turn, swayed by her doctor. They plan to send Lady Kilross away for a cure, while she begins a liaison with her young nephew's tutor, in some misguided attempt to defy her husband and perhaps prove that her childlessness with him is not due to a lack of religious faith, of which he accuses her. The liaison is discovered and Lady Kilross returns to her drug habit and commits suicide by drowning. Only her devoted young nephew understands her pain and realises she has found peace in death. The *Penny Illustrated Paper* considered that the play "promises to attract crowds of ladies who are interested in that type of play, where all sorts and conditions of affairs are discussed - affairs concerning marriage very largely - with unusual frankness" (30/10/08).

The *Daily Mail* described the play as "an honest work, deftly constructed, simply and sincerely told... Her [Ashwell's] performance all through was highly interesting, intelligent and sympathetic, and as a piece of acting should be seen" (10/10/8). Within a few days of the play's opening, it was announced that matinees would be given only on Saturdays, with mid week matinees abandoned for this production, due to the strain of Ashwell's role.¹⁴ *The Sway Boat* closed on Saturday November 21 after a six week season, nowhere near the success of previous plays. The *Onlooker* wrote: "My conviction remains that it failed because its chief interest was abnormal and pathological... public taste is still wholesome enough to eschew the pathological drama... [the] character of Lady Kilross... was a very striking study of morbid psychology" (5/12/08). With this play Ashwell may have mis-judged the preparedness of her audience to deal with Lady Kilross's situation after the more lighthearted experience of *Diana*. It is likely she had

¹⁴Unrelated to Ashwell's decision, but somewhat timely, the *Era*'s editorial, *Actor-Managers as Advisers*, describes an incident when an audience member at Martin Harvey's production of *The Lost Heir* at the Adelphi, sought his help to solve her marital problems. The *Era* observed that "the responsibilities of our actor-managers are already very onerous and numerous...it appears there is now to be added that of setting straight the crooked ways of the world as they affect the lives of individual play-goers... Miss Ashwell may receive missives from ladies who have fallen victims to the 'drug habit', deploring their weakness and asking her to suggest, if not supply, the means of a cure" (17/10/08).

Figure 17: Programme for *The Sway Boat*, Kingsway Theatre, 1908. (Author's collection)

brought a new audience into her theatre with the success of *Diana of Dobson's*; an audience not ready to deal with such different subject matter performed by the same actress. The following Tuesday *Grit* opened. In the programme, Ashwell confessed

that I had thought a longer period would have elapsed before it became necessary to launch another production on the uncertain sea of public favour; but *The Sway Boat*, though it attracted favourable attention and achieved an undoubted success artistically, was perhaps scarcely of the texture to appeal to those who sustain a rooted objection to being forced to dive deeply into psychological problems. I now present *Grit*, a play in four acts by Mr H. Herman Chilton, for your approval. It is no longer a novelty at this theatre for you to be called upon to judge the first work of a new author, and my past experience tells me that Mr Chilton could not possibly be called upon to face a more impartial and kindly tribunal.¹⁵

The comic plot of *Grit* involves an honest and kind carpenter (played by Norman McKinnel) who saved an old gentleman from drowning. When the old man dies, he leaves a large fortune to be divided equally between the carpenter and the 'upper middle class' daughter (Ashwell) of a friend, but only on condition that these two, who have never met, marry. The ceremony takes place, the honest carpenter prepared to let his 'wife' continue her friendship with Dick, a young man who then suggests she runs away with him. At this stage, the carpenter finds an earlier will of the old man, leaving all his wealth to the young woman. The carpenter offers to set her free by destroying the second will. She is touched by his gesture, dismisses the hapless young man, destroys the first will and in the final scene, recognises the true value of the carpenter and her marriage to him, thus providing a happy ending, which some critics implied was now rather beneath Ashwell and out of keeping with her previous productions. The *Daily Telegraph* described it as "an honest, well-intentioned piece" (25/11/08), but the reviews did not indicate a great success was to be had by this production, which ran through December, except for a Christmas break.

In its review of the Dramatic Year 1908, the *Era* considered it was becoming yearly more difficult to concoct a really good play for the London market. However, *Diana of Dobson's*, along with Pinero's *The Thunderbolt* and Shaw's *Getting Married* were considered significant additions to the repertoire, with Miss Hamilton's play described as being "at the same time a clever comedy and a scathing indictment of our social system" (2/1/09). This was timely praise as a revival of *Diana*, with virtually all the original cast, was announced at the Kingsway for 11 January 1909. Once again the reviews were enthusiastic. The curtain raiser was Judge Edward Parry's *Charlotte on Bigamy*, first presented during the one-act play matinees in May 1908.

On 17 January 1909 Ashwell wrote to the *Referee* on *The Dearth of Good Plays*, which drew a number of letters to that publication (on 24 January) as well as being reported in other newspapers. Since September 1907 the Kingsway had received over two thousand new plays to read.

¹⁵Kingsway programme for *Grit* by H.Herman Chilton, November 1908 (Author's collection).

These plays deal with modern life only as I have made it a rule to consider no plays in verse or on historical subjects, costume or musical plays. Out of these two thousand plays experience has proved that scarcely more than one percent have been worth the trouble of reading or even the clerical labour entailed in registration, acknowledgement, postage etc. Now, of this one percent, quite half have been one-act plays, so that only half percent represent three act plays. Or in other words, a good actable play which is worth producing is as one in two hundred.

She suggested that unknown authors or those who submit work without a recommendation from some person of recognised literary or dramatic standing should pay a reading fee, to cover expenses including payment to readers. One of the respondees, Thorpe Mayne, was moved to establish an Unacted Authors' Association aiming to get managers to decide productions by ballot and the use of playreading committees, with public play readings to bring attention to its members' work. Later, the *Birmingham Daily Mail* reported that the Playwrights' Association formed as "a direct result of Miss Ashwell's unfortunate suggestion that a reading fee of a guinea should be charged" (16/6/09), had enlisted an expert reader to select and tout plays to managers but although some one hundred plays had been received, "no nuggets" had been found yet. Later, Edward Knoblock, described his playreading role at the Kingsway as follows:

I read 7,000 plays in two years, about ten a day, working from 9 a.m. to 1 a.m. and Sundays from 9a.m. to 4 p.m. I also re-wrote about twelve plays and saw to the scenery and costumes for the actors. I received what was then considered a very high salary in England for play-reading - £4 a week, finally raised to £6!¹⁶

Ashwell continued to promote new plays and opened another of Coleby's, *The Truants*, on 11 February 1909, followed four days later by the opening of the company's three spring regional tours of *Grit* and *Diana Of Dobson's* in Folkestone, Grange and Croydon. *The Truants* was in a much lighter vein than *The Sway Boat*.

It is brightly written, it makes mild fun of the 'Salome' dance craze, and it has one splash into melodrama... Miss Ashwell handles a revolver prettily... *The Truants* ...are a couple of young lovers who plan to run off for no very good reason, but who are persuaded by Freda Savile [Ashwell] to respect the conventionalities ...Freda chances to have a secret - not at all dishonourable - which the youth... has discovered, and it is when he threatens to make ill use of it that the revolver is brought in to clinch the argument.

(*Liverpool Daily Post* 12/2/09)

All ends happily, with Freda able to marry her betrothed, who now knows about her child from a previous (but unknown to her at the time), bogus marriage, and the young girl (played by Athene Seyler), previously influenced by Freda's apparently independent attitude, marries her lover, rather than being a 'truant'. Reviews for *The Truants* were mixed, with some critics finding the mix of melodrama and farce sat uneasily with other works in Ashwell's Kingsway repertoire. All were unanimous, however, in their

¹⁶'The Playwright's Progress' from the introduction by John Vere to *Kismet and other plays* by Edward Knoblock, London, Chapman & Hall, 1957, p.9.

praise for Seyler's debut as the young woman Pamela and predicted a great future for the young actress. The *World* was particularly harsh in its criticism of Ashwell, claiming Coleby's lack of experience should have meant more help for him in preparing the play; help which appeared to have been given to earlier productions. "That it is no longer provided augurs ill for the stability of the Kingsway management", claimed H. Hamilton Fyfe. "Brains are as much needed in theatrical enterprises as others" (16/2/09). When theatre managers perceive this, "they will pay their actors less, and with the money they save keep a staff of skilled dramatic editors, who will help beginners with ideas to get their efforts right" (ibid).

Meanwhile, Ashwell's pointed *Advice to Playwrights* had appeared in the *Chronicle* and the *Era*. She encouraged them to "Get a good, simple story" (10/4/09) and not to let too many things of import happen before the rise of the curtain. "Centre your interest on one or two people. Learn to criticise your own work. Do not change your scene in the middle of an act. Write on modern life if possible" (ibid). On the same day the *Standard* reported,

The year 1909 has not been kind, so far, to the theatrical profession... The theatre which has suffered the most undeservedly from the slump of 1909 is the Kingsway. *Grit*, *Diana of Dobson's* (revival) and *The Truants* all deserved better of the too-exacting playgoer. *Grit* it is true ran for over two months, but *Diana of Dobson's* was worthy of more than thirty-two performances, and *The Truants* of more than thirty-six. Mr Norman McKinnel's carpenter hero in *Grit* ought to have drawn the town (in the Drama's pre-sumptuous days it would have done so) and Miss Athene Seyler's delightful ingenue and Mr Dennis Eadie's remarkable Bill Chetwood, in *The Truants* might have made the fortune of a much less worthy play.

Very quickly the 'honeymoon' period was over for the Kingsway and Ashwell's ambitious hopes. Acknowledging that the financial pressures were too great and with no reserves or sufficient box office income gained through longer runs than her productions were providing, Ashwell was obliged to abandon management at the Kingsway and the next few months were spent sorting out the practical arrangements for this change in direction.

There was, however, one more significant play premiered by Ashwell at the Kingsway. J.B. Fagan's new play, *The Earth*, written when "burning with indignation over the unfair treatment of *Irene Wycherley* by a certain section of the Press, centred around the proprietor of a newspaper, indicating the enormous, and sometimes ruthless, power of the Press" (*Myself a Player*, p.156). Once again, Ashwell played a strong woman, this time prepared to sacrifice her reputation to a higher cause. The central conflict is between the powerful newspaper proprietor, Sir Felix Janion, of *The Earth*, with a circulation of one million copies per day and a young M.P., Denzil Trevena, who is promoting the submission of a fair Wages Bill to the government. Janion opposes this Bill and prepares to use information on the accidentally discovered close friendship of Trevena and the unhappily married Lady Killone (Ashwell) to blackmail Trevena to

withdraw the Bill. When Lady Killone learns that Trevena will do this to protect her reputation, she considers such a sacrifice to be too great and declares she will take the blackmail story to the Press Association who will ensure it is published in all other newspapers not controlled by Janion. He is forced to return the evidence of the Trevena/Lady Killone relationship and the play ends with the indication that the Bill will go ahead. The published play is dedicated to producer Otho Stuart but it is clear Lady Killone was written for Ashwell. The character is described in the stage directions as “a woman of remarkable beauty. Her manner outwardly is one of great reserve tinged with irony, but she is capable of intense enthusiasm and extreme vivacity.”¹⁷ In the first act in two short speeches we understand the character of Lady Killone - Ashwell may well have been describing herself. When Janion’s elderly sister says, “You appear to feel very strongly about Mr Trevena’s Bill,” her reply is, “I should have thought all women would feel strongly about it. Part of it is designed to put an end to the sweating of women and children.”¹⁸ Later, when Janion learns Lady Killone is on the committee of the Women’s Political Union he sneers: “Didn’t know you were a suffragette, Lady Killone.” Her response is, “Yes, with limitations. You needn’t picture me as Andromeda chained to Downing Street railings, and waiting for Perseus, in the shape of a policeman, to wrench me free – I’m not that sort of suffragette.”¹⁹ She proves equal to Janion in her determination and her understanding of the ways of the world and at the end of the play he admits he is beaten by her pluck. It was a hard hitting play, putting on stage for the first time the issue of the duel between the Press and politics, and the scenes represented the newspaper’s offices as well as characters such as editors, sub-editors and journalists. It was well received at the premiere in Torquay, where three ‘try-out’ performances were given on April 8 and 10, before opening in London on 14 April.

There was a glittering opening night audience and royal patronage and approval with the Prince and Princess of Wales attending the performance on April 23 and King Edward making a private visit on May 10. The *Pall Mall Gazette* felt that the “remarkable impression” (19/4/09) made by the new play had been “confirmed at succeeding performances... the acting is unanimously voted as worthy of the high tradition... established under Miss Ashwell’s management... one of the liveliest comedies of the day and one of the most striking recent contributions to the Theatre of Ideas” (ibid).

The Earth created more news than just reviews. The *Daily News* reported, somewhat tongue in cheek, on Lady Blount’s complaint about the use of the title *The Earth*. Expounding the ‘flat earth’ theory, she had been publishing a magazine entitled *The Earth* for nine years, as well as presenting a lecture series and claiming authorship of a morality play also called *The Earth*. She was seeking recompense for “the injury I am suffering and the loss which I am sustaining” (12/5/09), but it seems not to have been taken seriously

¹⁷J.B. Fagan, *The Earth*, London, T.Fisher Unwin, 1909, Act 1., p.16

¹⁸Ibid. p.19.

¹⁹Ibid. p.29.

Figure 18: Programme for *The Earth*, Kingsway Theatre, 1909. (Author's collection)

Figure 19: Kingsway Theatre programme, 1909. (Author's collection)

Figure 20: Cast photographs, Kingsway Theatre programme, 1909. (Author's collection)

by the management or the public in general and no doubt provided some comic relief for the hard pressed Ashwell.

More seriously, George Bernard Shaw (whose wife Charlotte was a particular friend of Ashwell), in a letter to the *Times* about the Dramatic Censorship, virtually accused Fagan of plagiarism by claiming that *The Earth*, which had been passed by the censor, was stolen from Granville Barker's prohibited play, *Waste*. Shaw would have known that Ashwell, after the play was read for the Kingsway, had declined to produce *Waste*, presumably for similar reasons to that of the censor, given the play's attack on the established church and depiction of a scandalous illegal operation. Shaw declared that both plays contained the character of a cabinet minister who, "on the eve of crowning his Parliamentary career by the introduction of a great Bill, is discovered to have been engaged in an intrigue with a married woman" (29/5/09). He conveniently underplayed the very different issues dealt with in the two plays and it was clear his argument was with the censorship, not *The Earth*. Fagan responded the following day indicating the weakness of Shaw's argument, and considering that the pointing out of such similarities was equal to the observation that characters in both plays might have worn brown boots. The issue no doubt attracted audiences to the Kingsway - in fact Fagan thanked Shaw for "giving me an advertisement" by selecting "*The Earth* as a convenient missile to hurl at the Censor" (*Times* 30/5/09).

MOVING OUT OF MANAGEMENT

On March 13, 1909, Ashwell's solo management at the Kingsway ended. At the same time, the co-production of *The Earth* with Otho Stuart, was announced and the theatre re-opened in mid April. Ashwell had found solo management impossible - some of her problems had their origin in the 'patronage' situation described in the previous chapter and in *Myself a Player*. (pp.155-6). Support from that source had ceased, so when Stuart proposed sharing terms Ashwell agreed to enable the season to continue until the usual summer break. During May and June, while playing nightly in *The Earth*, happily attracting good houses,²⁰ Ashwell participated in many social and charity events while she began dismantling her management of the theatre, ensuring her colleagues did not suffer too much in the process. Her popular manager Walter Maxwell accepted an engagement in a similar capacity with Evelyn Millard at the Criterion and Norman McKinnel, "able producer of Miss Lena Ashwell's courageous plays" (*Western Morning News* 3/6/09), was appointed producer in chief from September to Herbert Trench's repertory theatre, Haymarket. The *Stage* announced that managers Jay & Mann had secured from her the entire rights of *The Truants* and were negotiating with several members of the original cast, including Athene Seyler, to take it on tour (6/5/09). Given previous successful touring initiatives with Kingsway productions, this must have been a difficult decision.

²⁰*Home Notes* (27/5/09) noted 'House Full' signs outside the Kingsway during this production.

In early June Ashwell and her husband, Dr Simson, with the Norman McKinnels and the Fagans, celebrating the success of *The Earth*, were the special guests of the New Vagabonds' Club, for dinner at the Hotel Cecil, where she proved to be an entertaining after dinner speaker - the press as far afield as Manchester quoting her anecdotes the following day. Her activities were newsworthy and while her role as a prominent actress/manager was coming to a close, she was finding confidence in other directions, particularly as a spokesperson and advocate for new ideas and causes.²¹

Announcement that Ashwell was ceasing management activities and the Kingsway would be let (with Ashwell retaining the ninety-nine year lease and millstone she had taken on only two years before), was made in most newspapers and journals throughout the United Kingdom between 17 June and the end of the month. Ashwell was quoted in the *Express* saying - "Management is terribly hard work. You have friends you cannot see and a home you cannot live in. But I have discovered new talents... That is enough for honour" (18/6/09). Approaching the matter positively, the announcement was coupled with the news that she would be the leading actress in Charles Frohman's²² company in a campaign of "strong human plays" (*Daily News* 17/6/09), from September. The press saw it as "a matter of regret that Lena Ashwell could not see her way clear to continue management at Kingsway" (*Express Star* 26/6/09), and considered

It is good to hear that Miss Ashwell will not be lost to London playgoers but saddening that her management of the Kingsway should only have lasted less than two years. She and her advisers have made mistakes this season, and most playgoers know of them... but during her first season she brought an unpopular theatre into great popularity and very high esteem. She gave us good plays, good acting and good music and she seemed to have established a relationship between herself and her audience probably warmer and more intimate than that enjoyed by any of the other theatrical managers in London.

(*Licensed Victuallers' Gazette* 26/6/09)

In early July it was announced that an English translation by the author, Alexander Bisson, of his French play, *La Femme X*, with Ashwell in the leading role, would be produced by Frohman at the Hicks, subsequently renamed the Globe, and *Lloyd's Weekly News* recounted Frohman's joke over the new name. "During the past season Miss Lena Ashwell has played in *The Earth*. From September onwards she will play in The Globe" (10/7/09). Meanwhile Fagan's "strong play" (*Era* 31/7/09), achieved its hundredth performance and there were plans for it to be produced in New York. It closed in London in early August,

²¹In May Ashwell had used the *Times* initially, with other papers following suit, to make an appeal for funds to save the existence of that "splendid corps the Legion of Frontiersmen" (13/5/09) who, without support during three years, had grown to a force of over three thousand men. "They belong to the class which made the Empire, and are trying to organise for its defence" (ibid). Ashwell's brother, Roger Pocock, following his travels in the wilds of Canada, had founded the Legion in 1904²¹ as a gung-ho association of adventurers. Ashwell and her siblings were close knit and a family who thrived on such challenges. For example, Hilda Frances Pocock, not to be outdone by her eminent sister and adventurous brother, established the New Frances Club in the Strand, London, initially for theatrical women only, but in June 1909 announced that the club's membership and facilities would be widened to include women engaged in business or literary work as well. On 11 December 1909 Ashwell gave recitations accompanied by pianist Stanley Hawley, at a fund raising concert for the Club at the Rehearsal Theatre.

²²Charles Frohman was an American producer who loved the British theatre, working on both sides of the Atlantic with great relish. He was drowned in the sinking of the *Lusitania* during the Great War in 1916.

at the height of the summer holiday season, although with *Diana of Dobson's* still on tour, Ashwell's management responsibilities continued.

"Miss Ashwell's Triumph" proclaimed the *Daily Chronicle* (2/9/09), following the opening night of *Madame X* at the Globe. "Great success in a fine melodrama" (*Daily Graphic* 2/9/09); "Rarely, indeed, has Miss Lena Ashwell proved more emphatically her singular power of grasping and holding her audience by an impersonation of almost startling effectiveness" (*Daily Telegraph* 2/9/09).

Ashwell played the role of Jacqueline Fleuriot, who twenty years after having been thrown out of her home for a failed romantic escapade by an unforgiving husband, Louis (Sydney Valentine), has sunk to the depths of despair and social status. She has become the mistress of Laroque, friend of a blackmailer who decides to attempt to obtain Jacqueline's dowry from the highly regarded Louis by means of blackmail. Jacqueline refuses to take part and shoots Laroque. The central melodramatic device is to have Jacqueline's young barrister son (Raymond), who of course does not know his mother (nor does she recognise him), defend her in court. Watched by Louis, Raymond eloquently succeeds in having Jacqueline acquitted, unwittingly accusing his own father of cruelty and merciless pride and changing their relationship forever. Following recognition between the members of the family, Jacqueline dies a slow and protracted death in the courtroom. The *Era* declared she "held the breathless attention of the house till the fall of the curtain, many of the audience being visibly affected, and one gentleman in the dress circle going into a fit" (4/9/09).

It must have been very heartening to be reviewed with such praise, given the past few difficult months. Ashwell seemingly made an easy transition in performance style from the relative intimacy of the five hundred and sixty seat Kingsway, to the larger auditorium of the Globe, which accommodated over one thousand patrons.

Madame X played for five weeks, but it is not clear whether this was planned or a result of limited audiences. Ashwell was soon rehearsing her next role, that of Mrs Hartland, in Douglas Murray's new play, *The Great Mrs Alloway*, directed by Dion Boucicault, which opened on Monday 8 November 1909. Mrs Alloway, previously a notorious courtesan who has cut a revengeful swathe of broken hearts and ruined fortunes in India following her abandonment, just prior to the birth of their son, by the man she loved, returns to England with her son George, under the assumed name of Mrs Hartland. George falls in love with a clergyman's daughter, Ethel, and just prior to his marriage has the opportunity, through the return from India of Sir Charles Hewitt-Gore, to learn more of his background and the father he never knew. When Sir Charles discovers that Mrs Hartland and Mrs Alloway are one and the same, he demands the marriage be stopped. Mrs Alloway defends her career and puts the situation to Ethel, leaving the decision to her. Ethel admits the extenuating circumstances, deciding to go ahead with the marriage, and in a bid for George's happiness at least, to leave him in ignorance. In doing so, she recognises that

George's prejudices would never allow him to forgive his mother and condemn herself to a lifetime of concealment of the truth from her husband.

The *Era* considered *The Great Mrs Alloway* to be "of mixed quality" (13/11/09), appearing initially to be a domestic melodrama, but emerging as "a play dealing very seriously with sex relations and women's wrongs" (ibid). It praised the central performance,

full of nervous animation and tense mental activity ...[which] proved her [Ashwell] to be one of the finest actresses on the English stage, and unapproachable in her especial sphere. The rising spirit of revolt in womanhood has no more picturesque exponent than Miss Ashwell, who is at her best when protesting with indignant scorn against cruelty and injustice. (ibid)

Although no longer deeply embroiled in management issues, Ashwell was still in possession of the lease of the Kingsway and all that entailed regarding bills, regulations and maintenance, and some of her time had to be spent in promoting the theatre as a venue available for hire. Her first booking for 1910 was a transfer of Rudolf Besier's play *Don* from the Haymarket and Criterion Theatres. Ashwell retained the principal lease on the Kingsway until after the War²³; between 1910 and 1920 various managements sub-leased it from her, including the husband and wife team, Lillah McCarthy and Harley Granville Barker (from the beginning of 1912 to April 1915), followed by the Vedrenne/Eadie management team. In December 1915 she was summoned at Bow-Street Police-court for non-payment of rates on the Kingsway, amounting to eighty-three pounds, six shillings and six pence. The solicitor representing Ashwell advised the court that the Vedrenne/Eadie venture had been unsuccessful and the theatre had been closed between May and October. Three days after its re-opening there had been a zeppelin raid and re-closure. Ashwell was working on *Starlight Express* at this time and hoped if this was successful, she could pay the rates. She was given a further month to do so.²⁴

It appears Ashwell did not lose sight of the possibility of returning to management – or at least making money through the ownership of plays which had West End potential. In the Louis Anspacher²⁵ papers in the New York Public Library there are letters relating to Ashwell's acquisition of the rights for five years in Great Britain and Ireland, of Anspacher's play, *Glass House*, on 21 September 1911. His representative in London was Golding Bright, Ashwell's old admirer. From the terms, it appears Ashwell planned to present the play at the Kingsway in the first half of 1912 and she paid an advance against royalties of £100. However, Anspacher's wife gained the interest of Irene Vanbrugh in January 1912, and although no

²³Ashwell wrote that at the end of her work with Charles Frohman, "I still had the long lease of the Kingsway and had to do many hateful things to pay for it until, after the War, I was able to sell the lease" (*Myself a Player*, p.157).

²⁴Unidentified newspaper cutting dated 17/12/15 in the John Malcolm Bulloch collection of London and Aberdeen theatre programmes and newspaper cuttings in 57 volumes 1882-1938, British Library Special Collections.

²⁵Louis K. Anspacher (1878-1947) was a playwright, author, lecturer and occasional actor, born in Ohio, USA. He published 17 plays prior to 1940, 3 volumes of poetry and literary and social criticism. He was an active supporter of woman's suffrage and birth control. (Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York)

further information was found (Vanbrugh does not appear to have performed in the play²⁶), it can be assumed Ashwell cancelled her interest in the play as a result of this.

Meanwhile, in 1910, Ashwell continued to work with Charles Frohman, who announced plans for a repertoire theatre company at the Duke of York's, commencing on 21 February. Given that leading ladies of Ashwell's stature, Lillah McCarthy and Irene Vanbrugh,²⁷ were also in the company, it was obvious she would not be engaged full time. The plan was to alternate repertoire pieces during each week, so that she would not be performing every night either. The planned season, which introduced subscription booking into ticket purchasing, included a formidable list of playwrights, with Ashwell appearing in works by George Bernard Shaw and J.M. Barrie. Frohman's directors were Dion ('Dot') Boucicault and Harley Granville Barker.

Shaw's own production of *Misalliance*, with Ashwell playing juggler and trapeze artist, Lina Szczepanowska, opened on February 23 and was considered by the *Era* to be an "undeniable success" (26/2/10), with Ashwell delivering "indignant tirades and ingenious explanations with all the requisite art and energy" (ibid). Other critics, including Shaw admirer, J.T.Grein, were less enthusiastic. A week later (on 1 March), she opened in a triple bill, appearing in the first performance of two one-act plays by J. M. Barrie - *Old Friends*, "a gruesome and impressive dramatic homily on heredity, and the descent of the sins [in this case alcoholism] of the fathers upon the children" (*Era* 5/3/10), and *The Twelve Pound Look*, a new comedietta which "was both humorous and sarcastic, and was heartily enjoyed" (ibid). In the latter play, Ashwell played Kate, the independent woman who had left her successful husband fourteen years earlier, in order to retain her sense of self worth. The play begins with the husband, now remarried, about to be knighted and employing a typist, Kate (with the typewriter that for £12 bought her freedom and the energy that her ex-husband's new wife admires), to write thank you letters for the congratulations he has received. Kate is still unimpressed by his success and finally tells him that she didn't leave him for another man (as he has assumed all these years), but for herself. Ashwell made the role her own and revived the play on a number of occasions, including during the First World War. This was the last new role Ashwell played until much later in the year, when she went to America. In fact by late March *Misalliance* had been taken out of the Duke of York's repertoire after only eleven performances and Ashwell's contract with Frohman presumably concluded at this time. Frohman's repertory experiment at the Duke of York's came to an end on 17 June after the theatres had been closed for a couple of weeks following the death of King Edward in May. Given his financial resources, it was considered by the *Era*

²⁶Irene Vanbrugh, *To Tell My Story*, London, Hutchinson, 1948. There is no mention in this autobiography of the play.

²⁷Two actresses of Ashwell's generation, well known for their strong personalities and stage presence and better known over time – perhaps due to their stage and personal partnerships with actor/managers Harley Granville-Barker (Lillah McCarthy) and Dion (Dot) Boucicault (Irene Vanbrugh).

(2/7/10 and 6/12/16), that Frohman might have succeeded with a serious repertory theatre had circumstances been more auspicious.

In September 1910, while a season of Italian Grand Opera (*Era* 20/8/10) was being presented at the Kingsway, it was announced that Ashwell would appear in America in C.M.S. McLellan's²⁸ drama, *The Strong People*, re-titled *Judith Zaraine*, under the management of Liebler and Company. The play had been performed successfully in London at the Lyric Theatre earlier in the year. In December she sailed for America, leaving her husband on his own at Christmas time. Prior to her departure, she received a note from Sir Edward Elgar saying "please take care of yourself in the USA. You are one of the few people whose absence makes England feel emptier."²⁹

While Ashwell was rehearsing *Judith Zaraine*, which dealt with a conflict between working men and employers in the mining district of Pennsylvania, the *Era* lamented the state of the serious drama in London, explaining in part Ashwell's difficulty in sustaining longer runs at the Kingsway.

The majority of playgoers go... to be amused, not to be enlightened or instructed. With our system of prices, the theatre... has to be supported by the great prosperous middle class... the class which takes its wives and daughters... If a play pleases this class, it prospers; if it repels them, it fails. (14/1/11)

The writer considered it impossible to educate the play going public with "a philosophical and didactic tendency" and hoped critics would begin to provide more "common sense criticism" (ibid) and less intellectual analysis. It seems it was even harder in New York. *Judith Zaraine* opened at the Astor Theater on 16 January and played for only two weeks. Ashwell played the title role

of a woman who helps lead a band of disgruntled workers in Minetown against the United Mining Company. At one point she threatens to use a stiletto on the colonel sent to put down the rebellious men. She also falls in love with a young man posing as a reporter but in reality an executive of the mining combine. In time she brings him to see her viewpoint and to help arrange a fair settlement.³⁰

Ashwell was praised in the *New York Times* for her portrayal combining "intelligence and strength of purpose" (17/1/11), but the play's purpose was not well understood by the critics (although the *Era*'s correspondent gave it honourable mention in his report 11/2/11), or audiences, and Ashwell was faced with another disappointment in America.³¹

²⁸Charles M.S.McLellan (1865-1916) was a New York born journalist and playwright whose early work was written under the name of 'Hugh Morton'. His biggest success was the musical *The Belle of New York*, which ran in London for two years from April 1898. He was the author of one of Ashwell's successful roles, Leah Kleschna, which she played in London in 1905.

²⁹Letter dated 30 November 1910, Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester.

³⁰Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p.684.

³¹This refers to Ashwell's 1906 American tour, discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis.

Originally not intending to be back in England until May, she returned in early March and within a few weeks was cast in the new comedy by Jerome K. Jerome, *The Master of Mrs Chilvers*, presented by the Vedrenne/Eadie management at the Royalty Theatre. Dennis Eadie was an old colleague and she no doubt looked forward to playing opposite him in this production, billed as ‘A Suffragist Play’. The production opened at the Kings Theatre, Glasgow, on 10 April 1911 and in London on 26 April. There is an undated letter to Ashwell from Jerome K. Jerome that appears to relate to her performance in *Mrs Chilvers*. He writes,

thanks for the delight your acting gave me. There was a time when even you were not perfect, but really it seems to be past. You have gained immensely in naturalism. There have been few evenings when I have so completely forgot I was in the theatre.³²

The *Era* considered that this topical, political comedy treated the “Women's Franchise question from a more serious standpoint than has been the case in most recent plays” (15/4/11). Mr Chilvers is an M.P. who supports his wife’s involvement with the suffrage movement, but their lives are thrown into disarray with the coincidence of his needing to fight a by-election and a decision of the House of Lords to open the door to parliamentary candidature for women. His wife agrees to stand at the first by-election on behalf of the Women’s Parliamentary Franchise League, hence pitting herself against her husband. Although she wins, she ultimately steps down when she learns she is to be a mother. The production, including the acting in all roles, was generally praised by the press. However, compared with *Diana of Dobson’s*, the work has not survived the test of time as a significant suffrage theatrical statement, perhaps because, having raised the issue, Jerome did not seriously pursue the matter of motherhood versus public life for women.

During the run of *Mrs Chilvers*, Ashwell made her debut, in a matinee on 3 May 1911, at the annual Stratford-on-Avon Shakespeare Festival as Rosalind in *As You Like It*. It was not a critically acclaimed performance and although later in her career she lectured on and published a book on Shakespeare’s plays (*Reflections from Shakespeare*, 1927), the playing of his women characters was never her forte. Later the same year, on 2 October 1911, she made her vaudeville/music hall debut at the Palace Theatre in Alfred Sutro’s one act play *The Man in the Stalls*. Given Ashwell’s comments during the censorship debate in 1909, her response to this new experience, as expressed in an interview with the *Daily Chronicle*,³³ makes interesting reading. As she prepared for her brief appearance, she observed other performers such as a female Japanese tightrope walker and was amazed at the training and “efficiency” (23/9/11) of this act. She recognised quite suddenly the “exquisitely definite and pointed” (ibid) nature of a music-hall performance, compared to the theatre, where “we create our own atmosphere... but in the music-hall we have to come straight on and do our work pat, straight off” (ibid). She realised the hard work behind such

³²Letter to Ashwell from Jerome in the Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester.

³³This interview was reproduced in *Encore* and the *Stage* on 28 September 1911.

entertainment and expressed appreciation for its variety, modernity and ability to bring “all classes of the community together” (ibid).

Perceiving Ashwell’s changed perspective on music halls, the *Era* was quick to comment.

The playing at a hall of Miss Lena Ashwell, a celebrated actress-manageress, in a sketch by such a distinguished author as Mr Alfred Sutro, is one of those happenings that does more to hasten a solution of the question of plays in music halls than any number of diatribes or speeches from aggrieved authors. (7/9/11)

It should be noted that Ashwell was sharing the bill for over a month with the Kellino acrobats, Rinaldo the wandering violinist and the Boganny Troup who presented an amusing scene in an opium den. Near the end of the run, she wrote to Shaw, “Please write me a music hall play! Something daring! and funny & please come and see *The Man in the Stalls* before Friday because I shall have to play the last performances with a dreadful understudy. Yours Lena Ashwell. I am the only Candida!”³⁴

Except for one-off charitable performances, Ashwell’s only other West End appearance³⁵ until November 1913, was in Charles Wyndham’s revival of *Mrs Dane’s Defence*, which opened on 16 May 1912 and ran until mid-July. This was not very successful as Wyndham suffered increasing memory loss and his distortion of lines made acting with him difficult.

Ashwell, so concentrated as Mrs Dane, could not handle the situation; for her, Wyndham’s gap-filling could be ‘excruciatingly funny as well as miserably tragic.’ The nervous strain was intolerable, and she had suddenly to leave the cast with an attack of shingles.³⁶

Ashwell writes with admiration and affection for Wyndham but considered the revival to have been “a most ghastly experience” (*Myself a Player*, p.122). It is apparent that throughout her career she suffered a number of stress related illnesses.

THE ENGLISH STAGE 1908-1914

Throughout this period Ashwell was an active participant in the professional issues of the day; the following is an account of the context in which she operated as a manager and actress. The drama was,

³⁴Letter dated 1 November 1911 in the GB Shaw Papers, MSS 50528, British Library. It is noteworthy, given her style, that she played very little of Shaw’s women and none of Ibsen’s. In the case of Shaw, friendship may have been an obstacle, as well as the lack of available time and opportunity. Even though Ashwell may have aspired to Candida, at the time of writing this letter to Shaw, the play was over ten years old and unlikely to be revived in the West End, even as a vehicle for Ashwell. This reference to the play may have been an unexplained shared joke between them.

³⁵In *Innocent Flowers*, Virago, London, 1981, p.129, Julie Holledge writes that Ashwell “played to perfection” Queen Caroline in Laurence Housman’s *Pains and Penalties*, refused a licence by the Lord Chamberlain and presented at the Savoy Theatre by the Pioneer Players on 26 November 1911. Gertrude Kingston actually played the role as indicated in the *Times* review, 27/11/11. Ashwell had previously shown (with *Waste*) her ‘respect’ for the Censor’s decision and it would have been uncharacteristic for her to appear in such a play, given her on-going responsibility as a theatre manager.

³⁶Wendy Trewin, *All On Stage – Charles Wyndham and the Albery’s*, London, Harrop, 1980, p. 187.

and is, always considered to be in decline. In 1908 questions were posed of public taste, alongside the revival of the idea of a National Theatre and a non-commercial and 'serious' municipal theatre to improve quality and respectability. Theatre licensing and censorship were hotly debated and the professional actor's conditions of employment, including wages and insurance, were important considerations.

The *Era* reported on the "current condition of the drama" (25/1/08), noting particularly the dearth of serious dramatists and the rise of music hall popularity,³⁷ praising Ashwell for her "energy and ability" (ibid), in reviving the fortunes of the Kingsway. At the height of the fashionable spring theatre season, the *Nation* reviewed Borsa's *The English Stage of To-day*, referring to the Italian's astonishment at the English public's indifference to ideas, seeking only "gentle and pleasing titillation of the senses."³⁸ The reviewer pointed out the commercial nature of London theatre, dependent on long runs, unlike the German and French theatres which received government subsidy, and noted that "Miss Lena Ashwell, at the Kingsway, is attempting to found a repertoire theatre... but she will probably fall a victim to the long run" (7/3/08). A true prediction as it turned out. Dramatist Alfred Sutro, in a lecture on *The Playwright and the Public*, given at the Working Men's College in London, seemed to corroborate this state of affairs when he advised,

The dramatist [he could have included manager in this statement] who would have influence on his generation may lift one eye to Heaven, the other must squint at the box-office. From that callous and entirely unemotional machine he learns that the expense of running a theatre amounts to £800 or £900 a week; and that taking into account the sum spent on production, the receipts must average £1100 or £1200 a week as a minimum for his play to enjoy a run. This means roughly that six thousand people must elect every week to go to his play... brought into the house by the solid fact of their liking the play and recommending it to their friends.
(*Era* 21/3/08)

The text of the lecture makes very clear the difficult balance of writing with a serious purpose and providing entertainment popular enough to pay the bills.

The difficulties in achieving success were further highlighted by conditions of pay for actors when the Actors' Association³⁹ resolved to set a minimum wage of £2 per week for an actor who spoke lines in a play (*Era* 7/3/08). There was discussion in the press regarding current variations in pay, with leading players likely to command up to £12 in some companies, although less was more usual, with most company members likely to earn between £2 and £5 a week. Unless a play was a period or costumed piece, actors and actresses had to provide and maintain their own clothes for a role. This was particularly

³⁷The view expressed by Beerbohm Tree and George Alexander at the Carl Henschel dinner attended by many of the profession on Sunday January 19, 1908.

³⁸*The English Stage of Today*, op.cit. p.46.

³⁹The Actors' Association was formed in 1891 with Henry Irving as president and the aim of improving work conditions. The first suggestion that it should become a trade union was made in 1906 and it did take on a more active role in pursuing better salaries and conditions. It was not until December 1929, however, that the British

expensive and presumably stressful for actresses, as many newspapers and journals filled whole columns with details about the dresses worn, preferring to comment on these rather than the quality of the acting.⁴⁰

Much of the debate about an 'intellectual'/non-commercial theatre was centred around what the *Era* at this time called "The National Theatre Question" in its many reports on meetings at which Ashwell was often present in 1908 and over the next decade. The debate over a National Theatre in England raged longer⁴¹ than the number of years it has since been in existence as a building and company, while for many the debate on the concept continues. In May, 1908, however, there was an important meeting at the Lyceum Theatre in London, attended by some three thousand members of the profession who agreed to combining the resources and intentions of the Shakespeare Memorial Committee, set up to celebrate significant anniversaries of Shakespeare's life and work and a National Theatre Committee, established to work towards a permanent home for the British theatre. This was, as Sir Oliver Lodge stated in his telegram read at the meeting, "too important an educational agency to be left to the uncertainties of private enterprise alone. It should receive national recognition, and should be raised into a higher and securer atmosphere" (*Era* 23/5/08).

Ashwell was included in the very large committee appointed to draft, under the chairmanship of the Earl of Lytton, the scheme for the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre, and today there is a bust of Ashwell in the Chairman's office of London's National Theatre which proclaims her a founder of the National Theatre. However, she was never considered by the more recent architects of the National Theatre, led by Sir Laurence Olivier,⁴² to be a key figure in this movement, and true to her style, she was more concerned to investigate the practical application of a National Theatre idea, which she pursued after the First World War with the Lena Ashwell Players, the subject of a later chapter of this thesis.

As well as looking to the future, management issues in 1908 included battles over costs, such as the Theatrical Managers' Association's determined, and successful, negotiations with the Metropolitan Water Board to reduce their excessive charges to theatres, and the lifting on restrictions on smoking in theatres to make attendance more appealing to a wider audience. In addition, in a move to improve the quality of

Actors' Equity Association was formed as a trade union for professional actors (*Oxford Companion to Theatre*, edited by Phyllis Hartnoll, 4th edition, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.107).

⁴⁰The *Era* (for example), included in its short news item section three paragraphs on Ashwell's dresses in *The Sway Boat*, concluding with "The gown donned by Miss Ashwell in the last act is a beautiful mixture of deep Bordeaux coloured satin of the richest and softest tint, covered with dark plum-coloured chiffon" (24/10/08). Previous to this, the *Bystander* noted that in *Diana of Dobson's*, Ashwell, while "not one of the most notoriously good dressers," triumphed with her second act costume, whose "glorious embroidery of shaded dahlias [was] ... a sure predication" of the next spring fashions (26/2/08). For further examples, see Kaplan & Stowell, *Theatre & Fashion*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

⁴¹The idea of a National Theatre in England was first suggested by David Garrick in the 18th century and in the 19th century both Henry Irving and Bulwer-Lytton were enthusiastic supporters of the idea.

⁴²Olivier undertook his first professional acting engagement with the Lena Ashwell Players in the mid 1920s and was fired for being disruptive. While he acknowledged Ashwell in writing and talking about his early career, there is

actor training, a Body of Associates, which included Ashwell, was appointed to the Council of the Academy of Dramatic Art in 1909. As well as the right to vote for Council members, the Associates offered their services with honorary part-time teaching and rehearsal supervision as well as other contributions to the work of the Academy.

At the same time, managers were confronting proposed changes to the law governing the licensing of plays and theatres, to some extent brought about by changes in public taste which were blurring the distinctions between dramatic and variety entertainment. The New Theatres Bill, prepared by Robert Harcourt, proposed that the London County Council take on the responsibility, in the hands of the Lord Chamberlain⁴³ since 1843, for licensing (and closing) theatres within the central London area. There was little doubt that the law needed to take into account the changes that had taken place in the provision of entertainment. The 1843 Theatres Act,⁴⁴ still in use, imposed restrictions that meant the holder of a dramatic licence could not present music and dancing in his theatre without application for such a licence and the giving up of his dramatic licence (and vice versa for a variety proprietor - who could only present short plays with limited casts and of a maximum of thirty minutes duration within a variety programme). It was considered that new legislation should be uniform and flexible, ensuring more consistent employment for artists and uniformity so managers knew where they stood. Harcourt proposed also that it should no longer be necessary to submit any stage play to the Lord Chamberlain prior to its first performance, taking away the right to forbid the presentation of a play he may have deemed unsuitable. The *Era* claimed that this proposal had met with almost unanimous disapproval from managers and dramatists approached on the subject and quoted that Ashwell, "judging from conditions in countries without censors, considered our present conditions preferable" (9/1/09). In a further editorial the *Era* suggested that the county councils be responsible (as already) for safety and building issues prior to licensing theatres and that dual licences be granted where requested, while the Lord Chamberlain retain his role as censor (6/3/09).

To address these issues, Parliament set up a Licensing and Censorship enquiry convened by a joint committee of both Houses. Its deliberations were reported verbatim by the *Era* in August and September 1909. In general, theatrical managers were anxious to retain the Lord Chamberlain as censor, in direct opposition to writers such as Shaw, who prepared a fifty-five page pamphlet against the censorship, and

a sense that there was no love lost between these two strong personalities. (Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor*, London, Coronet Books, Hodder & Stoughton, 1984, pp.52-54.)

⁴³This was a political appointment (until 1922) and therefore the Lord Chamberlain changed with changes in government.

⁴⁴Introduced by Sir Robert Peel's government, this Act contains twenty-five sections relating to the control of the stage. Every new play had to be sent to the Lord Chamberlain at least seven days before the first performance and his personal decision on its suitability was final. (John Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1990).

Figure 21: ‘Who Is London’s Best Dressed Actress?’ (*London Sketches*, 7 March 1908)

was furious when the committee decided not to take it as evidence⁴⁵. Shaw's objections to censorship have been well documented elsewhere, but one can only surmise that it must have placed a strain on the friendship between the Shaws and Ashwell, especially as she was the first woman called to give evidence on August 20th, necessitating a break in rehearsals for the production of *Madame X*.

In her answers to the Chairman of the enquiry, Herbert Samuel, she stated clearly that she considered censorship to be desirable and that "it was wiser to have that control before and not after the production of a play"⁴⁶ which involved many people who could be put out of work as a result of police proceedings. When asked what she thought of the control over plays being placed in the hands of local authorities, she responded, "It would be fatal from the actors' and actresses' point of view" (ibid). She would not like to be placed at the mercy of even the London County Council as a judge of what should and should not be presented because (as she stated twice), "I don't think they know anything about it" (ibid). She was also concerned that provincial tours would no longer be viable if local authorities had censorship responsibility as some towns may not permit a play allowed elsewhere. She considered important a small committee of "men of the world... experts, not Philistines", to whom the Censor could refer if undecided about a play and to whom an author could appeal. When asked would there be women on that committee, she apparently replied with a simple, "No, sir." In a few years time (1911) she was quoted on the censor being a woman, but it seems likely at this time she consciously avoided raising the women's issue when there were important professional issues at stake.

The enquiry also sought views on the removal of distinctions between licences for theatres and music halls. Her reply was - "I object to their being on the same footing. They [music halls] should not be allowed to produce long dramatic plays... it would be very bad for the legitimate theatre" (ibid). This point of view altered somewhat, following her debut in vaudeville in 1911.⁴⁷ The censorship debate continued into October with the report on retaining the censorship being issued in early November 1909. The principal outcome was that the Lord Chamberlain continued to administer the Theatres Act of 1843.

Meanwhile, the National Theatre question had re-emerged in 1910 after an apparent period of inactivity following the May 1908 Lyceum meeting. In the interim, an Executive Committee, under the presidency of the Lord Mayor of London, had been appointed, with only four of its twenty members being representatives of the theatrical profession. These were actor/managers Sir John Hare, Harley Granville Barker, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and Forbes Robertson (the latter two were appointed only after

⁴⁵ Shaw's preface to *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet* (London, Constable and Company, 1927), gives a full account of Shaw's view of the Censorship enquiry, and in 1955 the Shaw Society published a Shavian Tract, No. 3 – a transcript of his evidence to the committee.

⁴⁶*Report from the Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and the House of Commons on the Stage Plays (Censorship) together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendices*. Bluebook 214. London, His Majesty's Stationery Office, November, 1909, pp.210-214.

⁴⁷For details of Ashwell's vaudeville debut, see page 111 of this thesis.

vigorous representations were made to increase the number of theatre people). The *Era*, in an editorial seeking to revive interest in the scheme, gave some background on progress (16/4/10). This included an anonymous donation of £70,000, but subscriptions, particularly those thought likely to flow from provincial mayoral collections, had proved elusive and no general subscription list had been published to encourage further support. It was planned to approach King Edward, a friend and patron of the arts, to give his name and support to the scheme and the ‘cream of the British aristocracy’ were being enlisted for a large Shakespearean Fancy Dress Ball planned for June 27. It was hoped this event would open the wallets of the patrons desperately needed to take the scheme further. The *Era* exhorted the profession to support the scheme, now that there appeared to be a way forward.

Within a month, however, there was another hiatus in the progress of the National Theatre - the death of King Edward on 7 May 1910 and the national mourning that ensued. The new King, George V, within a few days of Edward’s death announced: “Knowing so well the feelings of my beloved father, I am sure that it would be contrary to his wishes if there were any interruption in the enjoyment of the Public during the Whitsuntide Holidays” (*Era* 14/5/10). The Theatrical Managers’ and the West-End Managers’ Associations were advised: “The Lord Chamberlain has received the King’s orders to the effect that in view of the number of people who would be thrown out of employment by a prolonged closing of the theatres His Majesty wishes that the theatres should be opened, except on the day of his late Majesty’s funeral” (*ibid*).

The Managers decided, however, as a mark of respect, that the theatres would remain closed until after the funeral, re-opening on 18 May. Many events were postponed (including the Shakespeare Ball, not held until June 1911) and it was obvious, given the considerable demand on the resources of the Actors’ Benevolent Fund (*Era* 28/5/10), that by the end of May the theatres were suffering as audiences were kept away by the social pressure of the general and Court mourning period which continued into June. There were many tributes to the King and messages of sympathy to his widow, the Queen Mother, Alexandra. Ashwell, who later worked closely with the Royal Family during the war, very quickly organised a special Sympathy Book, signed by many actresses. She wrote to the Queen, receiving a reply from Buckingham Palace on 10 June to the effect that “the Queen will have great pleasure in accepting the book.”⁴⁸ The Queen Mother obviously formally acknowledged the gesture, as in July Ashwell sought, through the pages of the *Era*, to obtain the addresses of many of the actresses who had signed, in order to communicate Alexandra’s response (16/7/10).

A year later, the Coronation of King George V was celebrated with a large number of balls attended by members of society and the theatrical profession. In retrospect this period seems to have about it a desperate extravagance and indulgence - certainly the next few summers prior to the outbreak of the Great

⁴⁸Letter to Ashwell in the Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester.

War were less glamorous. In her novel, *The Edwardians*, Vita Sackville-West captures something of this change that began to happen in society (“Sebastian has some extraordinary theory that people are becoming more honest towards themselves”⁴⁹), and she identifies its beginnings as coinciding with the coronation of George V. Ashwell attended the ‘1911’ costume ball at the Prince’s Galleries, and then the Shakespeare Ball, at the Royal Albert Hall, costumed as Juliet’s companion and taking part in the *Romeo and Juliet* quadrille, elaborately reported upon in the *Era* (24/6/11).

The theatrical profession was at its best, however, for the Coronation Gala Performance on 27 June, attended by the newly crowned King and his Queen, at His Majesty’s Theatre. There were many party pieces and the evening ended with Ben Jonson’s masque for women, *The Vision of Delight*, with Ashwell playing a “romantic Phantasy” in “a witty and brilliant epilogue to the Coronation festivities” (*Star* 28/6/11). The masque was a last minute addition to the programme, included only after Ashwell’s intervention when she took issue with Sir Charles Wyndham and the Managers’ Association, who had ensured most of the leading actors would take part, with only a few women in supporting roles. Ashwell threatened to send a letter she had written to the Queen, expressing regret that the actresses had been excluded. The managers finally agreed to the inclusion of a play for women, giving Ashwell twenty-four hours to organise it. She had presented *The Vision of Delight* at the Kingsway in 1908 and quickly rallied support to re-stage it (*Myself a Player*, pp. 167-8).

Dealing with more serious matters in October 1911, Ashwell, along with colleagues involved in the Actors’ Benevolent Fund and the Royal General Theatrical Fund,⁵⁰ examined the long-term financial security of members of the profession. In an article in the *Daily Chronicle*, she proposed a scheme of insurance against illness, unemployment and ill luck. Existing insurance schemes were inappropriate for the erratic working/non-working situation of actors and it was necessary to develop an insurance scheme

of our own, some freely organised pool into which those of us whose employment is as fitful as the breeze can put what we think or feel we can afford when we are in work, and out of which we can take as little as need be when the tiding over period arrives - the period between the expired engagement and the promised new one.⁵¹

Some touring companies already operated a plan of temporary insurance - a pool into which was put a portion of the first week’s wages and from which could be drawn ‘loans’, then repaid with a penny added for each shilling lent. At the end of the tour, the pennies ‘interest’ was divided equally. Ashwell considered a ‘bank’ or ‘pool’ to which weekly contributions were made was more workable than an

⁴⁹Vita Sackville-West, *The Edwardians*, London, Virago Press, 1983, p.308 (first published by Hogarth Press, London, 1930).

⁵⁰The Actors’ Benevolent Fund was established in 1882, designed to assist actors and actresses by means of allowances, gifts and loans. On Actors’ Saturday (the last in January each year) a collection was made in all theatres. The Royal General Theatrical Fund was established in 1839 to grant annuities to the subscribing membership, which included all theatrical workers.

⁵¹This was subsequently quoted in the *Era*, 4/11/11.

ordinary insurance scheme requiring lump sum premiums which actors often found hard to find and which were inaccessible in times of need until the term expired. Ashwell, recognising she needed support in an area of traditional male responsibility, wrote a note to Shaw asking him to “write a line to the *Daily Chronicle* about some form of insurance for actors. There are a large, very large number who need this and really want it, only it does want a big man to start it up.”⁵² The *Era* published letters in support of Ashwell’s suggestion (one by Clarence Derwent who began by saying, “Miss Ashwell’s sympathies have always been with those who have got left in the struggle for fame”, 4/11/11), with the hope expressed that a way would be found to suit the nature of the theatre profession.

Ten months later, in July 1912, the government introduced the National Insurance Act,⁵³ establishing a compulsory system of insurance for employees and workers generally, with the onus of enforcing the insurance in the first instance being imposed upon the employer. All theatrical workers were included in the insurance scheme, which entailed a small contribution (three or four pence a week) from wages earned as well as a similar contribution from the management employing the worker and a couple of pence from the government. It provided sickness and disablement benefit and the opportunity to pay more for greater benefit through approved Benefit Societies. The Actors’ Association took a strong role in encouraging all members of the profession to be fully aware of the conditions and benefits of the system.

In late November 1911 the Lord Chamberlain appointed a Joint Examiner of Plays, Charles Brookfield - a former actor, to work with the previously appointed examiner, G.A. Redford. Within a month Redford had resigned and the profession was being asked for its response. The *Cork Constitution* quoted Ashwell under the headline *Woman Censor?*

I don’t think it would hurt to have a woman who might represent the public more. I understand the Censor is there to protect the tastes of the public. There is only one reason for a Censor at all... to protect people playing in a play suddenly being charged at Bow Street for some curious scruple of the Calvinistic conscience. (20/12/11)

The *Liverpool Courier* announced that Lillah McCarthy “loyally opposes any censorship at all save public opinion” (3/1/12), and that Cicely Hamilton was fearful that a woman censor would be appointed on account of her looks and declared “she could not imagine ‘such a dreadful thing’”, while considering Ashwell to be “almost alone in favouring the notion [of a woman censor]” (ibid), doing so “on broad feminist and not on narrow dramatic grounds” (ibid). Ashwell had already made further comment in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

⁵²From an undated letter (but presumably October 1911) in the G.B. Shaw Papers, Dept of MSS 50528, British Library. No evidence was found that Shaw did write in support of this issue.

⁵³This Act was introduced by Lloyd George and payment of contributions began on 15 July 1912.

As to whether a woman censor is advisable and likely to license more freely than a man, everything would depend on the individual and that individual's limitations. The arbitrary division of sex in this matter will, I am sure, soon be another prehistoric joke. (2/1/12)

Confronting censorship issues on her own doorstep, Ashwell was compelled to apply for an injunction to restrain a performance, at the Kingsway, of a play disallowed by the Lord Chamberlain, fearing it would endanger her licence. The producer, Granville Barker, was permitted to go ahead with a private performance of *The Secret Woman* on condition that he only admit invitees, not the general public (*Era* 24/2/12).⁵⁴

In anticipation of a petition being prepared by some sixty dramatists, with hundreds of signatures from other professional people, eventually sent to the King on 11 June, 1912, Ashwell was a signatory (with seventy-four others) to a letter to the King, dated 29 February 1912.

We, the undersigned managers of theatres, and actors, whilst claiming the fullest freedom for the stage, desire to assert the necessity for such a censorship as a protection to ourselves and to the public. We cannot help feeling that were such a censorship abolished, not only might undesirable plays be presented to the public, but that the interference of the police, of municipal bodies, and various vigilance societies would render the conduct of theatres most irksome, and would be detrimental to the best interests of the drama. In this spirit we desire to express our confidence in the censorship as exercised under the Lord Chamberlain's supervision.

This letter was published in the daily papers (including *Era* 2/3/12) but apparently not received by the Home Secretary. (It seems another petition, signed by Sir Herbert Tree and other managers, was later submitted to the King.)⁵⁵ In this, Ashwell was opposed to the views of colleagues and friends such as Cicely Hamilton and Anthony Wharton. One element in the argument concerned the pro-censorship lobby's belief that the theatre in France, and to some extent in Germany, without censorship, lacked decency and propriety and that these qualities should be preserved in England (*Era* 6/4/12).

The pro-censorship supporters linked propriety and serious purpose in the drama to the idea of a municipal theatre. The *Era* gives an excellent insight into contemporary attitudes towards a non-commercial theatre. It argued that such a theatre would not draw its audience from the "present play-going population" (9/3/12). There was an "exclusive class" (*ibid*), who was potentially interested in the drama, but would not venture into the unpredictable West End theatre. The *Era* painted an elaborate picture of the municipal theatre as having a civic responsibility to provide a safe and respectable educative environment for young people "without any risk to their minds being affected by too

⁵⁴As an example of the censorship in action, the *Times* (24/1/12) reported that a licence for a suffragist play, *The Coronation*, by Christopher St John and Charles Thursby, had been refused. The Pioneer Players planned to perform it at the Savoy in aid of the International Suffrage Shop. Many tickets had been sold, so the organisers formed a society to give a private performance. The play dealt with the crowning of a king in an imaginary country where the Cabinet had become all powerful – on this basis the censor considered it to be of socialist and anti-military tendencies. It was performed with Shaw's *The Man of Destiny* and reviewed in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 29/1/12.

‘advanced’ or too outspoken art. And the class which takes life and literature seriously - perhaps a little heavily - would be catered for in a way which was impossible at the ordinary theatre” (ibid). It suggested the only way to cater for these people was “to let them have a theatre which is in accordance with their views and prejudices” (ibid).

As the theatrical newspaper, the *Era* was obviously trying to allay commercial managers’ fears. The more recent arguments for subsidised local theatre, which concentrate on access and affordability and other pleasurable associations such as ‘entertainment’, did not enter into the debate. The editorial did, however, argue that municipal theatregoers, once ‘converted’ to the habit, may well go on to attend the commercial theatre. Recognition was also made of the benefit to the profession with increased employment opportunities.

On 6 February 1913 Ashwell addressed the Bristol Playgoers’ Club on *Women and Individuality in Dramas and the Future of the Drama*. She considered that the theatre had two great purposes to serve - widening the consciousness and awareness of its audience to gain insight into the lives of others; and the awakening of feeling. In discussing popular entertainment such as cinema she felt “the mass could never be the real judge of values, and the danger in modern civilisation was to confuse monetary success with real intrinsic value” (*Bristol Evening News* 7/2/13). She hoped mechanical inventions (such as those applied to the cinema), would stimulate people “to demand from the theatre something far greater, nobler and more important than the theatre had yet been able to produce” (ibid). She concluded,

when all artistes could express their individualism [instead of audiences seeking ‘personalities’]...and without the only inspiration being that of one for gain, when they could construct a new standard which was not that of monetary success... they would have in England a great theatre representing the hopes, the desires and feelings of a really great nation. (ibid)

The National Theatre question was raised yet again on 23 April 1913, this time by M.P. Mr Mackinder in a debate in the House of Commons, reported upon in detail by the *Era* (26/4/13). Clarence Derwent, a member of the Actors’ Association executive, considered the debate to be a significant step forward but felt that until the National Theatre Committee acted positively to organise a public appeal and began planning the project, it would not be ready for the Shakespeare Tercentenary Year in 1916 (*Globe* 28/4/13). Subsequently, the General Committee, of which Ashwell was a member, met on 15 May to consider its progress report and the balance sheet, details of which were reported in the *Era* (17/5/13). The *Era* editorial expressed anger at the behaviour of those at the meeting, particularly Bernard Shaw’s flippant response to the loss of over £3000 on the Shakespeare Exhibition at Earls Court in 1912, and demanded

⁵⁵Frank Fowell, and Frank Palmer, *Censorship in England*, London, Frank Palmer, 1913, pp.374-379.

that the Committee shall descend from its lofty position among the clouds, take into its fold some competent, experienced business men with time to spare for its affairs, and tackle with energy and vigour, tempered with sound common sense, the question of providing a National Theatre, for which purpose much money has been already subscribed by a generous public.
(24/5/13)

The National Theatre debate led to discussions on the role of the dramatist in creating suitable material for such a project. Inevitably at this time, women's issues were aired at every opportunity, so when, in April 1914, the O.P. Club⁵⁶ met to celebrate British Dramatists, Cicely Hamilton declared "she did not think that there was a woman's point of view in the theatre. Her point of view was the same as a man's, only man refused to recognise that it was the same" (*Times* 27/4/14). Israel Zangwill⁵⁷ considered that there were a large number of unemployed dramatists, "largely caused by the competition of the dead, and, above all, by that of the distant. Shakespeare was the arch-enemy of all modern work" (ibid). The more balanced view, put by others at this meeting and at a gathering at Drury Lane Theatre in the same week, saw hope for the future in a national theatre; a theatre for the people, where education, insight and amusement, through quality plays and good acting, would ensure the survival of the British drama. At Drury Lane a People's Theatre Society was formed to promote the above – however, it was not long before this was another initiative to go into abeyance with the outbreak of war.

CHARITABLE WORK

Like many of her colleagues, and as both a manager and an actress with a growing reputation and status, Ashwell was called upon frequently to support and provide patronage for a wide range of charitable organisations. This was a fairly recent development; by the turn of the century professional actresses had become more respectable, accepted into society through marriage to titled men and association with Royalty, and the gap had widened between 'disreputable' musical hall entertainers and performers on the 'legitimate' stage.⁵⁸ Many charities began exploiting theatrical personalities to attract donors to fund raising events. Ashwell was very active on the charity circuit. Besides theatrical charities, Ashwell, married to an eminent doctor, lent her name and presence to medical and health causes, particularly her husband's hospital, the Women's Hospital in Soho Square, as well as the church and, increasingly, to those concerned with women's needs and special interests. It appears she frequently made available the Kingsway Theatre for special matinees, charging only costs, not a profit raising hire fee. As a member of the Executive Committee for a number of years, she took part in the annual summer Theatrical Garden Party in aid of the Actors' Orphanage Fund⁵⁹ at the Botanic Gardens, Regent's Park. This was an

⁵⁶The O.P. Club was founded in 1900 as an offshoot of the Playgoers Club, established in 1884. The O.P. aimed to 'foster and conserve the love of play-going in a broad and catholic spirit'. *The Stage Year Book*, London, 1926.

⁵⁷Zangwill (1864-1926) was a playwright, novelist and founder of the Organisation for the Settlement of Jews with the British Empire. His plays include *The Melting Pot*, *Plaster Saints*, *The Cockpit* and *We Moderns*.

⁵⁸For a detailed account of this, see Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, London, Routledge, 1991.

⁵⁹The Actors' Orphanage was founded in 1896 'to board, clothe and educate destitute children of actors, actresses, and members of the vaudeville profession, and to fit them for useful positions in after-life.' *Stage Year Book*,

important social event and most of the big names in the profession were present as a matter of course, serving tea, judging funny hats, performing sketches and running raffles.

Between 1908 and 1914 she was involved in numerous charitable or fund raising events as a performer, patron or theatre manager. As such, she was vulnerable to possible fraudsters and early in 1908 a man was charged with fraud for writing letters to Ashwell pretending to be a destitute actress and obtaining money from her under false pretences. Details of the case were reported in a number of newspapers, including the *Globe* and *Bristol Times* (8/01/08).

Organisations to whom she lent support included the Actors' Day Fund,⁶⁰ which raised money from actors donating a day's salary to support actors in temporary need and other theatrical charities. In May 1908 she masterminded a benefit matinee, which raised over £300 for the elderly actress, Mrs John Billington, at the Kingsway. An entertainment given solely by women, it included Ben Jonson's masque, *The Vision of Delight*; the first act of *Diana of Dobson's*; Lord Tennyson's *The Falcon*; a new short play by Cosmo Hamilton and songs, recitations and dances by many well known artists including Lillah McCarthy, Marie Tempest, Mrs Tree and Irene Vanbrugh. Ashwell was developing fund raising and organisational skills which she would use extensively from the outbreak of war and during the 1920s.

In May 1909 she supported the Hospital for Women and East London Hospital for Children, at which she welcomed the Princess of Wales to the Kingsway and recited Elizabethan love lyrics, "to music that did not go very well to her voice" (*Stage*, May 1909), at a special matinee at Drury Lane in aid of Queen Alexandra's Sanatorium for Consumptives. The Stage Society, the Crown Court Scottish National Church, the Franco-British Charity Fete, the UK Beneficent Association and Coquelin memorial presented to the Comedie-Francaise by members of the profession, all benefited from her energy during the summer of 1909. She also attended a charity exhibition of work by Italian artist Pilade Bertieri, apparently asking to be one of his next sitters,⁶¹ although there is no evidence that he painted her portrait. Included, without comment, in one of Ashwell's scrapbooks for 1909 is a cutting from the *Scots Pictorial* entitled *The Church's Debt to the Stage*, which comments on "the action of the Church Pastoral Aid Society in denouncing 'worldly' entertainments, such as dances, theatricals, bridge and whist drives, as means of raising funds for church purposes" (28/8/09). The journal considered it understandable that the profession thought the pronouncement to be "ungracious and ungrateful," considering that "the Church has hitherto shown itself only too eager to secure the services of actors and actresses... as a means of making money" (ibid). Ashwell is listed as an eminent artist likely to have "kindly promised to perform." The article points out that these appearances generally mean considerable personal inconvenience and

London 1926. Originally in Croydon, during the War in 1915, the Orphanage moved to Langley in Buckinghamshire.

⁶⁰The Actors' Day Fund, founded in 1907 'by leading actors and managers for the purpose of assisting by loan any subscriber in temporary difficulties. The ...subscription is one night's salary each year'. *Era Annual*, London, 1918.

“the honour and glory of reciting before a church audience somewhere at the back of beyond cannot be held as adequate reward... naturally ‘the profession’ is wroth” (ibid).

As her commitment to the vote for women grew, between 1910 and 1914, Ashwell’s commitment to related women’s causes increased. Using a rare opportunity to work in conjunction with her husband, on 20 August 1910, in the grounds of the Botanic Gardens, Regent’s Park, she inaugurated a crusade organised by the Women’s Imperial Health Association of Great Britain, of which Dr Simson was an executive member. A travelling caravan, named ‘Aurora’ by Ashwell, who broke a flagon of clear water over the wheel, led the crusade with a lecture programme in the towns and villages of the South West. The aim was to educate parents on the necessity of, and means of achieving, healthy homes for their children. The caravan was equipped to use new cinematograph techniques and lantern displays as well as leaflets to inform on a variety of health issues (*Era* 27/8/10).

During March 1912 Ashwell was involved in a diverse range of activities - from opening the Simple Life Conference at the Caxton Hall⁶², to attendance at two suffragist demonstrations and performing in *A Pageant of the Stage*, directed by Edith Craig, for the Theatrical Ladies’ Guild⁶³ Tea Party at the Albert Hall on Tuesday 11 June 1912. The scale and nature of such events is inconceivable today, from the venues used to the number of participants. Christopher St John’s *A Pageant of the Stage* was a spectacular display on the history of the theatre, during which Ashwell hosted a table for a lavish tea, before an evening performance as Mrs Dane at the New Theatre.

THE THREE ARTS CLUB

By 1911 Ashwell’s charitable and support work had become more focussed, now clearly directed towards women’s needs and interests, and from March 1911, Ashwell as Chairman, with Eva Moore, Mrs Kendal and other actresses, and presided over by Princess Marie Louise of Schleswig Holstein, began working towards the establishment of the Three Arts Club for women performers and artists. Although her visit to New York in 1910 had been a brief one, Ashwell had seen the operation of such a club run by the Professional Woman’s League and returned determined to establish such a facility in London. Centrally based, in the former Home for Cripples in Marylebone Road, London, its aim was to provide affordable, comfortable accommodation with companionship and pleasant surroundings for young artists needing, during engagements, to reside in London. At this stage, raising financial support to adapt and furnish the building was the aim of the committee, which was planning a matinee in May.

⁶¹This was reported in *Hearth and Home*, 17 June 1909.

⁶²The Simple Life Conference, to discuss and exhibit advances in domestic and household comforts, was presented in mid-March, 1909, with the featured Bachelor’s Paradise (a model of comfortable living for singles) much commented upon in the press, for example in the *Morning Leader* and the *Star*, 9/3/09.

Ashwell attended the Rehearsal Club Annual General Meeting (9/5/11) at the St James's Theatre, her task to thank Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein for her supportive presidency of the club which provided a retreat, founded in 1892, for actresses between rehearsals, matinees and evening performances. However, the Three Arts Club was Ashwell's principal concern. In an *Evening Standard* article headed *The Bottom Rung* by Lena Ashwell, she wrote that the Club was for "the friendless women engaged in artistic life... it is designed to help those who are not yet firmly established on the ladder of success... it will also safeguard girls in the theatrical profession unused to London life" (5/5/11).

The Club had an advisory board which included the Lord Bishop of London; artist John Sargent, R.A.; composer Sir Edward Elgar and playwright Sir Arthur W. Pinero, with many Associate members donating cash towards setting up costs of around £3,500. However, she was at pains to stress that it was not a charity: charges would be very reasonable but the Club, once established, would have to run on its income. The Club received a great deal of publicity, with detailed reviews for the special matinee that took place on 19 May at the St James's Theatre. The highlight was the revival of Ben Jonson's masque, *The Hue and Cry After Cupid*, with Ashwell playing Juno. The programme was about four hours in length, with scenes from well-known plays, one-act plays, a ballet and musical interludes. The event raised around £500. Given the frequency and number of similar occasions, with the stars of the London stage giving their party pieces, there must have been an enormous matinee audience prepared to support such events at this time.

Ashwell, hosting the Academy of Dramatic Art end of year performances and prize giving at the Kingsway on 21 and 22 July, used the occasion to advise young actresses about the Three Arts Club which eventually opened on December 8, 1911. There was an initial membership of five hundred and most of the ninety rooms were already booked by artists needing accommodation in London. In an interview for the *Standard*, Ashwell stressed it was "not a charitable institution" (6/12/11), but a resident club offering different size rooms for between nineteen shillings and six pence to two pounds ten shillings per week. *Woman At Home* concluded a detailed account of the Club; its initiators, facilities, governing body and advisory committees, and rules and regulations, with the comment: "This new venture marks another step in the sensible social emancipation of women workers and their revolt against conditions of existence which would never be contemplated or endured by a man" (December 1911/January 1912).

To celebrate the opening and to raise further funds, there was a magnificent ball at the Royal Albert Hall on 20 December. This was widely publicised, including via an advertisement in the December issue of

⁶³The Theatrical Ladies Guild of Charity was founded at the turn of the century to help women stage workers and their families, particularly immediately before and after the birth of children, and provided stage and street clothes for members in need.

Votes for Women. Arthur Bouchier played Santa Claus, with some four thousand revellers in fancy dress dancing to music played by one hundred and twenty musicians.⁶⁴

In May 1912 Ashwell presided over a matinee for the Three Arts Club at His Majesty's Theatre which raised £375 towards the furnishing bill of £3000. The *Era* reported the event in its 25 May issue, declaring, "A bewildering array of stars of the stage graced the programme", which opened with Jonson's masque, *The Vision of Delight*, with Ashwell as Phantasy. There was a scene from *Julius Caesar*, musical items, St John Hankin's *The Constant Lover* and two novelties, *In Haarlem There Dwelt*, adapted by Dora Bright and 'a Futurist Tubist harlequinade in eighteen acts', *The 'Mind the Gates' Girl*, concocted by Gertrude Jennings, Nigel Playfair and others. Ashwell announced that since December the Club had attracted seven hundred members, was self supporting and intended to set up regional bases once the capital costs were covered. She identified the kind of 'charity' they sought as the dictionary definition of 'universal love' rather than 'alms-giving out of pity to the poor.' Ashwell wrote many begging letters seeking financial support for the Club and for guest speakers to take part in lecture series. Arranging for Shaw to present a lecture took a number of letters to find a suitable date, and when he did speak, in December 1912, Ashwell was unable to attend due to illness ("an endless illness, nine weeks now"⁶⁵). From feedback she received, she wrote to him on 10 December 1912 saying "you gave them a feeling of value and made them feel a little of what Art & Beauty really mean... one is so thankful that you are alive & here to help us when there are so few... I'd have given an eye teeth (sic) to be there!" (ibid).

On 24 June 1913 the Australian prima donna, Nellie Melba, visited the Three Arts Club, welcomed by Ashwell and Eva Moore. Melba apparently declared, "I would rather die than make a speech' but nevertheless expressed great delight at her reception" (*Era* 28/6/13).

An interview in the *Era*, headed *Miss Lena Ashwell and Women - An Actress Benefactress*, created a picture of a gracious and genteel Ashwell, living in a charming old fashioned house in Grosvenor Street. There was, however, "something of the *revoltee*, something of the *indignatio*, not *sorra*, but full of sentiment, which makes the reformer, the righter of wrongs and the benefactress. Charity in Miss Ashwell's case begins at home, and with one's own sex" (12/11/13). Ashwell talked about working conditions for actresses, which led on to the Three Arts Club – "it is an experiment no longer, but an established success" (ibid), with over one thousand members. She explained that to become a member

⁶⁴There was an amusing sequel to this event, reported in the *Westminster Gazette* (14/5/12). Ashwell's husband, Dr Henry Simson, had an altercation with the Mayor of Islington, who was also the caterer for the Ball. After Simson had taken his own wine and sandwiches into his box for the evening, the caterer, Mr G.S.Elliott, removed these, claiming he had sole right to provide refreshments. Simson accused him of theft, so Elliott brought a charge to the High Court, claiming damages for slander. Simson denied this and counter-claimed for damages for the detention of his goods. Much amusement was had at the hearing and the Mayor was awarded one farthing damages.

⁶⁵G.B. Shaw Papers, MSS 50528, Department of Manuscripts, British Library.

“you must be a bona-fide worker at one of the three arts... it is of no use for *dilettante* or dabblers to try... you must give evidence that you are a genuine labourer in the vineyards, not an amateur” (ibid).

In *Flair* she was quoted as blaming many producers for perpetrating the situation where beauty over brains frequently prevailed in the casting of women. Producers

forget all about an artist’s power to become someone else... I think a lot of the trouble arises from the dreadful habit of looking for ‘types’ ...I should never have won a prize at a beauty show... By raising the intellectual standard of the actress we of the Woman’s Theatre hope to do something to remedy the treatment of minor actresses who, in an overcrowded profession, were exploited for their looks and given little opportunity for continuity of work.
(14/11/13)

Ashwell developed her observations further when she contributed a chapter to *Women Workers In Seven Professions, A Survey of their Economic Conditions and Prospects*, published by the Fabian Women’s Group in 1914.⁶⁶ In *Acting As A Profession For Women*, Ashwell did not mince words - she made it very clear there was little glamour for the majority of women who became actresses, pointing to the overcrowded nature of the profession and the need to develop ‘a supplementary trade’ to survive the long periods of waiting for work. She quoted an average annual income of £70 for an actor when working, but declared that “under present conditions, the average day for an average actress is one in which she looks for work.”⁶⁷ Her chapter gives examples of living and working conditions for most actresses, together with a clear idea of the frustrations and difficulties. It is an emotive statement, obviously intended to convey a realistic picture - but she hoped this was a period of transition from which women would emerge stronger.

Ashwell continued on the theme of women and work at the Women’s Institute, declaring that “work done gratuitously, things given for nothing [such as free theatre tickets] were despised” (*Manchester Guardian* 13/11/13). She felt it essential that everyone have the opportunity to experience the “intense joy of struggle and achievement” (ibid) through work. But women

must determine that conditions should be fair, and they must not do the community the great wrong of working without wages. One reason the work of the home-makers was so despised by men - although the home-makers were the most important people in the country - was that no money value had been placed on their work. Women were apt to distrust their own powers, to dwell too much on what they regarded as their limitations. There were no necessary limitations. Sex need be no bar in any direction. The main essential to success was a courageous belief in one’s own powers and a determination to go forward. (ibid)

⁶⁶Edith J. Morley, ed. *Women Workers in Seven Professions*, The Studies Committee of the Fabian Women’s Group, London, Routledge & Sons, 1914. Other professions included teachers; different levels of medical and nursing practitioners; law; municipal and parish officers; national government employees; and commercial and business clerks.

⁶⁷Ibid., p.300.

The Three Arts Club Fancy Dress Ball at Covent Garden on 22 January 1914 seems to be one of the few lighthearted activities experienced by Ashwell and her colleagues in 1914. A fundraising event, it also served to focus attention on the work of women artists, with competitions for the best one-act play and for posters to be included in the Club's March Exhibition in a London gallery. By this time the Club was producing *The Three Arts Journal*,⁶⁸ a monthly periodical containing reviews, literary commentary, humour and illustrations, favourably reviewed in *Votes for Women* (27/2/14). Ashwell sent Shaw a copy of the first issue, hoping he might write something for it and that he would "think it fairly good – it's awful hard work to start anything. Of course you know what we would all like! Only I don't dare really say it quite out flat – But-?"⁶⁹ Shaw's response is not known.

THE ACTRESSES' FRANCHISE LEAGUE

The beginning of Ashwell's association with the suffrage movement appears to coincide with her working on *Diana of Dobson's*, early in 1908. An unidentified newspaper cutting dated January 11 1908,⁷⁰ on *What We Think of the Suffragettes*, states, "Miss Lena Ashwell Judges by Results – 'If the tactics adopted are successful, they may be justifiable, if not, they must be ridiculous.'" Her initial tactics, however, involved the choice of plays she presented, rather than overt campaigning on behalf of winning the vote for women.

Following the run of *Diana* and as the Kingsway spring season was preparing to close on 20 June 1908, with the company getting ready for nine weeks touring, London witnessed a large procession of women. Organised by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies,⁷¹ it took place on 13 June, with a further Votes for Women March in Hyde Park on Sunday 21 June. Ashwell did not take part, but was included in the *Era's* list of "other actresses who advocate and work for Women's Suffrage" (20/6/08). Involving many of the same actresses, but in stark contrast to the marches, and perhaps indicative of the contradictions of the age, the King's Annual Windsor Castle Garden Party, at which Ashwell was present, took place on June 20. Ashwell's position as an advocate for the women's cause was no doubt difficult. Committed, although not yet married, to an eminent doctor who moved in royal and high society circles, she would have faced similar social dilemmas to those faced by many of her theatrical colleagues, already

⁶⁸There appears to be no surviving copies of this journal; none were included in Ashwell's scrapbooks, nor are they available in library collections in England.

⁶⁹Undated letter from Ashwell, G.B. Shaw Papers, MSS 50528, Department of Manuscripts, British Library.

⁷⁰Maud Arncliffe Sennett collection on Women's Suffrage in England 1906-36, in 37 volumes in the British Library, London.

⁷¹The NUWSS was formed in 1897 when all existing societies devoted to women's suffrage were federated under the presidency of Mrs (later Dame) Millicent Garrett Fawcett. By 1914 the Union represented between 500 and 600 non-militant groups concerned with electoral reform. Their policy was 'aimed at the creation in each constituency of a Woman's Suffrage Society on non-party lines... to create so strong a feeling in favour of women's suffrage as to make party managers on both sides realise, in choosing candidates, they had... better chance of success with a man who was a suffragist' (M.G. Fawcett, *Women's Suffrage*, London, TC & EC Jack, 1911, p.68).

married to titled gentlemen. Their determination and preparedness to use their positions for such a cause, while risking loss in social status, was admirable at such a time.

At the newly formed Actresses' Franchise League December 1908 meeting at the Criterion Restaurant,⁷² attended by many of Ashwell's well-known contemporaries, Forbes Robertson, a long time supporter of female suffrage, proposed

that this meeting of actresses calls upon the Government immediately to extend the franchise to women; that women claim the franchise as a necessary protection for the workers under modern industrial conditions, and maintain that by their labour they have earned the right to this defence.
(*Era* 19/12/08)

He urged his listeners to read *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill to understand more about the subject. Other speakers included a key figure in the movement, Evelyn Sharp, together with critic J.T. Grein and writers Madeleine Lucette Ryley and Cicely Hamilton. While recognising the League's youth, actress Eva Moore declared their determination to persevere and to win.

The League rapidly gained momentum and press recognition. Provocatively, the *Era* editorial, entitled 'Votes for Actresses', expressed surprise that actresses were seeking the vote given their already equal position in their profession. In condescending tones it considered "their motive is sympathy with their less fortunate sisters; and this is certainly a most meritorious impulse" (16/1/09). Placed beside a positive review of a play by Mrs James Ward, *Man and Woman*, under the heading of *A Suffragist Entertainment*, it must be assumed the editorial was intended to encourage debate. This was followed by a letter from 'A Member of the AFL', clearly stating the organisation's aim

women need it [the vote] as a moral recognition of their responsibility and stake in the affairs of their country, and as a public acknowledgement of their capability of judging and speaking for themselves on matters that concern them. They need it, too, even as men need it - for the education the responsibility of power brings with it.
(*Era* 23/1/09)

The League took part in the Women's Freedom League⁷³ fund raising bazaar at the Caxton Hall, opened by Ellen Terry on April 15 1909, the date the *Globe* announced that "Miss Lena Ashwell, by whom *The Earth* has been produced, is understood to have been converted to votes for women by Miss Cicely Hamilton, the authoress of *Diana of Dobson's*. The movement has made great strides in the theatrical world." The following day Ashwell opened the fair which consisted of stalls selling wares and at which

⁷²The Criterion Restaurant (restored in the early 1990s to a pseudo version of its Edwardian splendour) is next door to the Criterion Theatre in London's Piccadilly Circus. The Actresses' Franchise League made the restaurant its regular meeting place from 1908 to the outbreak of war in 1914.

⁷³The Women's Freedom League was formed in September 1907, as a break-away group from the Women's Social and Political Union. Formed by Mrs Charlotte Despard, Edith How-Martyn and Theresa Billington as a reaction to the increasing militancy of the Pankhursts. (Midge Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder*, A Documentary, London, Allen Lane, 1975, p.64.)

Figure 22: The Actresses' Franchise League Banner, 1909. (Museum of London)

short afternoon and evening performances were given by actresses and musicians. Signalling her commitment, the Kingsway programme for *The Earth*⁷⁴ carried an advertisement for the journal *Votes for Women* which was promoting a Public Meeting of Women at the Royal Albert Hall on 29 April, organised by the Women's Social and Political Union.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the *Era* continued to be conservative. Its editorial of August 21 1909, *Actresses and Politics*, stated "The actress... who was presented with a vote would have some difficulty in deciding what she would do with it. On the whole, the 'votes for actresses' movement is in a somewhat nebulous state; and there are many who, like ourselves, desire further enlightenment on the subject." AFL member and playwright/author Madeleine Lucette Ryley's response concluded - "Our object is perfectly clear. We believe that duly qualified women are entitled to citizenship, perhaps because, like the late Mr Gladstone, we can find no argument against it" (*Era* 28/8/09).

Undoubtedly, the *Era* was more supportive after this, with much more coverage of the AFL's activities as the organisation gained momentum. The League itself was much stronger; it had an administrative office and had identified its role within the large number of different interest groups making up the Suffrage movement. Given their relative equality with men in their profession, actresses were generally perceived to have wider freedoms than many other women and were looked to as articulate, publicly recognised spokeswomen for the cause.

Presided over by Mrs Kendal, the League's monthly programme of Friday afternoon 'At Homes' in the Grand Hall of the Criterion restaurant began in October 1909. At the first meeting, sympathetic male supporter, Harley Granville Barker, thought "it was a fitting thing that the women of the oldest profession should be leading the way in the fight for the political recognition of women" (*Era* 9/10/09).

Ashwell was a regular participant in the 'At Homes', which were reported on in the *Era*, and which introduced speakers on issues relating to the franchise cause and planned activities such as the performance of suffrage plays, often in collaboration with the Women Writers' Suffrage League⁷⁶ with whom the AFL shared members such as Cicely Hamilton, author of the *Pageant of Great Women*,⁷⁷ performed at the Scala Theatre in November 1909 to raise funds for the cause.

⁷⁴Kingsway Theatre programme for *The Earth* by J. B. Fagan, first performed 14 April 1909 (Author's collection).

⁷⁵The WSPU, which was the first and largest militant suffrage group in England, was founded by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia in 1903.

⁷⁶The Women Writers' Suffrage League was founded in 1908 on the initiative of Cicely Hamilton and Bessie Hatton, a committed suffragist and good organiser. (Lis Whitelaw, *The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton*, London, The Women's Press, 1990, p.68-69).

⁷⁷A *Pageant of Great Women* featured six categories of women – the learned, the artists, the saintly, the heroic, the rulers and the warriors, representing 44 women in history, literature and mythology. These groups presented short tableaux to the characters of Justice and an Everywoman figure in an effort to break down Prejudice, played by the only man in the cast. The work was presented on a number of occasions in London and the provinces for fund raising and propaganda.

Ashwell writes about herself at this time -

I began to discover that the world of the theatre was not the only world, and there were movements going on; for the seeds of revolution were germinating. There was much in the world that needed to be put right, and I became immersed in the suffrage movement and the position of women. *(Myself a Player, p.163.)*

Ashwell took part in the AFL's postponed (from May 18 to May 24 1910 due to public mourning for King Edward) fund raising matinee musicale at the Criterion Restaurant, with party pieces from a virtual 'who's who' of the theatre. She gave two recitations accompanied by Hubert Bath, with music by Stanley Hawley; Decima Moore whistled a solo; Ben Webster rendered Eva Ogden's poem, *The Sea*, and so on. More significant was the 1910 Suffragist Procession through London on Saturday June 18. Ashwell describes it thus:

long before the last women had left Cleopatra's Needle [a monument on the Thames Embankment], the head of the orderly and well drilled army, carrying banners and flags of different societies, arrived at the Albert Hall. In the windows of the clubs and along the crowded streets were curious and contemptuous people. Well-dressed men, with ridicule in their eyes and the smile of superiority on their sneering lips, stared as we passed along. It really was infuriating and now it seems quite unbelievable. Lots of funny things happened to cheer us on that exhausting walk in the dust and heat of the roadway. Everyone was in mourning for King Edward, but for this procession we were asked to wear white dresses. Owing to a rush of work, I had no time to change, so there I was, conspicuous in black... and I heard a man say... 'You see 'er, that there in the black? That there is the bad girl of the family.' *(Myself a Player, p.168)*

Three days later the AFL presented a matinee programme at the Kingsway in aid of funds for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Cicely Hamilton's *How The Vote Was Won*, and *Press Cuttings* by G. B. Shaw⁷⁸ were performed, with Ashwell acting as hostess/manager of the theatre. Then, on 23 July 1910, Ashwell took part in what is known as the Great Demonstration of Suffragettes in Hyde Park. The press frequently reduced these events to entertainment with such comments as – "the crowd noted with cheers a little band of beautifully dressed women, among whom were Miss Lena Ashwell... and several other suffragist sympathizers on the stage" (*Daily Express* 25/7/10). Twenty-five years later, Ashwell wrote

It is impossible to realise now the scorn which women who thought that they should be recognised as citizens drew upon themselves from otherwise polite and sensible people. Managers, authors, pressmen became quite passionate in their resentment and, wise in their generation, did not associate themselves with this unpopular movement. *(Myself a Player, p. 164)*

⁷⁸*How the Vote was Won* began as a pamphlet story by Hamilton and was dramatised by Christopher St John. It had a farcical plot and was a popular success for the AFL. It was premiered at the Royalty Theatre, 13 April 1909. (*The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton*, op.cit. p.83-4.) Shaw's *Press Cuttings*' full title is 'A Topical Sketch compiled from the Editorial and Correspondence Columns of the Daily Papers' and is a satirical account of the behaviour of anti-suffragist women, politicians and military men. First performed at the Royal Court Theatre, 9 July 1909 and published by Constable and Company, London, 1924.

Even Beerbohm Tree, a friend in so many other ways, contemptuously rejected the suffrage point of view. While preparing for an American tour, Ashwell continued active involvement with the AFL. She chaired its meeting on 7 October 1910, introducing various speakers and encouraging “substantial donations to the fund” (*Era* 15/10/10). Also on this date the AFL presented a programme of short plays for the Chiswick branch of the Women’s Social and Political Union. Given the growing militancy of some elements in the movement, the AFL was at pains to stress its neutrality and role as assistant to other suffrage societies in the provision of professional services. The presence of Sarah Bernhardt, in London performing at the Coliseum, serves to highlight the dual off-stage roles many actresses were playing at this time. On the one hand they were part of a very political, and in some cases, very violent, activity aiming to change the role of women in their society - on the other, they were part of glamorous and indeed, frivolous, events such as the reception in Bernhardt’s honour, also on 7 October, which Ashwell attended at the King’s Hall of the Holborn Restaurant, hosted by the Countess of Warwick. Obviously, many people, men particularly, had difficulty reconciling these roles.

November 7 to 12, 1910, was deemed to be Suffrage Week and many societies demonstrated on behalf of the vote for women. The AFL’s activities at this time were outside these dates, with a matinee in association with the Women Writers’ Suffrage League at the Aldwych Theatre on 18 November. The programme concluded with Cicely Hamilton’s *Pageant Of Great Women*, directed by Edith Craig, with Ashwell as Florence Nightingale and many of her well known colleagues portraying the great women of history. “The house was packed with a most enthusiastic audience” (*Era* 26/11/10), comprising mostly women, who were entertained by two new one act plays as well as the Pageant and various songs, dances and recitations including “Miss Ashwell’s beautiful recital of some Elizabethan love lyrics [which] compelled an insistent encore” (*ibid*).

Ashwell provided entertainment with some recitations during tea at the AFL ‘At Home’ on 3 March 1911 when Lord Robert Cecil⁷⁹ urged the suffragists to take on “the rather dull, tedious work known as canvassing and persuading electors to put this question [the vote for women] before all others” (*Votes for Women* 10/3/11). He had the support of many, including Ashwell, when he stated this method was more useful than militancy would ever be.

By March 1911 the AFL were holding meetings in the East End of London, presenting short plays, songs and recitations. A local M.P., George Lansbury,⁸⁰ was helping this campaign; special funds were raised to

⁷⁹Robert Cecil (1864-1958), was the third son of the third marquis of Salisbury. During the war he was Minister of Blockade and after the war an enthusiast for the League of Nations.

⁸⁰George Lansbury (1859-1940), was a supporter of the suffrage movement who in 1912 resigned his seat in the Commons as MP for Bow and Bromley so he could fight the by-election on the issues of votes for women (he lost by 751 votes). He was involved in the Labour Party newspaper, *The Daily Herald*, before and after the War (during which he was an imprisoned pacifist) and a member of the Labour Government in the late 1920s (*Shoulder to Shoulder*, BBC Radio Times Special, London, 1974, p.64).

support the activities and members called upon to give their services. The AFL was particularly heartened by the growing awareness of working class women, many of whom, as breadwinners or responsible for keeping a family together, in the 1910 Census return had put themselves down as 'The Head of the Family'. Attitudes were beginning to change.

On Saturday 17 June 1911 there was what had become an annual Great Procession of Women seeking the vote, with the AFL contingent leaving the Embankment at 4.30pm. The *Era* (24/6/11) includes Ashwell in the list of marchers but it is uncertain as to whether she actually took part as she states in *Myself A Player* that she took part in only two suffrage marches, one of which was in Boston with Charlotte Shaw, the other in 1910, following the death of King Edward. She was, however, supporting events representing the diversity of her interests and commitments at this time, appearing at the Kingsway with Ellen Terry and other distinguished actresses in Christopher St John's (Christabel Marshall) new play, *The First Actress*,⁸¹ which, together with new plays by Cicely Hamilton and Margaret Wynne Nevinson, launched Edith Craig's Pioneer Players.⁸² This group was committed to the votes for women cause and the promotion of theatre by women. The *Standard* made the entertaining *faux pas* of thinking St John was a man, accusing 'him' of being a "traitor to his sex" (9/05/11) in the play's treatment of women by men.

In the summer of 1911 Ashwell was elected a vice president of the Actresses' Franchise League and the following months were particularly busy⁸³. The League had about six hundred members including most of the well-known actresses of the time. It remained neutral on issues such as militancy, preferring to be identified as a propaganda group, providing assistance to other suffrage societies and using its monthly meetings and performances of plays to recruit new members and add to the debate on the franchise for women. On October 27, 1911, the League presented a matinee at the Lyceum Theatre. Prior to the event, a number of actresses resorted to 'sandwich-board' publicity, with considerable enthusiasm, in the streets of Westminster. The centre piece of the matinee was a one-act play by Laurence Housman, *Alice In Ganderland*, a politicised version of Lewis Carroll's story in which Alice represents Women's Suffrage while the others at the tea party were its political opponents. Parody was in evidence too when Ashwell recited Sidney Low's response to Kipling's poem *The Female of the Species*. She repeated this for the Women Writers' Suffrage League at the Criterion (2/11/11), where the president, Mrs Baillie Reynolds stated, eloquently, "We are not in revolt, we only want to move on." The *Birkenhead News* continued its report of this meeting with,

⁸¹This play depicts a dream experienced by the pioneer of professional actresses, Margaret Hughes, in 1661, in which she has visions of future celebrated actresses, up to the present day, represented by Ashwell.

⁸²The Pioneer Players continued until 1921, presenting a serious and not very popular repertoire which was increasingly out of tune with the post-war atmosphere – 'no-one would have gone to see their plays for light relief' (Joy Melville, *Ellen and Edy*, London, Pandora 1987, p.227).

⁸³The president of the AFL was Mrs Forbes Robertson and other vice-presidents elected were Marie Brema, Lillian Braithwaite, Mrs J.B.Fagan, Julie Oppfaversham, Mrs Langtry, Lillah McCarthy, Decima and Eva Moore, Mrs

Miss Lena Ashwell, after reciting Mr Sidney Low's reply to Mr Rudyard Kipling's poem, made a speech which was full of fine thoughts, and delivered in her musical, finely modulated voice, it was a rare treat for her hearers. 'Women', she said, 'are the possessors of souls, but they have to see God and their own souls through the eyes of men. Women now wish to put an end to this everlasting degradation; they wish to wake up and realise their own souls.'

(11/11/11)

At the November meeting of the League, Mrs Maud Arncliffe-Sennett, a former actress and full time suffrage activist who methodically chronicled the Suffrage movement in an extensive collection now in the British Library, was elected to the committee and on 16 November many members took part in the Women's Demonstration for Suffrage at the Royal Albert Hall. The next day a large deputation of women representing most of the suffrage societies went to Downing Street to meet Prime Minister Asquith and Lloyd George. Ashwell was one of the four women representing the Actresses' Franchise League. The deputation was seeking to ascertain the Government's present intention on female suffrage given the planned Manhood Suffrage Bill.⁸⁴ Although there was some feeling progress was being made, Asquith declared the government's position had not changed since 1908 with regard to its plans and attitudes, and he could not bring forward something for which there was not full agreement amongst his colleagues - or something that he did not believe was in the country's best interests.⁸⁵ Four days later there was a militant women's protest at the House of Commons. Two hundred women were arrested following violence and stone throwing. This had been anticipated, with the police out in force. The divide between negotiators and militants among the suffragists continued to widen.

Between December 4 and 9, 1911, there was the annual fundraising Christmas Fair and Fete for the WSPU at the Portman Rooms. The programme included twelve performances by members of the Actresses' Franchise League in ten short plays, in the afternoons and evenings, including three performances of Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look*. Ashwell was billed to contribute to the proceedings, presumably in her role of Kate in the Barrie. On December 15, the League celebrated its third birthday at the Criterion restaurant. Around this time the indefatigable Ashwell also took part in fund raising events for the West London Hospital and the Fine Needlework Association for Invalid Women and Girls.

At its Executive Meeting in January 1912, attended by Ashwell, the AFL passed a resolution calling upon the government to incorporate the principle of women's suffrage in the King's speech, "as an earnest of its sincerity towards it" (*Standard* 25/1/12). Success with these methods continued to elude the League - frustrated again in June when they asked Asquith to receive a deputation on the subject of electoral

F.Mouillot, Beatrice Forbes Robertson, Madeleine Lucette Ryley, Elizabeth Robins, Irene and Violet Vanbrugh, Mrs E.S. Willard and Mrs Theodore Wright.

⁸⁴First introduced by Asquith in November 1911 to extend male franchise, the Manhood Suffrage Bill effectively 'torpedoed' (in the words of Lloyd George) the amended Conciliation Bill which proposed female suffrage limited by age and property qualifications. Both Bills had amendments suggested but eventually did not proceed - in the case of the Manhood Suffrage Bill, it was finally rejected in May 1913. (Duncan Crow, *The Edwardian Woman*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1978, pp.206-10.)

reform, only to be told he could not see his way to accede to their request owing to pressure of business. However, members of the League and the Women Writers' Suffrage League were continuing to use plays by women to promote their cause - throughout February and March, *Diana of Dobson's* was being performed by H.V. Neilson's company at Kelly's Theatre, Liverpool, at the Fulham Grand and in Scotland. In early March, with Ashwell as Diana, the first act was on the bill at the Palladium, following a February season of Hamilton's one act play, *The Constant Husband*, directed by Ashwell⁸⁶. In this comedy, Ashwell played the part of a smart French businesswoman, whose husband is about to elope, as he has done on other occasions. Fed up with his returning to her, she visits the current object of his affections, expressing the hope that this liaison will be permanent. She parts with her cookery books (his return frequently prompted by his need for her culinary expertise) and expresses the desire to get on with her own life. Hamilton was once again using a lighthearted approach to convey a further aspect of woman's serious need for respect and independence. The playwright was also on the bill, with co-author Christopher St John, with their short play *How the Vote was Won*, at the Actresses' Franchise League performance for local audiences in Walthamstow (a north-eastern outer suburb of London) in early February. Another suffrage author, Elizabeth Baker, premiered her new one act satire, *Edith*, at the New Princess Theatre fundraising matinee for the Women Writers' Suffrage League on February 9, 1912⁸⁷. The programme also included a pageant of women, *Shakespeare's Dream*, featuring Cicely Hamilton as Lady Macbeth and Ashwell as Ophelia. The lines spoken were from Shakespeare's plays, "bearing more or less upon the suffrage question" (*Era* 17/2/12).

The *Standard*, in its daily *Woman's Platform* page, reported on the protest demonstration by women at the London Opera House on 15 March, where a number of suffrage groups, including the Actresses' Franchise League, combined to call for the enfranchisement of women to "put an end to the existing disorder" (16/3/12). Regretting the militant approach, and seeking to dis-associate organisations such as the AFL from such an approach, Ashwell was a signatory, along with actress Eva Moore, to a published letter of sympathy to West-End tradesmen who had suffered from the disorder, "the recent suffragette smashings" (*Era* 16/3/12), of shop windows. The *Standard* also reported large attendance (with Ashwell listed as among those present) at the March 29 Women's Social and Political Union demonstration at the Albert Hall. Here the resolution passed began,

⁸⁵This was reported in the *Daily News* and the *Times* on 18 November 1911.

⁸⁶This was given a repeat performance at a fund-raising matinee, for the Babies' Home and Day Nursery in Hoxton, at the Palladium in April.

⁸⁷Elizabeth Baker (1876-1962) wrote at least fifteen plays, the best known of which is *Chains*, first performed by the Play Actors in April 1909. (Edward Knoblock claimed he suggested this play to Ashwell for the Kingsway but as Sheila Stowell writes in *A Stage of Their Own*, Manchester University Press, 1992, p.106, it seems he may have confused this play with another.) Baker was a member of the Pioneer Players from 1918 to 1920. Another of her plays, *Edith*, 'argues that women are capable of managing money and being successful in business'. Linda Fitzsimmons, Introduction to *Chains*, in *New Woman Plays*. op.cit. p.81.

This meeting strongly condemns the attempt now being made by the Government to destroy by methods of repression the agitation for the enfranchisement of women, and calls history to witness that this attempt to break the spirit of the freedom loving British people is doomed to fail. (30/3/12)

Various speakers expressed the determination of the Union to continue the fight and over £10,000 was raised from the audience towards this.

In May 1912 the Actresses' Franchise League produced a small pamphlet with details of its aims and the names of those on the executive committee.⁸⁸ Mrs Forbes Robertson was President at this time, Ashwell one of seventeen vice-presidents. It stated:

That this League has been formed as a bond of union between all women in the theatrical profession who are in sympathy with the Women's Franchise Movement... only Actresses be eligible for the Executive Committee... persons qualify for membership by being or having been connected with the theatrical profession in any of its branches... minimum subscription one shilling... The AFL is strictly neutral in regard to suffrage tactics and the objects of the League are:- 1. to convince members of the theatrical profession of the necessity of extending the franchise to women; 2. to work for women's enfranchisement by educational methods, such as:- i) Propaganda meetings, ii) sales of literature, iii) propaganda plays, iv) lectures, 3. To assist all other Leagues whenever possible. (ibid)

At the AFL Annual General Meeting on 28 June 1912 final plans were made for a further meeting on 5 July at the Criterion, at which Ashwell presided, to consider the connection between the White Slave Traffic Bill and the Enfranchisement of Women. The Bill was before Parliament for consideration of some amendments which the meeting feared would weaken the existing Act. Ashwell introduced the subject as one "which women should know [about] and should face with courage and determination. So long as one woman remained a victim of the white slave traffic the women of the country must feel responsible" (*Daily Herald* 9/7/12). Dr Christine Murrell spoke of the evils and sufferings and saw the Bill as "a sign of an awakening of the public conscience, but women needed the vote for their effective protection" (ibid). A resolution was proposed and accepted – "That this meeting, while welcoming any effort on the part of Parliament to minimise the terrible evil of the white slave traffic, calls upon the Government to deal a more fatal blow by granting the vote to women" (ibid).

This action was similar to many others involving the women's suffrage movement.⁸⁹ The necessity for women to have a voice on issues that impacted upon them was increasing and, given the outbreak of the Great War two years later, in hindsight was inevitable. While this meeting was not necessarily a turning point for Ashwell, it was a clear indication of her commitment and future direction in the community. She

⁸⁸Arncliffe Sennett collection, op.cit.

⁸⁹For example, Mrs H.B. Irving gave a speech, *Women Workers and the Living Wage*, at the meeting of the National Union of Women Workers in Oxford on 1 October, observing that the theatre "was, and still is, almost the only profession where pay and opportunity are equal for men and women" (*Era* 5/10/12).

had moved out of theatre management and the rest of 1912 was a period of enforced inactivity for Ashwell - her last performance that year was a recital at the Kursaal, Harrogate, on 24 August. After giving notice that she was applying for a music and dancing licence for the Kingsway (which was considered by the London County Council Licensing Committee on 14 November), on 15 October she had an operation to remove her appendix. Ashwell had intended to take part in the AFL Lyceum matinee performance of Christopher St John's *The First Actress* on 29 November, but as the *Era* reported she was "for some time after her recent operation... in a critical condition, [but] is now out of danger and on the road to recovery... unable to resume her professional work before the New Year" (2/11/12).

She could not be with the AFL welcoming committee at Trafalgar Square on 16 November when the votes for women march from Edinburgh arrived in London to present a petition at the Houses of Parliament, but she responded to Mrs Arncliffe-Sennett's appeal for support with a £5 donation.⁹⁰ Actresses continued to use their unique position to lobby for the vote. *Votes for Women* reported on the 'Memorial' sent to the Speaker of the House of Commons and Members of Her Majesty's Government on 19 December signed by AFL President and Secretary Gertrude Forbes-Robertson and Adeline Bourne which began,

While adding to the gaiety of the nation, the actresses have been suffering from great wrongs arising out of sex disability... the broad, expansive view of life which the actresses' calling engenders, has revealed to them a state of society in Great Britain which they, as patriotic women, can no longer support. Debarred by sex disability from the exercise of the franchise to right these wrongs, repudiated by the government of the day, unprotected by any party machinery, the actresses, representing a very large and important faction of working women, now appeal to the highest tribunal in the land, the House of Commons, and ask to be allowed to stand before the Bar of the House to lay before the Commons at first hand their reasons for claiming equality with man in the State. (27/12/12)

However, The *Suffragette* reported that no action had as yet followed the Actresses' Memorial. It explained that the Bar of the House of Commons was a British institution not often used but

from time to time in the process of the centuries aggrieved persons have claimed to be 'heard at the Bar', and from that situation they have exposed their real or alleged wrongs before the Commons of the Realm in Parliament assembled. It is a dignified and picturesque procedure, with a touch of the histrionic. (3/1/13)

The *Suffragette* felt sure the actresses would put their case in a dignified and moderate manner but given that the decision to allow their claim rested with Parliament, the writer implied that more aggressive methods would no doubt continue to be used by the suffragettes unless the women were heard.

Recovered from her operation, Ashwell re-joined the fray. By then, plans were underway for a 'Day of Meditation' for all those interested in the suffrage question, which took place on St Bride's Day, 1

February, 1913. Organised by the Archdeacon of Westminster, the Reverend Dr Clifford and other church leaders, Muriel, Lady de la Warr, Mrs Bramwell Booth (Salvation Army), Mr and Mrs Forbes Robertson, and Ashwell, it was a day of special meditation and intercession in Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral and various cathedrals, chapels and churches throughout the country.

Men and women, however they may feel with regard to the solution of the present crisis, are asked to join in this common approach of the ultimate and innermost aspects of the question, earnestly desiring that the consciousness of the world may be so heightened that clear light may be gained on the difficult path, and increase of wisdom and power to achieve. Men and women especially interested in the matter are asked to keep five minutes at noon for silent remembrance and prayer, wherever they may be, during the days [January 20-27] upon which the suffrage question will be before the Commons. *(Westminster Gazette 23/1/13)*

A few days later, at the Queen's Hall, there was a large meeting organised by the recently formed Federated Council of Suffrage Societies to protest further against Prime Minister Asquith's failure to respond to the growing demand for the vote. The AFL was strongly represented by Cicely Hamilton and Winifred Mayo. Mrs Pethick Lawrence expressed the positive mood of the meeting and movement in her declaration that in recent weeks there had been "a tremendous access of public opinion to their side" *(Standard 6/2/13)*.

A month later, at the AFL meeting on 6 March 1913, Hamilton, presiding, extolled her colleagues not to be downhearted by the lack of progress towards votes for women. Other speakers outlined the present role of women in society and their need to work together as well as with men who supported their aims. It was announced there would be a mass meeting on March 17, the first big event to be organised by men only in support of female suffrage, with Drury Lane Theatre being made available for a further meeting on 2 May. The pressure continued with a rising clamour for Asquith to resign. On 8 March 1913 the *Era* ran an editorial on *Actresses and the Franchise*, presenting their aims and activities in a very positive light. The League, with seven hundred members, was an influential group in the Women's Suffrage Movement and its leaders were leaders in the profession. It is surprising, therefore, to find that the *Era's* survey to find out if actresses wanted the vote threw up what seems to be incredible (and frustrating) indifference. The *Era* sent out a pre-paid postcard to every actress in London and the provinces asking if she wanted the vote - the result, published quietly the following week, was two hundred and forty-four in favour of the vote, three hundred and forty-six against and eight hundred and forty-five indifferent. Without knowing how many actresses were sent the cards, it is impossible to know how representative this response really was, but it seems apparent that many AFL members did not respond to the survey. The *Era* then debated, somewhat tongue in cheek, the question whether if once the female sex becomes 'advanced' and emancipated, a whole stock of dramatic motives will have to be put on the shelf.

⁹⁰Arncliffe Sennett collection, op.cit.

Take for instance, Jealousy. With equal marriage laws it will be absolutely absurd. Obviously jealousy is only reasonable when based on the feeling of property in the wife... dare we say there will be no want of fun when the equality of the sexes is established, and the Woman of the Future becomes the Woman of the Present.

(15/3/13)

While it is not possible in this study to detail all the issues relating to the fight for Women's Suffrage at this time, it is important to note that Ashwell was very much part of the theatrical profession's involvement, which included strong reaction against the policy of forcible feeding of imprisoned suffragettes on hunger strike, expressed at a large meeting at the Kingsway Hall on 18 March, at which Bernard Shaw was a speaker. The Drury Lane meeting on 2 May was variously reported - the *Daily Herald* presenting a rosy picture of "the fairest stars of the theatrical firmament" (3/5/13), giving melodious and eloquent expression to their demands and being showered with money to support the cause. The *Globe*, on the other hand, greatly regretted that none of the speakers

with the bravely conspicuous exception of Miss Irene Vanbrugh, thought it proper publicly to dissociate herself from the militant movement, whose reckless violence has shocked the conscience of every decent man and woman in the community. The ladies who form this particular League stand in a peculiar position towards the general public; their influence is great, and if they disapprove of the methods which have so gravely compromised the fortunes of the legitimate movement for women suffrage, they should have had the courage to say so.

(3/5/13)

It was a difficult meeting, leading eventually to Vanbrugh's resignation from the AFL. The resolution, put by Lady Willoughby de Broke, called on the Prime Minister to bring in the vote by a government measure, "by which alone the present deplorable state of disorder can be prevented and the women of the country enfranchised" (ibid). This prompted Vanbrugh to declare that she had no sympathy with militant methods, which was greeted by both cheers and hisses. No other speaker supported her and "she resumed her seat" (ibid). Vanbrugh later wrote that Ashwell followed her as the next speaker, saying that "while she appreciated my wishing to clarify my own attitude it was not possible for the A.F.L. to dissociate themselves from both sides in their campaign."⁹¹ Ashwell, who in June 1914 was to acknowledge that militant methods had played a role in speeding up the campaign, then pleaded the cause of women workers, giving statistics on long hours and small wages. She urged those present "not to be put off by any criticism, but to ask the anti-suffragist to meditate on the question, and get her to realise that the one thing necessary to the women of this country was the vote" (*Era* 10/5/13).⁹²

⁹¹*To Tell My Story*, London, op.cit., p.83-4.

⁹²The programme/platform layout leaflet for this event included an advertisement for Adola Ltd of 21 South Molton Street, London, for the LENA POCKET BEAUTY CASE, a make-up bag with contents; designed and used by Lena Ashwell. (Arncliffe Sennett collection, op.cit.). From a contemporary point of view, Ashwell's involvement in the promotion of beauty products is in conflict with her views on equality for women and her statements made over time about actresses not being regarded as only worthy of notice if beautiful, however, the "Lena' pocket case was intended as a practical item for 'travelling and motoring' and at the time would not have appeared out of character.

Figure 23: Advertisement for the 'Lena' pocket beauty case in AFL programme, Drury Lane Meeting, 2 May 1913. (Arncliffe Sennett collection, British Library)

The Arncliffe Sennett collection in the British Library includes many cuttings, pamphlets and letters giving a clear indication of the passions and rising frustration in relation to negotiation versus militarism. Much damage was done by suffragettes to property, including a bomb at St Paul's Cathedral and, in March 1914, to paintings in the National Gallery. A month after the Drury Lane meeting, suffragette Emily Davison was injured by the King's horse during the Derby at Epsom, when she ran onto the course as a protest: she became a martyr to the cause when she died on 8 June.

June 1913 was a high profile month for Ashwell; on 5 June she addressed the Suffrage Club on the many inequalities between men and women on the stage, particularly in relation to payment, the need to dress fashionably and touring conditions; on 6 June she chaired the AFL meeting at the Criterion on the subject of the White Slave Traffic Bill; and on 10 June her part in a deputation from the Women's Tax Resistance League to the Treasury, on the subject of the taxation of married women, was widely reported.⁹³ Seven women met with Chancellor, Lloyd George, to point out the injustice arising out of the anomalous condition of the income tax law not having been brought into line with the recent Married Women's Property Act. The deputation considered it an indignity that a married woman was not considered properly to be responsible for her own affairs and urged that husbands and wives should be treated as separate taxable units. Ashwell, in what was reported as a 'clever' and 'amusing' speech, explained that after fifteen years of paying tax on her own earnings, this year the tax papers were made out to and sent instead to her husband at her place of business, the Kingsway Theatre. She was referred to in brackets as '(for wife)'. She explained that her husband

had never been an actor... nor her manager, and had no desire to study the workings of a profession in which she had already made sums on which she had paid a considerable amount in income-tax before she was aware of his existence, although he assured her he was aware of hers. [*Laughter.*] While appreciating his talents, she could assure the Chancellor of the Exchequer that he would be quite incapable of giving a just return to the Government of her work, or the money she had made by it. If she was not a person, but an appendage, it should be impossible for her to be on the list of taxpayers. Surely anything which was simply a parenthesis should not be on the list of those who supported the expenses of this great nation.

(*Westminster Gazette* 10/6/13)

Other members of the delegation gave examples of indignities and injustice and Lloyd George promised, without conviction, to consider the points raised.

At the July 1913 AGM Ashwell was elected to the AFL Executive Committee (while retaining a Vice Presidency). It was reported that there were seven hundred and sixty members, and that the League had joined the newly formed Federated Council of Suffrage Societies with Winifred Mayo appointed delegate

⁹³Women were required to pay tax on their earnings although without the vote had no say in how this was spent. Tax resistance was initiated by the Women's Freedom League in 1908, with the separate Women's Tax Resistance League being formed in 1909/10 for the specific purpose of organising and co-ordinating tax resistance. (Constance Rover, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain 1866-1914*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967, p.31.)

to this Council. *Votes for Women* published *A Conversation with Miss Lena Ashwell – Diversities of Gifts but the Same Spirit*, in which she is quoted:

Imagination is quite a modern thing, don't you think? Oh, yes; of course, great people have always had imagination - but not the common folk. Today the growth of imagination is going on in all classes; people are learning to visualise things, and so all sorts of old bad systems have got to go. The penal system, for instance. It was only possible when people had no imagination; it cannot be endured any longer, now that people can visualise it. (4/7/13)

As a working woman she considered that it was “through work people find themselves” (ibid) and that you cannot “have a fine race of men when these very men are occupied in making slaves of their women” (ibid). She declared she was not an advocate of militancy (“I haven't the temperament for it”), but recognised the power of some of their tactics and could “see that it is horribly difficult to view things fairly when we are right in the middle of them... and that it is impossible for all women to work in the same way for their freedom” (ibid).

As in previous years, the summer months in 1913 provided outdoor and high profile opportunities for suffrage demonstrations which included the non-party National Political League's Great Queen's Hall demonstration on 8 July to denounce the Government's 'cruel and illiberal' Cat and Mouse Coercion,⁹⁴ for which Ashwell was listed as a supporter;⁹⁵ a further demonstration in Hyde Park; and the arrival in London on 18 July of a deputation of borough councillors from Edinburgh and other northern towns, intent on interviewing Mr Asquith on the subject of women's suffrage. This deputation was entertained by the Actresses' Franchise League and the Men's League for Women's Suffrage⁹⁶ at the Knightsbridge Palace Hotel on 18 July, at which Ashwell, with Eva Moore, Charlotte Shaw and others, played hostess. As well as taking refreshments and entertainment, the assembled passed a resolution that, “This meeting considers that Mr Asquith has violated the principles of democracy and calls upon him to resign the great office he has degraded.”⁹⁷

In May, *Votes for Women* had announced plans for a Co-operative Theatrical Scheme for Women, organised by AFL Play Department manager and playwright, Inez Bensusan. The aim was to have the whole operation, including eventually a theatrical agency, run by women, with the

most original part... [being] the financial side... based on the co-operative principle, so that not only will individual guarantors have a share in the profits... but if tickets

⁹⁴The 'Cat and Mouse' Act (Prisoners' Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Act) introduced in 1913, followed on from the suffragette hunger strikes in prison. The Act enabled the Home Secretary to release any prisoner whose health was suffering, and to re-arrest her on recovery (K.W.W. Aikin, *The Last Years of Liberal England 1900-1914*, London, Collins, 1972, p.133).

⁹⁵Arncliffe Sennett collection, op.cit.

⁹⁶The Men's League for Women's Suffrage was formed in 1907 under the presidency of Lord Lytton, whose sister Lady Constance Lytton, was one of the best known imprisoned suffragette hunger strikers.

⁹⁷Arncliffe Sennett collection, op.cit.

are bought in larger quantities by Suffrage Societies and sold again at ordinary theatre prices to their members, the Societies will gain a double profit. (23/5/13)

Once expenses were covered, all profits would be divided between the AFL and other guarantor suffrage societies. As its first big project, the Woman's Theatre had booked the Court Theatre for a week during the autumn with Ashwell cast in the lead of Brieux's play *La Femme Seule*, translated from the French by Charlotte Shaw. So, apart from giving interviews for the *Era* (12/11/13, and *Flair* (14/11/13); lecturing on Women and Work at the Women's Institute on 12 November; chairing an AFL meeting at the Shaftesbury Theatre on 18 November, and playing hostess at the Theatrical Ladies Guild Albert Hall Tea party on 21 November, Ashwell was preparing the role of Therese, a woman on her own.

Ashwell introduced the well attended AFL Shaftesbury Theatre 18 November 1913 meeting as a 'remarkable' one - it was the first time, at such a meeting in support of female suffrage, that all the speakers were men, including author Roy Horniman, Professor Bickerton from New Zealand, a church minister from Leicester, and theatrical figures Ben Webster, F. Whelen and Israel Zangwill. She hoped the support of men would enable women to be given recognition of their citizenship - "they had arrived, and now they only asked for the recognition of their arrival" (*Era* 19/11/13). An appeal was made for funds to help the cause and Ashwell announced the forthcoming Woman's Theatre season at the Coronet Theatre, changed from the previously announced Court Theatre.

Brieux's play, *Woman on Her Own*, was not generally well received by the theatre critics at its 8 December opening. The *Times* considered the play might be called "'Round the Woman Question in two and a half Hours'. The author seems to have looked up all the disabilities, real or imaginary, under which women labour in our modern society, and to have determined that his heroine shall endure them all" (9/12/13). The *Daily Chronicle* could not understand why Ashwell had consented

to enunciate this doctrine of inferiority... she is herself a direct contradiction of the author's argument. Success by her own effort has been hers; she has shown herself enterprising and capable until she stands today as the woman's representative of her profession. No slight achievement this. (11/12/13)

There was praise for the production but not the play. Brieux's Therese, suddenly made penniless by an unscrupulous (male) lawyer and therefore no longer a suitable wife for her loved, but weak, fiance, is forced onto her own resources. She works first in journalism, for a women's magazine, but is forced to leave when the editor makes advances towards her and pay and conditions are made worse. She then works in a book binding factory, and organises the women into a union to obtain better conditions. When the men threaten violence and damage, her boss is forced to make her leave and at the end of the play she is to return to Paris - either to live as mistress to her fiance because they cannot marry without his parents' consent, or to turn to prostitution or some other form of slavery to man. It was a propaganda piece and even *Votes for Women* realised that, "like so many recent dramas, the whole thing is rather a statement of

the difficulty than a solution, and though M. Brieux has attempted to state it honestly, there is over all a sense of hindrance and defeat” (12/12/13).

After a week of performances, mainly to audiences of women, *Woman on Her Own* was succeeded by *A Gauntlet*, a translation of a play by Bjornstjerne Bjornson, originally produced by the Play Actors in February 1913. Set in Sweden, the play “debates the question of whether a virtuous pure-lived girl has the right to demand a clean past record from her future husband as well as his future devotion” (*Era* 17/12/13). While the reality of the girl’s situation is portrayed, there is a hopeful ending, based on understanding and tolerance.

The *Daily Sketch* praised the initial achievements of the Woman’s Theatre, pointing out its development from the work of the AFL and its financial success in covering its expenses before the opening performance. Mention was made of the contributions of Janette Steer, director and Charlotte Shaw, translator, of *Woman on Her Own*; Winifred Mayo who translated *A Gauntlet*, and the actresses, including Cicely Hamilton, Christine Silver and Lilian Waldegrave. However, Ashwell was considered

the most interesting personality of all... she is a happy wife, the best friend in the world, a willing adviser and practical helper to any who seek her aid, an ardent fighter for the woman’s cause, which she says is the only cause worth fighting for, and a charming hostess. She is the busiest woman imaginable, for she is a ‘leading lady’, has a theatre of her own, and an interest in a hat shop, as well as a manicurist’s, and a fine furniture shop⁹⁸ besides being a regular and welcome visitor to women’s hospitals and a labourer for improved conditions for sweated women workers. (11/12/13)

She was also the honorary adjudicator on 17 December for the elocution competition at the Shakespeare Schools, selecting from nineteen reciters, two scholarship winners and commending others. Given the above, it is not surprising that Ashwell was among the thirteen distinguished women from all walks of life, pictured on the front page of the *Daily Sketch* (30/12/13), considered by the newspaper to be suitable for inclusion on the King’s Honours list; at the time (and for another two years), open only to men.

THE UNITED SUFFRAGISTS

In the first half of 1914 there was a considerable increase in activity by the suffragist movement. Ashwell contributed to a reception in aid of the Women Writers’ Suffrage League on 3 February, with Elizabeth Robins, Cicely Hamilton, Evelyn Sharp, John Galsworthy and Alfred Sutro lending their support. There was a demonstration at the Albert Hall in mid February, co-ordinated by the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, and with the establishment of the United Suffragists in February, there were now fifty-three organisations (involving both men and women), listed in the *Votes for Women* Suffrage Directory

⁹⁸There was an article in the *Standard* (31/12/13) describing the furniture shop in South Molton Street, off Oxford Street in the centre of London. The shop, in which Ashwell had a share, was attempting to encourage the

(27/2/14). Ashwell headed the United Suffragists' committee of ten,⁹⁹ who declared that in the short time of its existence the organisation had worked effectively in the Poplar (East London) by-election, helping to reduce the majority of the Liberal candidate by some 1600 votes.

We held daily some six or seven well-attended meetings, we did a vast amount of canvassing, and on the day previous to the poll, a continuous meeting was kept going at the dock gates from 11 am to 8 pm, and we ended our campaign by a united procession and demonstration with the East London Federation of Suffragettes.
(*Votes for Women* 27/2/14)

At this time *Votes for Women*, edited by Evelyn Sharp, became the official organ of the United Suffragists. Ashwell did not explain her reasons for this apparent shift of allegiance from the AFL, although the aims and objectives of the United Suffragists indicate the direction she was taking and by this time the conciliatory approach of the AFL was less effective as the pressure increased to bring matters to a head. The United Suffragists was formed in the belief that men and women could usefully cooperate on equal terms in one organisation for the enfranchisement of women and regarded woman suffrage as the foremost political issue of the day, working without considering the interests of any political party. The organisation recognised the value of various forms of suffrage activity and offered membership to members of other societies (militant or non-militant) as well as hoping to attract those not already enrolled with any group. The intention was to lobby local constituencies to bring pressure to bear on the government; to correct 'journalistic inexactitudes'; and to work in harmony with other leagues, while keeping in view "the important truth that a merry heart goes all the way, and that a spirit of comradeship, good temper and sense of humour has always characterised the Woman's fight for freedom."¹⁰⁰ At this time Ashwell was also supporting an independent proposal to present a deputation to Asquith and the Home Secretary to seek the constitutional cessation of Forcible Feeding¹⁰¹ and the withdrawal of the Cat and Mouse Act. Letters in the Arncliffe Sennett collection indicate that Asquith refused to receive such a deputation and that many of those concerned determined to go to Downing Street on 18 February to petition the Prime Minister with the knowledge that if they resisted the police, they could be arrested. It is unlikely that Ashwell would have taken part, but there is also no evidence in the material available that the action went ahead. Ashwell was a speaker at the votes for women Fellowship meeting at the Kingsway Hall on 26 February, sharing the platform with African explorer and administrator, Sir Harry Johnston; M.P. George Lansbury and Mr Pethick Lawrence. She was also on the platform for the United Suffragists' informal gathering at the Portman Rooms on 20 March.

appreciation and purchase of furniture created by living craftsmen. It should be noted that there is very little surviving information on Ashwell's business initiatives and interests.

⁹⁹The other members of this committee were Mrs H.D. Harben, Evelyn Sharp, Mrs Frederick Whelen, Mrs Ayrton Gould, Mr Gerald Gould, Henry Nevison, John Scurr, Mr H.J. Gillespie and Charles Gray.

¹⁰⁰Arncliffe Sennett collection, op.cit.

¹⁰¹In an attempt to prevent hunger striking, the Government introduced Forcible Feeding, subjecting weak prisoners to cruel and injurious enforced feeding.

On 11 April 1914, while George Bernard Shaw was despairing at the treatment of his play *Pygmalion*,¹⁰² opening in London, his wife Charlotte and Ashwell were en route to America (where already women in ten states had the vote), for a five week holiday. The trip was made with Chicago doctor and philosopher, James Porter Mills and his wife, who called herself 'Healer' and dabbled in Christian Science. Mills lectured in England before the war on his system of thinking and believing about life, which he called the 'Teaching'. Ashwell, and then Charlotte Shaw, espoused the Mills' ideas, even though

Dr Mills was not at all brilliant, not even clever. At times Charlotte thought him a rather snuffy, bad-tempered old man; but he had undeniable 'power,' and he was 'different'. He could not write well, yet in the books which he published, lacking clarity and without any vestige of style, he was able to convey something that caught and held the attention.¹⁰³

Both Shaw and Ashwell became 'disciples' of Mills in England and Charlotte published her understanding of his ideas in the pamphlet, *Knowledge is the Door*, which sold 1000 copies before the outbreak of war.¹⁰⁴

As well as pursuing philosophical interests, while in America they took part in a suffrage procession in Boston; Ashwell describing it as a "tiny, well-ordered body passing through a polite and sympathetic crowd to be received at the Town Hall by the Mayor and Corporation" (*Myself a Player*, p.169). She implies it took place a few months after the march in London in 1910, but there is no evidence that Charlotte Shaw was with her in America in late 1910/early 1911, when Ashwell performed in *Judith Zaraine*. In the light of her observations given when she chaired the United Suffragists' first public meeting at the Portman Rooms at the end of May 1914, it is assumed the Boston march took place in the previous month. For this meeting, *Votes for Women* reported a large attendance with many turned away. Ashwell gave the opening address, describing the organisation's work and commenting on her experience in an America sympathetic to the women's movement. "There was not one sign of the attitude which, believe me, is driving mad the women of this country. There was nothing but interest, respect, and politeness" (*Votes for Women* 29/5/14). She considered the American press to have dealt fairly with the suffrage movement, while

the newspapers here have misrepresented the Suffragists and suppressed news of their constitutional efforts. In America women had constitutional rights even without the

¹⁰²Herbert Beerbohm Tree played Higgins and Mrs Pat Campbell was Eliza. Tree apparently gave an overstated performance which made the production a hit, 'grossing more than £2000 a week', but Shaw gave Tree 'curt advice to stop playing for laughs and to never again play Higgins once the current run ended'. (Stanley Weintraub, *Bernard Shaw 1914-1918, Journey to Heartbreak*, London, Routledge, 1973, p.14.)

¹⁰³Janet Dunbar, *Mrs G.B.S. A Portrait*, New York, Harper & Row, 1963, p.219.

¹⁰⁴This was published in 1914 by A.C.Fifield and reviewed by *The Lady* as "a remarkable little metaphysical treatise... an introduction to the science of self-conscious existence" (29/1/0/14). Ashwell had a new edition of this privately printed and published by J & E Bumpus Ltd., in 1937, which advised that Mills' books could be obtained from the Fellowship of the Way, "founded by Dr Porter Mills, and carried on by Miss Lena Ashwell" at 19 Grosvenor Place, London.

possession of the vote. In this country women's constitutional rights would have to be searched for with a microscope. (ibid)

Other speakers included Evelyn Sharp, Bishop Powell, Edyth Olive and Douglas Eyre. Ashwell became impassioned when speaker Olive Schreiner found it impossible to continue. Schreiner had witnessed the break up by police of a deputation of women outside Buckingham Palace that afternoon and was too distressed by the treatment of the women to continue. Having explained this, Ashwell declared:

When you realise what is going on day by day and hour by hour, then you know what it is that is making militants. [Applause] Whatever your feeling is, whether you approve or disapprove of militancy, whether you are angry or bitter against it, or whether you are only indifferent, believe me, militancy and acts of violence do not arise of themselves, they are the result of other actions, and the whole thing is the result of the position which women are not only in, but kept in. (ibid)

The meeting gave a clear indication of the determination and increasing anger at the Government's intransigence felt by many supporters of the cause - and obviously compelled many like Ashwell to acknowledge the causes of militant action by many of their colleagues. A few weeks later the *Era* quoted Ashwell's response to French singer Yvette Guilbert,¹⁰⁵ who when asked to speak at a United Suffragists' meeting, declared she would speak, "provided that you pledge your militant sisters to call a truce and to abstain from any act of violence or hostile demonstration up to that date" (17/6/14). Ashwell stated,

I do not belong to a militant society, and have no control over my militant sisters. I hold, however, a strong belief that active efforts on the part of every non militant Suffragist to obtain suffrage rights for women will eventually force those prejudiced or obtusely indifferent to realise the vital necessity for this reform. Only the courageous can put an end to militancy by publicly asserting their belief in women's suffrage, and taking active steps to redress the evils of which militancy is the hideous result. (ibid)

Guilbert did speak at the meeting, chaired by Ashwell, on 7 July which was entitled *How to Stop Militancy!* This was part of a week-long programme during which women from British dominions overseas were in London to see the suffragist movement in action (*Daily Herald* 8/7/14).

Apart from a 'peaceful' event for the Poetry Society on 7 June 1914, when Ashwell was a reader of poems to celebrate the hundred years of peace between England and America¹⁰⁶, her energies at this time

¹⁰⁵Yvette Guilbert (1865-1944) was a well-known figure in the music hall, bringing to the popular stage a new style of delivery, precise diction, and an intelligent appraisal of the potential of vocal material. She was immortalised by Toulouse-Lautrec in many paintings and sketches. She gave many lecture-recitals of *chansons* on tour between 1901 and 1914 - presumably the reason she was in England in 1914 at the time of the United Suffragists meeting. (*Oxford Companion to Theatre*, op.cit. p.360). She and Ashwell became friends as well as colleagues; Guilbert stayed with Ashwell when she visited London.

¹⁰⁶This organisation was founded as the Poetry Recital Society in February 1909. Ashwell was an active member, one of many vice-presidents between 1909 and 1928, along with many theatre colleagues such as Ellen Terry, Israel Zangwill, Frank Benson, John Galsworthy, H. Beerbohm Tree. (Poetry Society archives, London). Throughout her career Ashwell gave many recitals, usually of poetry rather than theatrical excerpts.

were fully focussed on the suffragist cause. Support came from many quarters – some, like actor Laurence Irving, speaking in Vancouver, anticipated success for female suffrage in England¹⁰⁷. He acknowledged that militancy had forced the male population to take notice of the women’s demands. He expressed the sadly futile hope that the vote for women would come in time to

relieve the terrible state of warlike preparation in Europe. The maternal instinct, which is stronger than the paternal, will make women hesitate and demand substantial reasons before sending their sons on some fantastic errand of death. The power of the manufacturer of armaments to work to bring about wars will be robbed of its strength.¹⁰⁸

Every opportunity to put forward the cause was seized. On 22 June 1914 Ashwell’s letter to the *Daily Chronicle* on *Woman Suffrage and the Referendum* was published. Protesting at the suggestion by Lord Murray that a referendum be held to decide on the vote for women, she declared

Our claim is not based on opinion, but on the principles of liberty and justice. Woman suffrage is an immediate political necessity... We are an inarticulate half of the community - workers, wage earners and taxpayers - and not only have a right to, but need the vote.¹⁰⁹

Ashwell had found her voice, determination and stamina, necessary resources for the next phase of her life.

Maintaining her links with things theatrical, she attended an entertainment and pageant, devised by Edith Craig, of *Famous Men and Women Through the Ages*, and arranged by the Joint Committee of the AFL and the Women Writers’ Suffrage League at the Hotel Cecil at the end of June; and in early July she made a brief visit to Bristol to address the Playgoers’ Club where she declared that “there were two forces now striking her with equal power - the theatre and the cause of women throughout the world” (*Era* 8/7/14). Ashwell praised the work and plans of Muriel Pratt, the director of the Theatre Royal, who was working to achieve a serious repertory programme for which Ashwell urged support.

THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

Then the worst fears of many were realised: war was declared on Germany at 11 pm on 4 August 1914 and on Austria-Hungary on 10 August. With amazing rapidity Ashwell, actresses Decima and Eva Moore and Gertrude Kingston formed the Women’s Emergency Corps and established a temporary office in

¹⁰⁷Laurence Sidney Irving (1871-1914), was an actor, playwright and younger son of Henry Irving, for whom he wrote *Peter the Great* (1898). His wife was the actress Mabel Hackney with whom he toured in Canada and the USA. This address was given prior to his embarkation on the ill-fated *Empress of Ireland*. He and his wife were drowned when the ship sank following a collision in the St Lawrence River.

¹⁰⁸The *Suffragette* 5/6/14 - reproduced from the *Vancouver Daily Province*.

¹⁰⁹As a footnote to Ashwell’s letter, the *Daily Chronicle* editor stated, ‘The Referendum as applied to woman suffrage has been considered by Liberals several times, and rejected, and Lord Murray would not have revived the

Robert Street, Adelphi. Letters, dated August 7, were sent to the daily papers and a public meeting convened at the Shaftesbury Theatre for 3 pm that day. The Corps' first task was to create a register, for use by any authority requiring such services, of all women and their particular skills, who wished to help the war effort. The classification list included cooks, interpreters, crèche and mother carers, stores distributors, clothing collectors and distributors, carers of horses and riders, motor drivers and "all women trained in any capacity" (*Morning Post* 8/8/14). On the first day of registration, many hundreds of women offered their services and the issue of women suffrage took a back seat while Britons adjusted to a changed world.

A series of circular letters written in August 1914 indicate the concerns and progress of the Women's Emergency Corps. Many well known suffrage workers immediately devoted their energy to the Corps, whose major concern was the daily growing unemployment amongst young women, whose male counterparts were, of course, enlisting in the armed forces. Within a few weeks over three thousand offers of help from women had been received, with over half of these classified and registered on a card index. "We are making a special point of so organising and controlling voluntary service that there shall be no interference with the paid labour market."¹¹⁰

The Corps was at pains also not to interfere with or supersede the relief work undertaken by existing societies and sought cooperation while aiming "to be representative of every shade of opinion and every class of woman" (ibid). The *Bristol Evening News*' editorial, detailing the many ways women could help to enable active men to join the fighting forces, reported that the WEC now had ten thousand women registered and that Government departments, railway companies, and business houses had been informed of the competent unemployed women on their books, ready to carry out work previously done by men (4/9/14).

In addition to the WEC, Ashwell established the Three Arts Club Emergency Relief Fund for women, recognising early on that arts workers would be particularly hard hit by the impact of war on employment opportunities. As the *Era* editorial noted "we have to face a financial upheaval such as has never been known in the world of commerce, and even in the homes of prosperous business men there will have to be a rigid cutting down of luxuries, of which amusement is one of the chief" (12/8/14).

Although August was traditionally a time when many London theatres were closed for the summer (with productions moving to provincial theatres), suggestions were being made to halve admission prices and actors' salaries - already many were on the breadline, so the fund was an important initiative. Working in cooperation with other organisations such as the Actors' Benevolent Fund, the aims were to help those in

suggestion had not his absence in Colombia and elsewhere left him out of touch with the progress of political events in England.'

¹¹⁰ Arncliffe Sennett collection, op.cit.

urgent need to obtain paid employment of all kinds; to give training for such employment and maintenance when required; and to obtain grants from existing funds for the relief of such cases, and to administer such grants. For extreme cases money and food was also available. Like many other organisations at this time, it called for donations, offers of work and help in kind. By the middle of August, variety theatre managers and artistes had arranged a cooperative scheme with receipts being divided equally between them; and theatre goers were being asked to support their theatres as various companies devised ways to maintain their work (*Era* 19/8/14).

On September 2 the *Era* announced its own War Distress Fund to provide immediate help for those in the profession; theatres were donating performance proceeds to the fund, and well known actors were sending money. All donations were listed in editions of the *Era*. Ashwell was chair of the Committee established to decide to whom support would be given; any application had to have a reference from a theatre manager. There was no doubt the profession was rallying to help its own; the initiators of these schemes were well known, respected and given the involvement of people like Ashwell in a variety of guises, no doubt well co-ordinated. The *Leicester Daily Post* noted that “distress in the theatrical profession” (27/10/14), was not to be included in the scope of the National Relief Fund and encouraged the public to support the profession’s activities, such as the Woman’s Theatre plan for a variety week at the Coronet Theatre at the end of November for which Ashwell was listed as one of “an imposing host of contributors” (ibid).

Given the work situation for artists, in hindsight it seems logical to suggest they be employed to boost morale by providing entertainment for the troops, and Ashwell was one of the first to suggest this could be possible. However, when writing about her war work, she explains the situation -

in October 1914 I tried very hard to get the entertainment of troops put on national lines, and was interviewed several times on the scheme of ‘every camp its own theatre’, and the organising of the work by professional actors, but there was little interest shown. This effort, meeting with no success, was followed by the formation of a Representative Committee - which I invited to organise an appeal to the War Office - a gathering together of noted musicians and actors, with representative Generals and Bishops of the Church as a guarantee of our respectability and good faith. An appeal was formulated and sent to the War Office that recreation should be organised, that the movement should be national, as national as the Red Cross, but our offer was refused.
(*Modern Troubadours*, p.5)

She described herself as ‘sad and disheartened’ by this and ‘threw more energy than ever into the work of the Women’s Emergency Corps.’ Of this organisation Ashwell writes that “when I read the first six months’ Report [of WEC], it takes my breath away; the tremendous amount of work that was done, and the way that it gave birth to many greater efforts - the National Food Fund, the Women’s Legion, the Women’s Volunteer Reserve, amongst many others” (ibid).

Once the organisation was operational in London, Ashwell and Eva Moore spoke at meetings in Bristol and Newcastle where provincial branches of the Corps were set up. On 27 March 1915 the *Ladies Field* reported there were now fifteen branches across the country, dealing with local conditions but working closely with the London headquarters. Then,

on one never-to-be-forgotten day, when I had quite lost hope of the drama and music of the country being regarded as anything but useless, Lady Rodney called on behalf of the Women's Auxiliary Committee of the Y.M.C.A. [Young Men's Christian Association]. She had just returned from France, and came from Her Highness Princess Helena Victoria, Chairman of the Committee, to ask if it was possible for a concert party to go to Havre. (ibid, p.6)

Given Ashwell's connections and friendship with members of the royal family, particularly Marie Louise, it is possible to imagine the scenario where she told the Princess of her despair and desire to help the troops and artists and this was eventually transformed into a request from Helena Victoria which was less easy for officials to ignore. Ashwell describes how she obtained support from a friend to cover the expenses of the first concert party and how Princess Helena Victoria and her Committee made arrangements with the War Office, "owing to the very suffering state of the men at the Base Camps who had passed through a very difficult period of fighting, and were to be at the Base for rest and further training, this experiment of sending recreation should be made" (ibid).

At this stage it was only a tentative experiment, with conditions including no advertisement or making use of the situation to aggrandize one's professional popularity. All artists had to be known and guaranteed as suitable by Ashwell and were to become known to Her Highness who was personally responsible for them and their conduct.

They were to work with the Y.M.C.A., who would look after the billeting arrangements in France, and places, times, etc., for the concerts... There were grave doubts on the part of the Y.M.C.A. ...I think some expected us to land in France in tights, with peroxidized hair, and altogether to be a difficult thing for a religious organisation to camouflage. Some good things did come to us through the war, and one of them was the breaking down of barriers due to misunderstanding.

(*Modern Troubadours*, p.7)

So, as Britain embarked on a destructive war which was to last for five years and cause incalculable loss and pain, the many 'battles' fought by Ashwell and her colleagues during the years 1908 to 1914 had prepared them for major physical and mental challenges to which they rose with exceptional energy and determination. As a theatre manager, actress, suffragist, spokesperson and fighter for the recognition of the full capabilities of women in society, Ashwell had emerged a leader. The conditions of war shifted many previous male dominated responsibilities onto women: responsibilities which Ashwell embraced. Priorities were identified and pursued very quickly by these women; militant suffragettes became committed war workers or recognised that their activities were no longer appropriate, while the non-militant suffragists, including Ashwell, set about to change for ever attitudes which had relegated women to a secondary, and usually a merely domestic, role in society.

CHAPTER THREE: 1915 to 1919 The War Years - 'Patriot'

THE CONCERT PARTIES

Ashwell spent most of January 1915 in preparation for the first Concert Party visit to France, while rehearsing the role of Margaret Knox in the Harley Granville Barker/ Lillah McCarthy revival of Shaw's 1911 work, *Fanny's First Play*, which opened at the Kingsway on 13 February. On 14 January she played an 'extra' (in the drawing room scene at Lady Sneerwell's) at a special matinee performance of Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* at the Opera House, Covent Garden. Attended by the King and Queen, it was a fund raising event to increase the depleted coffers of the Actors' Benevolent Fund. It was yet another example of the theatrical profession rallying to help, with a star studded cast raising more than £2000 for colleagues in need.

Fanny's First Play opened to mixed reviews. Shaw as a social commentator was not in favour at this time¹ and although Charlotte Shaw attended, he did not. As with the original production, the author's name was not included on the programme - Shaw declared in the published Preface that,

concealment of the authorship... was a necessary part of the play. In so far as it was effectual, it operated as a measure of relief to those critics and playgoers who were so obsessed by my strained legendary reputation that they approach my plays in a condition which is really one of derangement, and are quite unable to conceive a play of mine as anything but a trap baited with paradoxes, and designed to compass their ethical perversion and intellectual confusion.²

The world had changed greatly since that first production (also at the Kingsway, in January 1911) and while many critics still found it amusing and well played, the *Observer* considered "the matter seems out of date and the fun like the crackling of thorns under a pot" (14/2/15), and the *Times* that

it may seem to the judicious that the moment is not happily chosen for resuming the old Shavian capers, which were among the strangest by-products of a long peace. The fun of travestied facts and lopsided judgments then agreeably stimulated a languid world... But today we have to be at grips with facts. (15/2/15)

Ashwell's performance was praised,

she may not look eighteen, but she looks every inch the rebel and she employs all that nervous force of hers, all her passionate intensity, all those bursts of feminine indignation and all those quick changes of mood she has always at her service to render the scenes in which the girl figures natural and charming. (*Sunday Times* 14/2/15)

Two days after the Kingsway opening, the first concert party left for France, consisting, as was the future pattern, of a soprano, contralto, instrumentalist, tenor, baritone/bass, and entertainer. Theodore Flint, musical director and accompanist, had gone ahead in January to make the arrangements. (He was based in

¹The *Times* review was headed: "Untimely Shaw Revival at the Kingsway" (15/02/15).

France, booking accommodation and arranging transport and joined each party on its arrival.) The ensemble gave its first ‘Concert at the Front’ on February 18, at No. 15 Camp in the Harfleur Valley. In fifteen days they presented thirty-nine concerts, including a special performance in the Theatre Folies-Bergere in Rouen on 24 February, the proceeds of which were donated to the widow of a Belgian killed in an accident involving a British motor lorry.³

Before visiting France to see her idea at work, Ashwell continued the role of Fanny until 27 March. At the same time she began the enormous task of auditioning and selecting artists (in collaboration with a committee acceptable to the YMCA and including Sir Charles Santley and Mr Gleeson White), promoting awareness of the Concerts at the Front and raising the money to continue them. Later, these activities took her all over the country and needed considerable stamina and commitment. She was anxious to learn how the artists were faring, and letters she received in late February were heartening. Printed copies of these, headed ‘For Private Circulation’, and included in her scrapbooks at the Imperial War Museum, were obviously used to further the cause. Theodore Flint wrote from Le Havre on 21 February:

You asked me to let you know about each individual. It is very difficult to answer, as they are all so excellent in their way, and are all so obliging and charming, and don’t mind a bit how much they sing or what they do... During the songs, or whatever it is, you could hear a pin drop, but when it is all over the roars and yells are simply thrilling... The high boots have been an enormous success; I don’t know what they would have done without them, as the mud has been too awful.

From the British Expeditionary Force Headquarters in Le Havre, a letter from YMCA Head, L.G. Pilkington, thanked Ashwell on behalf of the soldiers and workers for “such a magnificent Concert Party”, whose “success has been perfect in every way” (20/2/15). Early newspaper articles, mostly presumably from press releases issued by Ashwell, made much of the soldiers’ responses and the *Star* quoted an army doctor as saying, “one concert did the wounded men more good than a month’s nursing” (20/3/15).

The first major fund raising event was billed as ‘A Great Matinee Performance at the London Coliseum on Thursday 25 March, in the gracious presence of Her Majesty Queen Mary and in aid of Princess Victoria of Schleswig-Holstein’s Auxiliary Committee of the YMCA for providing Funds for Concerts

²*Misalliance, The Dark Lady of the Sonnets, and Fanny's First Play with a Treatise on Parents and Children* by Bernard Shaw, Brentano's, New York, 1914, p.160.

³It is important to acknowledge that there were many individual and localised initiatives made to entertain the troops during the First World War. Ashwell's was the most wide-ranging and high profile. For information on other activities, the reader is referred to such studies as Larry (L.J.) Collins, *The Function of Theatre Entertainment in the First World War, 1914-1918*, Ph.D Thesis, University of London, 1994 – subsequently published as *Theatre at War, 1914-18*, London, Macmillan, 1997, and J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990. This latter publication makes no reference to Ashwell.

Figure 24: Poster for the first Concert Party to visit Rouen, France, February 1915. (Mander & Mitchenson collection)

for the troops at the Hospitals and Recreation Huts in England and France.’ Oswald Stoll, manager at the Coliseum, secured a company of star artists, who, if they had received their usual rates, would have cost over £5,000 (*Standard* 20/3/15).

Every seat was sold in advance for the four and a half hour long programme which included many party pieces by well known performers, including Ashwell’s former husband, Arthur Playfair. Over £1450 was raised towards Concert Party expenses, which at this time amounted to £25 per week, per party. Concert Party members’ expenses were covered and some were given small amounts towards expenses at home. At the end, Ashwell announced to the large audience that the first party had returned, a second was currently in France and a third, which included already well-known pianist and composer, Ivor Novello, whose *Keep the Home Fires Burning* was an instant hit, would depart in early April. Meanwhile, many concerts were also being presented in England at bases and training camps.

As part of her campaign to ensure support for the Concerts at the Front, Ashwell went into print in a number of newspapers. Her article, *Singing Them To Berlin, What the Royal Matinee Means to Our Men* (*Echo and Evening Chronicle*, 24/3/15), explained progress to date and the work of the Three Arts Club Employment Committee, through whom initially artists were identified and contacted for the Concerts⁴, and whose workshops were accommodating many women making soft toys, greeting cards and novelties for sale, as well as knitting under contract for the Army. The Committee had a special ‘house warming’ event on March 30 to celebrate its activities. Ashwell described the success of the concerts and the value of music:

The warmth of our reception shows how great a help music is, and, being a help, that it ought to be used. In the matter of recruiting, for example, the authorities have been slow to recognise that an appeal could be made to people through bands... it is such a splendid thing that artists should be of use in wartime. We ought to be used... We ought to be treated as just as important a part of the community as any other. (ibid)

She developed this argument in *Laughing to Hide Our Tears, A Famous Actress Vigorously Defends London Against The Charge of Levity*, when she defended the instinct to seek “gaiety, joy and laughter” (*Illustrated Sunday Herald* 28/3/15), in theatres, music halls and dances in order to deal sanely with the terrible pain of war and to face again hardships having been “invigorated, refreshed, and stronger for the mere change of outlook” (ibid).

In the last week of the run of *Fanny's First Play*, it was announced in the press that after just over four years of management, the Granville Barkers’ tenancy at the Kingsway would finish, and that Ashwell had negotiated a new sub-lease with Messrs. Vedrenne and Eadie (already producing at the Royalty Theatre),

⁴In *Modern Troubadours* Ashwell explains, “In the storm and stress of those days, disagreements and misunderstandings grew up, which in days of peace might have been avoided. After a few months it seemed better to organise the work independently. I resigned as Governor and withdrew from the Club, and... carried on the work from the Kingsway and my own home, and afterwards at 44 South Molton Street” (p.110).

whose first production would be *Advertisement* by B. Macdonald Hastings, opening in mid April. With such arrangements concluded, Ashwell was free to travel to France and join her Concert Party. It was a brief visit during which she recited at eighteen concerts. Describing the experience in the *Globe*, she said “I have never felt so proud of being an Englishwoman and I never longed so ardently to be an Englishman. Oh! if I could make the laggards at home see, in their mind’s eye, something of what I have seen!” (7/4/15).

When speaking to the *Globe*, Ashwell also stated she had returned convinced that “we are the most music-loving people in the world” (ibid). William Robinson, a member of one of the concert parties, was given a supply of mouth organs by the journal *Musical News* and after playing one during each concert, left it with the best player (or soldier most in need of cheering up) in each hut or ward to continue music making in the camps. Ashwell’s scrapbook for 1915 includes copies of letters published by the journal (8/4/15), describing the response to the distribution of such simple instruments which symbolised comfort and comradeship throughout the war.⁵

In early April, after an overnight boat journey from Le Havre, Ashwell went straight into rehearsals for a short melodramatic play, *The Debt*, by W.T. Coleby at the Coliseum. *The Debt* was on the variety bill at the Coliseum and the first performance on 19 April marked Ashwell’s debut there. Ashwell played the role of a Secret Service Department woman, who, having lost a brother to the Prussians, got her revenge by hunting down and disabling a gun set up by a German intent on destroying Admiralty House and the entire British Cabinet. The *Daily Chronicle* review considered she had abandoned “her usual hurried manner of speaking... and bravely dispensing with other precious Ashwellisms unfitted to melodrama, holds her audience in an unrelaxing grip throughout the piece” (20/4/15). Given the insubstantial nature of the piece (although written by a friend for her), in normal circumstances it is unlikely Ashwell would have appeared in a mixed programme at the Coliseum. However, this was wartime and it is likely she considered the subject matter appropriately positive and morale boosting and that her appearances at a popular venue such as the Coliseum would give her more opportunities to promote her war work while not taking too much of her time or energy. At this time there were many articles, repeated in regional newspapers, about the work of the Concert Parties and the Three Arts Club Women’s Employment Fund, with pleas for financial contributions (eg. *Ladies’ Field* 17/4/15). Except for the 23 April Shakespeare birthday celebrations, of which there were very few - Ashwell appeared in a scene from *Macbeth* and recited at Lilian Baylis’ Victoria Theatre and for the Urban Club Shakespearean Festival at the Holborn Restaurant - most events were fund raisers for war causes.

On 1 May 1915, *Land and Water* published *Charity at Home*, a letter from Ashwell and Elizabeth Asquith appealing for support and describing their work, set up “so that the rank and file of our profession

should be able to live without losing their self-respect.” The readers were advised of the shop in Baker Street where goods made by the Three Arts workers could be purchased and informed of Royal encouragement for the project. As well as seeking funds for her own work, Ashwell lent her support to a Guildhall concert on 4 May for the Belgian and Serbian Relief Fund and sold flags on 12 May during the Russian Flag Day to aid wounded soldiers of one of Britain’s allies.

She also recited Elizabethan love lyrics, with Stanley Hawley at the piano, during the varied ‘Motherhood Matinee’ programme at the Haymarket Theatre on June 1 to raise funds for the Women’s League of Service. Once again the list of participants read like a ‘Who’s Who’ of the theatre of the time. It cannot be stressed too much what an extraordinary contribution the theatrical profession was making to a war-torn society at this time. At last it seemed that the imagination, energy and sense of purpose shown by members of such organisations as the Actresses’ Franchise League, although in retrospect recognised as inevitable, was making an impact on the awareness of other women who had only twelve months before led glamorous and comparatively frivolous and easy lives.

The press, perhaps because they lacked news on men in other than war roles, were running a variety of articles on women behind the scenes in the theatre, focussing on the less glamorous aspects. As Cecil Chisholm observed, “At the present time the majority of the repertory playhouses are under the guidance of women. And that guidance is not merely nominal; it is active, practical, complete” (*Women and the Theatre, Lady's Pictorial*, 15/5/15). The *Sheffield Telegraph* praised Lilian Baylis’s management of the Royal Victoria Hall (Old Vic Theatre) as a “successful experiment in South London” (13/4/15), and the *Daily Chronicle* featured British Women Dramatists, giving a brief historical account of women writers, many obliged to work under male pseudonyms, who had produced successful plays before Cicely Hamilton (22/5/15).

Ashwell travelled again overnight to France on June 4 to work with her concert parties. A characteristic parting remark was published in the *Glasgow Evening Citizen*, “Do believe, all of you who can get amusement and change whenever you wish, that the men who are working for Britain live in grey monotony and need the recreation we are giving them” (6/6/15).

While she was somewhere in France, her colleagues in London, Elizabeth Asquith and Cicely Gleeson-White, sent letters in which Ashwell was included as a signatory, to most of the country’s newspapers, describing the work of the Concert parties and seeking further funds to cover the weekly concert party cost now put at £50. At this time, as the *Dublin Evening Mail* explained, “in addition to the concerts arranged in various hospitals and military centres at home, about once a fortnight a concert party of six goes to France, where three concerts a day are given for a fortnight or three weeks at the large Base

⁵For more information on the impact of the mouth organ /harmonica in wartime, see Ray Grieve, *A Band in a Waistcoat Pocket*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1995.

Figure 25: Concert Party at the Front. (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 10 August 1915)

depots” (18/6/15). In this way over 300 concerts employing some 250 artists had already been given, and “we calculate that we have given entertainment to some 300,000 troops” (*Bristol Times & Mirror*, 15/6/15).

Ashwell was back in England in late June arranging the publication of her impressions of *Behind the Trenches, The Strangest Concert Tour in History* (*Daily Chronicle* 30/6/15), and *Our Concerts in France, The ‘Good Night’ Match Line*, describing the lighting of matches by the men, in pitch darkness, to show the artists the way to their vehicles after a concert (*Evening News* 29/6/15). In addition, many papers published another account, her *Somewhere in France* letter. In *Modern Troubadours* Ashwell explains that to use indoor events to raise money in London in the summer would not have been successful so, “getting up at four o’clock in the morning so as to ensure some complete quiet, I tried to put an account of my experiences in writing. The Press was good enough to publish these efforts... and in a very short time... I received close upon a thousand pounds” (p.34).

Overall some £100,000 was raised between 1915 and 1919 with the concerts increasing greatly in numbers, indicating that Ashwell was using the right methods to sustain her cause. The response of the soldiers obviously greatly impressed and inspired Ashwell and she wrote at length about the impact music had on the men. She also went to the press to publish her articles about the Three Arts Club Employment Fund dollmaking workshops and to promote sales of the work produced, in space lent by retailer George Selfridge until the end of the war. The making of soft toys involved women otherwise ‘unemployable’ through lack of skills or mobility,

We are very proud of the excellent work which is turned out by our workers, who were entirely unused to machining and toy making. The most fascinating products of our toy factory - the penguins and ‘cuddley’ dolls - not only win everybody’s hearts, but they won professional congratulation at the Board of Trade’s British Industries Fair... our workrooms are not yet self supporting... the training we give the unskilled is the most valuable part of our work, [but] it is expensive, as we pay a living minimum wage, while the inexperienced beginner is learning - and learning a handicraft means spoiling material steadily for some weeks... At present we have 83 women and girls... the failure of the Russian Opera Season at the end of one week after six weeks' rehearsals brought many more singers to us in distress.
(*Daily Chronicle*, 22/6/15)

Many of the toys, together with donated memorabilia, were sold and auctioned at special lunch and tea events at the Savoy Hotel in early July.

From the press cuttings in Ashwell’s scrapbooks for this period, it is obvious her name was never out of the news. Regional interest and involvement in her work was growing with articles such as *Cheering Up Tommies, Concerts That are Better than Physic, Gift from Home - Miss Lena Ashwell's experiences in France* (*Newcastle Illustrated Chronicle* 1/7/15) and, as evidenced by her being invited to speak at a patriotic and recruiting meeting held by the 4th Battalion of the London Regiment at the Royal Institute of

British Architects in early July, she was recognised as a positive force with first hand experience of the difficulties faced by soldiers and war workers.

Her willingness to give time and energy to many causes saw her performing in a mainly Polish company at the Bechstein Hall on June 29, to raise funds following Paderewski's appeal for Poland, and in July she was hosting (it appears free of charge), J.T.Grein's Independent War Players for two weeks at the Kingsway in four short French plays, prior to their tour of French and Belgian bases in England.⁶

She wrote a letter to the *Times*, headed *Music and Men*, announcing the presentation to date of four hundred concerts in eleven centres in France and the dispatch of the eighth concert party, which, without more support, could be the last. "Though we have also given a large number of concerts in England, we have realized the greater necessity to be at the front, and our committee has decided to leave other organizations to deal with the work at home, while we concentrate on France (with an eye on the Dardanelles)" (5/7/15). Lena Ashwell Concert Parties continued to perform in England for fund raising events throughout the war, but these events were organised by others.

She went into print again in an article with the self explanatory heading, *Talks with the Wounded Tommies in Hospital in Flanders - Look forward to a Concert as eagerly as Children. Loch Lomond the Favourite Song. By Lena Ashwell*. She promised to personally acknowledge all donations to the fund and by this date was using her home address in Grosvenor Street, central London, as the Concert Parties' office (*Daily Sketch* 12/7/15).

In the August 1915 issue of *The Nineteenth Century*, Ashwell gave her impressions of the first six months of Concerts at the Front. Entitled *With Captains Courageous Somewhere in France*, the article lamented the tendency to regard music as a luxury and artists as useless burdens on the community, but declared, "it is the artists who preserve and express the genius of the race, or the cry of a nation's soul" (pp.344-52). She described concert party visits to various service camps including one for tending horses, another for transport workers, a motor camp and a forage camp (army stores) as well as hospitals and bases from which men left to go to the trenches. In the hospitals she writes of "an atmosphere so impregnated with concentrated pain that at first we are almost afraid to begin" (ibid). She observed they were made not only aware of the suffering of war, but also the dullness and the monotony of the lives of the men.

The violin is what the men like most. Handel's *Largo*, Schubert, dances representing national fetes and folk-songs, and the big simple airs, are more appreciated than any chorus-song... Perhaps in the future good music and good plays will be part of our national scheme of education. In the meantime it seems possible that our national love of the beautiful has been under-estimated. (ibid)

⁶Grein was the dramatic critic who rarely praised Ashwell as an actress in earlier times. She apparently did not bear a grudge.

Figure 26: Poster for March 1915 'Grand Concerts'. (Imperial War Museum, Ashwell scrapbook)

In this article Ashwell effectively conveys the purpose of, and response to, the concert parties, with anecdotes and quotes from the military. Following its publication, she received a letter, dated 7 August 1915, from Ruth Wright who was returning from London to her home in New York:

I feel as if you had taken me with you... it is a beautiful article, which compels tears and smiles - and a great deal of faith in British mankind... if you would write [an] article, say 1500 or 2000 words, and send it to me... I should see that whatever profits there are would be paid to you for your fund. There is difficulty in getting publication now for anything that directly bears on the war, but if you would develop the theme of the New Spiritual Significance of Suffrage, and the idea that we little people, as you so well put it, are too myopic to see the great purposes of the universe which perhaps initiated the entire suffrage movement for one of the forces of this war, I am sure the article would be of great interest and would present both suffrage and war in a somewhat novel light. You might perhaps tell a little of the actresses and girls of the chorus who are making woolly toys... You might say that all thought of suffrage had long ago been unselfishly postponed until England should be out of danger, that these women who had worked and struggled for women's political power were now placing their experience in organisation and routine-work on the altar of patriotism.⁷

Wright and Ashwell had obviously discussed ways to promote, for fund-raising purposes, the work of the concert parties in America. Wright indicates in her letter that Ashwell was ill at this time, reported upon by the *Dover Express*, advising that she was unable to travel to the previous Wednesday's fund raising concert 'Cafe Chantant' at the Dover Town Hall, presented by a Lena Ashwell concert party recently back from France (4/9/15). She did, however, get to Torquay on September 5 to take part in the Pavilion Theatre benefit concert for manager A.M Wilshere, performing material from her repertoire in France and using the opportunity to talk about the work of the concert parties, which by now had given approximately 2,000 concerts to the troops and war workers (*Daily News and Leader* 6/9/15).

By this stage, undaunted by the lack of facilities, the Concert parties were performing one-act plays in their programmes at the base camps, and in September 1915 playwright Gertrude Jennings reported on their success. Her article, *Plays Behind the Firing Line, The Adventures of a Dramatic Party in Ricketty 'Fit-Ups' Without Stage Properties*, provides an entertaining insight into work conditions for the performers.

Never was audacity better rewarded. True... there were no curtains, footlights, dressing rooms or furniture. We dressed in small dark crevices at the side of the stage, our light two guttering candles on a packing case. We had for stage properties three wooden chairs and a scent bottle... What did it matter when we had audiences who thronged to the halls, climbed upon benches and on each other's shoulders, pressed in at the doors, looked in at the windows and laughed and cheered as audiences have never done before!... We gave two performances every night, often in the same camp, the second audience coming in as soon as

⁷In the Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester. No evidence was found of an article published along the lines suggested by Wright – given Ashwell's meticulous keeping of her scrapbooks at this time, it must be assumed either the article was not written or if written, not published. The point of view Wright and Ashwell had discussed, is, however, interesting in indicating their attitudes and their perception of American response to the European situation in 1915.

the first went out... We often gave our first evening performance out of doors... it was not so fearfully hot and [the men] had more room. *(Daily Sketch 20/9/15)*

Jennings' article also refers to a talkative donkey who spoils a love scene, but, like Ashwell, she was inspired by the response and spent much time in France during the war.

While Ashwell was rehearsing for another Coliseum appearance, the *Liverpool Courier* reported the Kingsway production of *Diana of Dobson's* was still touring and currently playing in that city's New Pavilion Theatre (7/9/15). The continuing popularity of the play up to and during the war must have been heartening for Cicely Hamilton, and no doubt financially rewarding for Ashwell. The revival of Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look*, with Ashwell repeating the role she had premiered at the Duke of York's in March 1910, opened at the Coliseum on 13 September 1915 and played in the variety bill for a couple of weeks. "A masterpiece in miniature... a great actress in what is probably the best playlet in the language," declared the *Evening Standard* (14/9/15). An indefatigable example, the next day Ashwell was a speaker at the Women's Freedom League National Service Organisation, Kingsway Hall meeting, chaired by Mrs Despard, where "She alluded to the power of fatigue resistance shown by women workers... [and made] a special appeal to women to make themselves efficient for some kind of work" (*The Vote* 17/9/15), expressing "the hope that a better understanding would grow out of the ghastly tragedy of war" (*ibid*).

Among all the ladies who are so excellently serving the cause of the relief of suffering and distress, none is more popular in every sphere of benevolence than Miss Lena Ashwell, the celebrated actress. Miss Ashwell is not only enthusiastic, she is thorough and practical, and is a tower of strength to all the organisations with which she is connected.

(Loughton Advertiser 18/9/15)

This eulogistic piece, as part of a biographical sketch, appeared the same day *Our Home* announced that the AFL would turn their energies during the war to establishing the British Women's Hospital, to be available for local and French sick and wounded soldiers. The Hospital Committee, presided over by Lady Forbes-Robertson, and including Ashwell, subsequently offered to raise £50,000 for the building of a permanent home for disabled British soldiers and sailors on the site of the old Star and Garter Hotel at Richmond, given to the country by the King and Queen. The British Red Cross was to equip and maintain the institution and plans were presented to the public at Her Majesty's Theatre in early October. Meanwhile, it was announced that Ashwell was preparing to return as actress/manager to the Kingsway (*Daily Telegraph* 30/9/15).

RETURN TO KINGSWAY MANAGEMENT

Given Ashwell's other activities at this time, returning to production appears to be an overly demanding direction to take. Her explanation was,

I will confess to you that not only am I looking forward to returning to the Kingsway, but this time I hope to stay a long time if the public will allow me. I have been devoting most of my time lately to the War Funds and other charities. Who can refrain from such splendid work at such a 'calling' time? Still, naturally, there comes, also, a 'call' to do what I can in my own profession. (Referee 10/10/15)

Obviously in terms of her lease Ashwell had to maintain the Kingsway and she may have considered the best way at this time to deal with the overheads was to resume her actress/manager position. She maintained her artistic policy of old, with a new play by a twenty-three year old "soldier/ dramatist" (*Evening News* 2/10/15), John Hastings Turner, who was likely to be sent on active service at any time. *Iris Intervenes*, described by Turner as *An Arabian Night in the Suburbs* and with Ashwell in the title role, was eagerly anticipated, as was her 'experiment' of employing mostly women to run the show:

There will be a woman stage manager, a woman assistant stage manager and a woman property 'man'. The limelights will be worked by women who have been coached by the electrician, and there will be women scene shifters and an orchestra composed of women. There will still be some men employed, mainly upon the heavy work; but there will not be one man [who is] eligible for military service. (*Times* 14/10/15)

The *Glasgow News* quoted an unaccredited little verse:

To a playhouse of masculine influence void
Our Miss Ashwell is pointing the way-
Where only a feminine cast is employed
To interpret a feminine play. (16/10/15)

while acknowledging that this goal was not to be achieved with *Iris Intervenes*, as the playwright, at least, was male.

In response to the interest shown in this initiative, Ashwell wrote in the *Daily Mirror*, declaring, "Distinctions between 'men's and women's work' are apt to turn out, on experiment, to be purely conventional" (16/10/15). She reported that the men workers at the theatre had been happy to help and she concluded, "We must hope that the new solidarity between men and women at work will continue after the war" (ibid).

These preparations did not cause Ashwell to ease up on her charity work or new ideas and plans. She spoke about the concert parties at the London Central YMCA fund raising concert on 9 October and as well as an article, *Concerts For The Army, Music has a Vocation in Modern Warfare*, for *Red Triangle* (15/10/15), there were two newspaper interviews at this time which articulated many of her concerns.

It is for us women to wage unremitting and strenuous war against all conditions of poverty and disease and misery that weaken the Empire at its heart. It is for us women to fight in dead earnest against the spirit of social apathy, indifference and despair; to stand by those who have lost their economic weapons, and to save them from the defeat that comes from loss of independence. (*Daily Chronicle* 10/10/15)

Thus she described the motivation of the Women's Emergency Corps - to help, in cooperation with the Government Labour Exchanges, as many women as possible find satisfying work. She described the diversity of schemes - making wooden toys (previously 'made in Germany') for which department stores Harrods and Selfridges had placed orders; training for market gardening, poultry keeping and other land activities; and cooperation with organisations such as the Red Cross.

In an unidentified article,⁸ just twelve months into the war, Ashwell outlined a scheme that anticipated her work in the 1920s. Introduced by the newspaper as a "novel scheme", it called for the creation of sufficient theatre and entertainment ensembles to move around the country so that every training camp and military base (approximately 50) would have regular access to plays and musical events and performers would have regular work. Having calculated the expenses and the minimum fees acceptable to professional artists, Ashwell considered that while some of the cost could be covered by small admission charges, "it should be a Government scheme" which recognised the support to the community already given by artists, and to ensure that specialist skills were not wasted, especially in the light of the potential educational role of such ensembles. She suggested experienced managers would ensure smooth booking and touring arrangements and that an advance would be appropriate from the Prince of Wales Fund.⁹ She indicated there were existing organisations, such as the St George's Popular Entertainment Society, whose personnel and resources could be involved in such a scheme. This was advanced thinking for a country with no experience of public funding for the arts, and where cooperation and the sharing of resources was inhibited by commercial pressures, yet Ashwell raised the arguments for public support like a seasoned campaigner. Although this ambitious, but realistic, plan was not achieved during the war, it was an articulate and clear directive for her post-war work.

Hastings Turner's romantic comedy, written during his days studying at Oxford, opened on 16 October 1915. Ashwell played Iris Olga Iranovna, a bohemian Russian with a past who moves into suburbia next door to churchwarden and businessman, Henry Cumbers and family. The clash of life styles and personalities is immediate and ferocious, especially when Iris, who says of herself, "My assets are the fact that I am a darling; my liabilities are the fact that I am a woman" (*Lloyds Weekly News*, 17/10/15), allows Henry's son to flirt with her. However, in pursuit of a business rival who is supposed to have stolen papers from Henry, Iris and Henry are forced to spend the night together alone in a broken down car on the road to Dover. During what many critics considered the best scene in the play, they come to understand each other's position and to reconcile their differences without being compromised. The *Referee*, along with most papers, was enthusiastic: "A bright, clever, hopeful young play and all that a happy audience and a happy and able company could do to make Miss Lena Ashwell's return to her own

⁸Included in Ashwell's scrapbooks at the Imperial War Museum, London.

⁹This fund had been set up to help those thrown out of work as a result of the war. Donations had been received from performing artists through charity events and individual contributions.

stage a memorably joyous one... Miss Lena Ashwell liked Iris immensely, one could see that - and so did we" (17/10/15).

Most reviews commented on the warmth of the audience's welcome for Ashwell's return to the stage, due not only to

her personal popularity, but also owing to the fact that the play... is of a character that thoroughly deserves the laughter and applause that followed it throughout its three acts... has many witty lines that are the result of genuinely natural situations, and it also possesses a fantastic charm of idea and a sense of character that make it worth while not only as a play but as a production. (Standard 18/10/15)

Ashwell's versatility was in evidence; aside from *Diana of Dobson's*, her most successful roles had been serious ones, but now it seemed,

Miss Lena Ashwell has a predilection for comedy characters, and in the part of Iris she has obviously found a personality in which she revels. Iris is a temperamental whirlwind... Her tantrums, her repentances, her love, her beguilements, and her childlike imaginings are beautifully outlined by the author and filled in by Miss Ashwell, who has not played with more spirit and vivacity for a long time. (ibid)

The *Observer* considered "Miss Ashwell has found, somewhere or other, an interesting new dramatist" (17/10/15). She did seem to have the knack of selecting interesting plays, so her article in the *Daily Mail*, *How Not to Write a Play*, was probably justified. The production of *Iris*, by such a young playwright, had prompted many would-be authors to submit their manuscripts to the Kingsway. Writing some "winged words... for the authors of bad plays" (30/10/15), Ashwell began,

The people who think they can write plays and can are delightful beings, and we are always on the look-out for them, but though the people who think they can and can't may be equally delightful in every other way, their ways with a play are rather trying to the conscientious manager who reads every play sent in, in the hope of having the pleasure of discovering a good play or a new and promising play-writer... There is no receipt for writing a good play that I know of, but there are, apart from the obvious rules of the stage, so many pitfalls and mistakes into which would-be playwrights walk. (ibid)

She suggested that the technically and imaginatively impossible should not be required of the stage manager, actors or audience, nor should an apparently intensely dramatic situation be created which makes fools of all the characters.

A play must be worth writing if it is to be worth acting and seeing, and some plays, quite well constructed and well written, make one wonder as one reads them how the authors found it worth while expending so much time and trouble over them. Apparently there are in the world a great many people who sit down to write a play without having any particular play to write. If, some way or another they produce anything with three acts, they are too pleased to criticise it. There are also people who embark on the perilous project of writing historical plays, apparently without any historical knowledge or any qualification except a vague theory that in the good old days of our ancestors nobody had much common sense. (ibid)

Iris Intervenes finished its London season on 20 November, having taken part in the Red Cross/St John Ambulance 'Our Day' on 21 October, to which every theatre and music hall in the United Kingdom gave at least ten percent of its gross box office receipts. The production was packed away while plans to tour it early in 1916 were put in hand.

Meanwhile, the Concerts at the Front bandwagon rolled on, the momentum helped by many articles and letters written from a variety of perspectives including long, descriptive letters that agreed: "The work may be tiring, but for sheer inspiration and love of one's job it is hard indeed to beat,"¹⁰ featuring artistes such as 'Irish colleen' Biddy Doyle,¹¹ and an actress using the pen-name 'Penelope' (presumably Penelope Wheeler), who gave an account, in the *Lady's Pictorial*, of performing four one-act plays in the camps (13/11/15). Apparently, the YMCA was happy by now to allow artistes an element of 'self promotion' for the sake of the greater cause. Robin H. Legge, music critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, had read "a huge mass of letters... from soldiers of every degree in France" (30/10/15), before appealing on behalf of the Concerts fund. As part of his appeal, he detailed Theodore Flint's calculations that "on average he plays about fifty songs per day" (ibid), and that since he began working with the concert parties had played "nearly 25,000 songs and pieces" (ibid). By this stage fifteen concert parties had been to France with two more ready to depart on schedules which now involved three or four weeks giving up to three concerts a day. In support of a fund raising 'Flag Day' for Concerts at the Front in Aberdeen, Scotland, on 30 October, the Reverend John Gordon, of St Patrick's, Aberdeen, wrote to the editor of the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* to describe his experience of being at two camps where concerts were presented, declaring, "the least we at home can do is to see that plenty of guineas are at hand to enable these delightful concerts to be continued" (26/10/15). Returning artistes and Ashwell continued to be quoted and referred to in many press items about the war, with local newspapers featuring the participation and contributions of home grown talent; photographs were used to convey the environment and conditions for performers and their audiences and Ashwell's winter appeal, reported in the *Evening Standard*, was headed "A Great Want - First Food, then Raiment, then Shelter, then Music" (5/11/15).

Ashwell identified the war period as the time when her ambition for personal success gave place to a greater ambition for the success of greater causes. As the British faced a second war-torn Christmas, Ashwell addressed the Student Christian Movement at University College, London. Her talk, *Dramatic Art and National Life. Miss Lena Ashwell on the Artist as a Human Being*, was reported in great detail by *The Challenge*. She exhorted her listeners, "in the state of destruction which we are going through" (10/12/15), to seek the right standards, particularly in education, and away from the acquisitive and personal. She declared "now was the time for the builders" of a better world. "In history the people who really were of importance to the rest were the teachers and the artists" (ibid), from whom people today

¹⁰ A statement from the well-known vocalist Elsie Illingworth, *Huddersfield Weekly Examiner*, 23/10/15.

¹¹ Unidentified newspaper cutting in Ashwell's scrapbook for 1915, Imperial War Museum, London.

could take an example. She explained her own shift away from success for its own sake and financial reward with the realisation that,

the moment you turn aside and leave the pure expression of yourself with the idea of expressing it in the best manner, without any consideration of anything else, that moment you are killing the thing that is worth while in you... What we are here for is not to conform to what has been done before, but to make something new and better. (ibid)

She declared her ambition for a better theatre, considering it was everyone's responsibility to demand the best of what she saw as "the most powerful thing that a nation can have to use in opening up doors of knowledge" (ibid). She hoped her listeners would welcome and be challenged by changes which would be brought about by the war and believed "we shall have a very much finer Church after the war... The whole Army vibrates with a desire to have a religious conviction, a sureness that what they are fighting for is really worthwhile, that there is something invisible, and therefore, indestructible, behind us" (ibid).

Ashwell was sometimes carried away with her own eloquence, but throughout her life was motivated by deep religious belief, so the above must be considered as a serious statement of her convictions.

THE STARLIGHT EXPRESS

It is likely Ashwell first considered producing the stage version of Algernon Blackwood's *Uncle Books* which he and Violet Pearn, winner of the *Era's* 1913 Playwrights' Competition, had made into *The Starlight Express*, when Muriel Pratt was performing with her in *Iris Intervenes*. Pratt had premiered Pearn's *Wild Birds* in her first season of management at the Bristol Theatre Royal in May 1914, but had given up plans to stage *The Starlight Express*, with music by Clive Carey, following the outbreak of war. Carey and Basil Dean, who was to have directed the production, enlisted, and production plans were cancelled. Pratt still hoped to produce *Starlight*, but in May 1915 was forced to abandon her Bristol repertory plans and to seek work in London.

Ashwell, having decided to produce it "as a piece of Red Cross work for the mind during the first agony of the war" (*The Stage*, p. 189), engaged Henry Wilson¹², President of the Arts & Crafts Society, as designer, assisted by Stanley North, who was responsible for the comet design used as the production 'logo' in publicity and on the programme. A Mr Phillipson, in memory of his dead wife, provided financial backing and Ashwell brought in the former proprietor of the Kingsway, Arthur Penley, as the production's business manager. She approached another 'dreamer of dreams'¹³, Blackwood, for

¹²In the Rush Rhees collection at the University of Rochester library there is an undated letter written by Wilson to Ashwell, prior to the above, in which he writes about G.B.Shaw, describing him as 'an angel masquerading as Mephistopheles.' In this letter he advises Ashwell of his election as President to the Arts & Crafts Society.

¹³This is a quotation from A.W.E. O'Shaughnessy's *Ode*, which as K.E.L. Simmons in 'Elgar and the Wonderful Stranger: Music for The Starlight Express', (*Elgar Studies*, ed. Raymond Monk, Scholar Press, 1990), points out both Elgar and Blackwood used it in their work. Ashwell was also influenced by this poem, which she quotes when

suggestions as to a composer. He contacted Robin H. Legge, and Sir Edward Elgar was approached, initially by Legge on 9 November, seven weeks prior to the opening matinee, and later on the same day by Ashwell, already known to the Elgars.

Very dear Sir Edward. Robin Legge has encouraged me to ask you if you would consider writing music for a play I hope to do at Christmas by Algernon Blackwood. The play is half reality and half fairyland & it is your help in fairyland I want so much. There is a great mystic quality in the play which I am sure will help people to bear the sorrows of the war, & the end is really wonderful in its beauty. Would you ring me up tonight & say if I may come to see you about it.¹⁴

Progress on the project was recorded by Lady Alice Elgar in her diary¹⁵ - the next day Ashwell visited and “showed E. the play. She longs for his music to go with it.” On November 11 the Elgars and their friend Alice Stuart of Wortley, who was on the fund raising committee for Concerts at the Front, were guests at the performance of *Iris Intervenes* and tea after. Lady Elgar’s diary entry records:

Alice S.W. with us. Enjoyed ‘Iris Intervenes’ extremely. Lena wonderfully clever in it. The only play or novel in which a woman has the sense to say ‘Nothing wd. make me believe it (tale about her Husband). Even if it were absolutely proved I’d not believe it.’ A. [ie, Alice Elgar¹⁶] clapped & was joined by someone.¹⁷

On 13 November Elgar agreed to do the music, some of which would be adapted from his much earlier *The Wand of Youth*, and Ashwell, Blackwood and others involved in the production, including soprano Clytie Hine and baritone Charles Mott, were either regular visitors to Elgar’s home or he attended rehearsals at the Kingsway. It was a frantic few weeks, during which Elgar produced his largest work for the stage - 300 pages of score containing more than an hour of music, and the first major piece he was to record on the gramophone, with the augmented Kingsway Orchestra, on 18 February 1916.

However, it was not a happy time and it seems Ashwell was under pressure due to shortage of time and her other projects and she may have pushed too hard and made some inappropriate choices. From the start decisions alienated a number of people, including Muriel Pratt who had hoped to play the character Jane Anne, but was not cast by Ashwell. Despite the musical’s premise that ‘misunderstanding due to lack of sympathy could be changed through star-dust (sympathy)’, Blackwood and Elgar (who became firm friends) were convinced the designer had mis-understood the work and began to anticipate disaster.

referring to “the Arts” as “the education of the heart” in *The Stage*, op. cit. p.131-2. Simmons has undertaken extensive research into the creation of *The Starlight Express* – the subject of a major publication he is working on.

¹⁴The original of this letter is in the archives of Novello & Co, London, quoted by Simmons, op. cit., p. 162.

¹⁵From the collection in the Hereford & Worcester Record Office, St Helens, Worcester, England and quoted on the cover of the EMI Records’ edition of music from *The Starlight Express*, 1976.

¹⁶Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar The Windflower Letters, Correspondence with Alice Caroline Stuart Wortley and her Family*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, p.156. This should be Alice Stuart Wortley – Moore has confused his Alices.

¹⁷Ibid. p.156.

Ashwell asked Blackwood to stay away from rehearsals for a week and his letters to Elgar are an indication as to why she felt he was disruptive,

Can we do anything? I have, of course, the right of veto. That means getting a new artist, postponement of opening, heavy loss of money to Miss Ashwell, and so forth. You know better than I do what a sweeping veto would involve. That our really big chance should be ruined by her strange belief in a mediocre artist is cruel.¹⁸

The actor, O.B. Clarence, who played the role of Daddy, wrote later in his autobiography: “During rehearsals there was constant bickerings and difficulties... There were disagreements about the symbolism of the decor, which was all rather highbrow and obscured the beauty of the story. There were even dissensions among the orchestra.”¹⁹

Unfortunately, Alice Elgar did not have time to write up her diary between 14 and 26 December, which may have given greater insight into Elgar’s growing concerns. She and her husband worked hard on the music. Then, on 21 December, Elgar’s nephew and godson, William, died aged 25. Postponement, however, was averted although it was a stressful time, as indicated by Ashwell’s letter to Elgar a few days before the opening performance on 29 December: “I can’t do the play without you, & it is really life or extinction for me to get the play right & it can’t be right without you.”²⁰ Elgar missed the opening performance, which he intended to conduct, after Lady Elgar had an accident in a taxi on 27 December. He attended many performances in January, but the production closed after a month, with Ashwell returning to her war work and abandoning West End theatre management for good. It is interesting that the full score has never been published²¹, the original play was not published, and there have been no performances since the Kingsway production, although it has been presented in a radio version.²² There is a manuscript of the play (without music), which was sighted during this research, in the Lord Chamberlain’s collection in the British Library. This was the script passed by the Lord Chamberlain’s office on 6 December and licensed on 11 December, 1915, more than two weeks before the opening night. From Simmons’ account, many changes were made during this period, so this cannot be considered a definitive text. Ernest Bendall, in the Lord Chamberlain’s office, described the work as

a daintily didactic little fairy play of the school of *The Blue Bird* but less dramatic in its motive and plot... seems rather lacking in lucidity... perhaps through its super abundance of subordinate characters... But it is always perfect in taste and sound in tone... last Act... has many passages of tender beauty.²³

¹⁸This was written on 25 December 1915. From the Novello & Co. archives, Simmons, op. cit., p.177.

¹⁹O.B. Clarence, *No Complaints*, London, Jonathon Cape, 1943, p. 145.

²⁰Novello & Co archives, Simmons, op. cit., p 179.

²¹Only three of the songs and a pianoforte suite have been published, although a number of recordings were made in the 1970s. The radio version was broadcast on the BBC in 1965 and 1968 (Simmons op. cit., p. 143).

²²Simmons has prepared an edited ‘full-text’ version, using Pearn and Elgar’s copies of the script, attempting to marry the words and the music (op.cit., p.187).

²³Letter accompanying manuscript, dated 6/12/15, Lord Chamberlain’s Play Collection, British Library.

Figure 27: Press invitation to *The Starlight Express*, December 1915. (Bulloch collection, Volume 3, 1915, British Library, Special Collections)

The story involved a poor, ‘wumbled’ (worried and jumbled), English writer and his family (three children and tired wife) living in the Jura who, through the children, their Secret Star Society and the Starlight Express, find understanding, inspiration and joy to share with everyone, through sympathy, symbolized by stardust. From most of the reviews, it appears the work was well received and enjoyed by audiences. There was unanimous praise for Elgar’s “entrancing incidental music” (*Daily Telegraph* 30/12/15).

Elgar’s music charms and pleases alternately... The whole is an accompaniment of perfect appropriateness. He enters completely into the particular mood of the piece. It has stimulated his imaginative vein to the full.
(*Morning Post* 30/12/15)

Given that most reviews were positive (Desmond MacCarthy’s elaborate and unsympathetic critique in the *New Statesman* did not appear until 15 January 1916), the short run must be attributed as much to the war-time situation and dearth of theatre audiences as to the work’s lack of traditional pantomime appeal.²⁴

At the start of 1916 the die was cast for Ashwell. The role of actress/manager at the Kingsway was no longer viable and after a year of juggling administration, fund raising and performance, she had achieved official acceptance and acknowledgement of the significance of her initiative. “There is no doubt that the War Office regarded our work as of importance since they made an exception on our behalf with regard to permits. Few permits at that time were issued for less than three or four months, but we were given short permits for the touring parties” (*Modern Troubadours*, p.35).

The YMCA, initially cautious, now recognised the enormous benefit of the Concert Parties, actively promoting them as part of the Association’s war work and using them for events such as the opening of their new huts in France.²⁵ When the January 1916 issue of the *Windsor Magazine* ran a detailed, illustrated article, *The YMCA and the War. A World-Wide Voluntary Effort*, by Charles T. Bateman, Ashwell’s work was featured. Already, after a year of hard work, over 1500 concerts had been given in France:

we seemed to be spreading widely in all directions; the number of visiting parties was increased from two to four and even five in a month. Permanent concert parties and repertory companies were established in the different Bases. More parties were asked for, for the firing line, and we began the arrangements for sending artists to Malta and Egypt, with the possibility of Salonica.
(*Modern Troubadours*, p.73)

This meant renewed and constant appeals for donated funds - official financial support did not follow official recognition. The Malta plans were announced at a large gathering at the Mansion House, London, courtesy of the Mayor of the City, on 25 January, 1916. Speakers included Ellen Terry, the Duchess of Bedford, Major General Sir Alfred Turner, Sir Frederick Bridge and other dignitaries. Ashwell announced also that an all-male concert party had now been permitted to go right up to behind the firing line to give a

²⁴Ashwell closed the production on 20 January 1916, presumably because it was not worthwhile financially to continue.

²⁵YMCA pamphlet on the hut openings which took place on 8 January 1916, Imperial War Museum scrapbook.

series of concerts. This had long been her aim but officialdom had placed many obstacles in the way and the breakthrough was due as much to Ashwell's persistence and eloquence as the success of the base camp concerts. In addition, she had some influential supporters as the *Era* report of the meeting indicated: "Miss Terry concluded with an epigram. 'Comfort for the mind,' she said, 'is often more important than comfort for the body; and monotony, that deadly enemy of the soldier in the trenches, is more afraid of music than of a muffler'" (2/2/16).

In February and March there were letters to the press, fund raising concerts and appeals in London and the regions for the Concert Parties while Ashwell began an extensive tour. *Iris Intervenes* played at the Wimbledon Theatre in the first week of February, during which the company gave a performance at HMS Crystal Palace, a naval training unit. Then a week at the King's Theatre, Hammersmith, followed by four performances at the Eastbourne Devonshire Park Theatre.

Before leaving London, Ashwell did not offer herself for re-election, at their meeting on 2 February, as a member of the United Suffragists' Committee; presumably lack of time was a deciding factor in this decision. By March 1916, *Votes for Women*, 'the Official Organ of the United Suffragists', was calling itself *The War Paper for Women* and had become a monthly, rather than weekly, review of the suffrage movement. Although this cut back was in part due to war time shortages of paper, there was less suffrage activity to report on as women took on more pressing responsibilities. The energies of the Actresses' Franchise League were going into the Women's Emergency Corps, the British Women's Hospital and the Camps' Entertainment Committee; there was no longer time for their monthly 'At Homes' at the Criterion although they did still hold an annual general meeting in October (*Era* 1/11/16).

However, Ashwell was not turning her back on the women's cause, taking on a bastion of male control by proposing to the Actors' Benevolent Fund meeting that there should be ladies on the committee. Lady Tree apparently opposed the suggestion, "on the ground that at present it would be unwise to disturb existing conditions" (*Referee* 2/1916), but Sir George Alexander agreed with Ashwell and when put to the vote, there was general agreement for her suggestion, although no immediate action was taken.²⁶ Ashwell also lent her support to an appeal by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) for £25,000 towards facilities such as rest-rooms, recreation rooms and canteens for women munitions workers and others who were taking on hard industrial work previously done by men (*Daily Telegraph* 17/2/16).

While in Eastbourne Ashwell took the opportunity to hold an appeal meeting at the theatre on 22 February. She began making important contacts with local government representatives which would be called upon and developed post-war; as a civic duty and a matter of civic pride, mayors became involved

²⁶Writing in *Modern Troubadours* in 1922 Ashwell commented, "though actors have to allow the greater part of a play to be represented by women, they do not like women to represent the profession. How many years, for instance, have passed before a woman was allowed to have any power in the Actors' Benevolent Fund? - a power so well exercised now by Lady Wyndham" (p. 38).

in fund raising events for the Concerts at the Front, providing municipal facilities, official sanction and readily identifiable collection points for funds raised. She realised the importance of acknowledging every gesture of support and her 'thank you' letter published in the *Craven Herald* to the people of Skipton was typical: "I am quite sure that everyone would feel amply repaid could they only see the pleasure the concerts give to our gallant troops at the Front" (26/2/16). Much was made of stories illustrating the benefits for the wounded and ordinary soldier, as well as emphasizing that the troops had pretty sophisticated tastes, seeking good tunes and enjoying 'classical' pieces.

On February 28, 1916, the *Daily Malta Chronicle* reported:

His Excellency the Governor honoured the entertainment given on Wednesday night in the Valletta Gymnasium Extension of the Soldiers and Sailors Institute, Strada Mezzodi, on the occasion of the first appearance in Malta of the Concert Party provided by Miss Lena Ashwell, the well known actress, working in conjunction with the Y.M.C.A.

Although this first event was a fairly formal affair, there was the same enthusiastic response as had been experienced in France. This first party to Malta performed on board troop and battle ships and for fishermen mine sweepers, very aware of their vulnerability to torpedoes and bombardment, while at the same time relishing the experience. They also performed in Italy and were away from England for twenty-one weeks. Two further parties were to go to Malta in 1917 and 1918; the financial responsibility for these taken by the Red Cross, since most of the concert work took place in hospitals. In late September 1916 the first Malta party was reconstituted and travelled to Egypt, where the artists remained for two years. Ashwell did not visit the parties in Malta or Egypt, so relied on the artists for their reports²⁷ and on local representatives of the Crown and high-ranking officers to overcome local obstacles.

While those at home in England were reading Ashwell's account, in the February edition of *Strand Magazine*, of *A Year's Music at the Front*, she was giving nightly performances in *Iris Intervenes* at the Croydon Grand Theatre and then at the Stratford Borough Theatre, no doubt envious, as she placed into her scrapbook the typed report she received in March from the first concert party to go to the Firing Line. Compiler unknown, the report gives a brief daily account of where the party went and performed each day between 26 January and its return to Calais en route to England on 4 March.

Feb.5th -Locre Hospital - Big Gun during Cello solo; Feb.8th - Caisse d'Espagne - packed, men had marched in with rifles & smoke helmets, ready to start for trenches at a moment's notice if necessary; Feb.10th - 2nd C.C. Hospital-Guns going all the time-windows rattling-audience greatly amused by our surprised faces; Feb.12th. Walked up Monte Rouge and watched bombardment; Feb.15th -...within a mile of the trenches; Feb.19th - Canada Huts. Very heavy firing.²⁸

²⁷Ashwell incorporated many of these reports into *Modern Troubadours*.

²⁸This report is included in Ashwell's scrapbooks at the Imperial War Museum, London.

Figure 28: Printed material produced by Ashwell to promote the Concert Parties. (Imperial War Museum Ashwell scrapbook)

Figure 29: Maps showing Concert party visits, 1916. (Imperial War Museum Ashwell scrapbook)

Presumably after hearing more detailed accounts of the party's experiences, Ashwell's article, *Along the Firing Line, Adventures with a Piano*, was published in the *Daily Chronicle*. Given that she did not experience all the incidents first hand, her ability to understand and absorb the experience of others and to write so fluently about them gives an insight into her perceptive character and strong belief in the 'rightness of her purpose. She described the conditions of travel, especially with a piano which "is not the most handy item of luggage to travel with by road, even when it is just a five octavo pianette without legs [nicknamed 'Peter'] - the piano that never grew up" (13/3/16), and the rats who joined the audience for a concert in a dark barn in the middle of nowhere. The artists, along with the soldiers, were issued with gas helmets, "a fearful head-dress" (*Glasgow Bulletin* 13/7/16), and quickly picked up the soldiers' vocabulary, with 'Blighty', a term of affection for 'dear old England', apparently of Hindustani origin. The article ended with an appeal for a small motor-van for the next firing line concert party so that the artists and piano could travel together.

Generosity of spirit was in evidence on March 7, when Oswald Stoll opened the Coliseum for a second Great Matinee performance (a follow up to the first given in March 1915) with the patronage of Queen Mary, Princess Mary, Prince Albert, and the Princesses Christian, Victoria and Marie Louise of Schleswig Holstein, whose personal guests included 120 soldiers from various hospitals and their nurses. A successful fund raising event for Concerts at the Front, with Ashwell making an appeal from the stage, it raised £700. Artistically it included the premiere of an amusing new fantasy by Sir James Barrie, *The Real Thing at Last*. "It was a happy skit on some of the peculiarities native to the kinema theatre" (*Standard* 8/3/16), including the rejection of stage actors as unsuitable for film and a screened version of an American, sanitized view of *Macbeth*. Irene Vanbrugh was depicted "releasing a film" which curled snake-like out of a cage, "looking like a boa-constrictor... It is quite in the Barrie vein to see, in that now familiar phrase... a sinuous monster let loose on the public" (ibid). Although Barrie was in jest, the piece was subtitled *A Suggestion for the Artists of the Future* and there were many, like Ashwell, who saw the cinema mostly as an insidious, unwelcome innovation.

During the next few months Ashwell travelled extensively throughout the United Kingdom; by day talking at fund raising meetings; auditioning local singers to take part in the concert parties, which was a necessary and effective ploy to get the regions to actively participate in the scheme; and inspiring local communities to organise regular fund raising events. In the evenings she was Iris, playing week long seasons with the Kingsway company at the Nottingham Theatre Royal in mid March; in Newcastle and Manchester for the first two weeks of April and Edinburgh, Glasgow and Brighton in early May. While her concert party was experiencing the big guns at the firing line, the Kingsway company had its own experiences under siege. "The night before the production of *Iris Intervenes*, there was a big Zeppelin raid which did so much damage to the Kingsway. On the tour I hardly went anywhere without being preceded by a raid, or having one during the week" (*Modern Troubadours*, p.111). In Newcastle there were four

nights of raids with all trams and trains stopped and all the lights put out; not, however, sufficient to deter audiences.

At the conclusion of the tour, she returned to France for a number of weeks, during which time, in mid June, her accompanist and close friend from Royal Academy of Music days, Stanley Hawley, died aged forty-nine. Hawley, at the time the honorary secretary of the Royal Philharmonic Society, was a respected musician and composer, who had accompanied singers Mme Patti and Santley on extensive tours. It must have been a sad time for Ashwell, unable to attend the funeral in Ilkeston; but along with many colleagues she sent a floral tribute. She paid further tribute to Hawley in October 1917, at a Wigmore Hall Memorial concert where, accompanied by Sir Henry Wood, she performed a number of the recitations he had set to music, including Whyte Melville's poem *Riding thro' the Broom* and Davidson's *Ballad of Hell*. Other performers included singer Carrie Tubb and pianist Myra Hess; the proceeds being devoted to the publication of a work by a British composer.

Iris in *Iris Intervenes* was the last sustained major role Ashwell played on stage. She had been an actress for only twenty-four years; a much shorter career than many contemporaries or successors such as Peggy Ashcroft. While it was considered she had reached the top of her profession in her portrayal of difficult and unconventional women in contemporary plays, she was never fully tested as an actress. She played a limited range of characters and had only rare opportunities to play Shakespeare, and then not in the roles through which others have made their reputations. She did not play many of Shaw's women or characters from Ibsen, Chekhov or Wilde which may have given her a place in honour rolls associated with the 'classics'. Undoubtedly the war intervened in Ashwell's acting career – by 1918 she had been diverted, apparently willingly, into another 'career', which will be examined in later chapters of this thesis.

As Ashwell's *Iris Intervenes* tour was coming to an end theatres were facing a new challenge. The Entertainments Tax on all places of amusement came into force on 15 May 1916. Ostensibly a wartime necessity, it engendered much debate and practical adjustments prior to its introduction. Initially it was generally accepted philosophically, although it did create more work for theatre managers, who could either use special government issued admission tickets with the tax included or present weekly returns on tickets sold. There were some exemptions in relation to charity performances and children's entertainment, but box offices had their work cut out depending on the number of different ticket prices offered. On 16 August the *Era* reported that the worst fears of many had been fully realized with cinemas and smaller music halls the most adversely affected. "The patrons of these places ...are not disposed to bear the additional burden imposed by the new tax, and have achieved their object of not increasing their expenses... by occupying cheaper seats... or by fewer visits."

The entertainment business faced further difficulty with the 1916 Military Service Bills becoming Acts, the second one introducing the compulsory conscription of all fit men between the ages of 18 and 41 (the

first Act had made it compulsory only for unmarried men between these ages). As most male performers had already enlisted - Ashwell and other wartime entertainment groups were already using many older men - managers were obliged to re-think plans and to employ more women on stage and behind the scenes. As the *Era* observed: “Naturally, that fine actress and manageress and most liberal and cultured of Suffragists, Miss Lena Ashwell was among the first to realize their potential usefulness in a theatre. Did she not have them trained and employed as scene shifters?²⁹” (31/5/16).

Ashwell would have found it encouraging that managers were not seeking exemption from the Government for their male workers, instead “The war has heightened their [women’s] influence, and endowed their purpose with a wider sympathy” (ibid), creating virtually whole orchestras of women musicians and giving a war-time boost to older male and lesser known female variety acts and music hall entertainment.

While there was some acknowledgement of the important contribution made by the theatrical profession to the war effort, theatre managers were conscious of the conflict of purpose in relation to the Government’s demands for economy in all walks of life. An *Era* editorial noted: “It is insistent; it is everywhere; we have it blazoned on walls and on large hoardings in eighteen-inch letters: ‘Extravagance in dress is not only bad form, it is unpatriotic.’ If we cannot have peace, therefore we must have retrenchment in our expenditure and reform of our social customs” (14/6/16). However, the musical comedy audience sought glamour and splendid sets to escape the drabness and stress of their existence and for some theatres, complying with this edict, would result in diminished audiences and thereby reduced contributions to the Entertainments Tax. While some works for the stage, such as those by Shakespeare, could rely less on elaborate mise-en scene, and call on the imagination of the “more intellectual class of playgoer” (ibid.), thrifty musical comedy was perceived as a contradiction in terms. Happily, given the conditions in France, this did not inhibit the enjoyment of the troops, welcoming, without any trappings, both excerpts from Shakespeare and popular musical comedy. As ever, Ashwell did not miss the opportunity to turn a general request into a specific, as an article in the YMCA magazine indicates: *Have You Given Your New Hat? A suggestion by Miss Lena Ashwell (Red Triangle 30/6/16)*. It was a report on a concert given at the YMCA London Central venue at which Ashwell, who was introduced “as one of the greatest assets of the YMCA” (ibid), spoke: “I want you to give me all you have got, and then more... I want you to give your new hat; your new carpet... everything you thought you were going to buy next week, and to give it me for the sake of the boys at the front and the boys in the Navy” (ibid).

It was announced that Ashwell had just issued a booklet of photos and stories about the work and experiences of the concert parties (who by now had presented over 2000 concerts) which was on sale for

²⁹Ashwell trained and employed women to work backstage for her production of *Iris Intervenes*.

2d from the YMCA. As well as recognition from the YMCA, praise came from other quarters: an appeal for support for the concerts at the front in *Hospital* concluded,

Probably the terms of the Royal Warrant establishing the Royal Red Cross decoration preclude the bestowal of that distinction upon an Englishwoman who is not actually in the service of the Crown; but if not, we know of none with a better claim than Miss Ashwell to that recognition of loving labour on behalf of the sick and wounded in our wars. (1/7/16)

The *British Journal of Nursing* also featured the Concerts at the Front, with Ashwell quoted as referring to the monthly 'Officers and Nurses' concerts at the bases as "the only occasion when the nurses from the different hospitals meet each other, and we have pauses between the music so they can talk. They are all fetched... in motor cars by the YMCA, and driven back again when it is over" (22/7/16).

Ashwell continued to cast the net wide for support - her scrapbook for this time includes undated cuttings from the Canadian papers, *Toronto World* and *Toronto Daily News*, appealing for support. Ashwell had written to an old school friend (Mrs H.J.Bethune), who had raised support for a 'Canadian Week' of concerts at the Front and was collecting donations on behalf of Ashwell in Canada. This friend was presumably the one referred to in *Modern Troubadours*, who "sent four of her sons over from Toronto, one of whom was killed. The third son, who was twice wounded" (p.152-3), wrote to Ashwell in December 1916 from the Front, expressing his appreciation for one of the concerts in his camp. She quotes his affectionate letter in her account (ibid).

Ashwell returned from France in the first week of July with a 'Firing Line' concert party, which subsequently became one of the "new turns" (*Morning Post* 18/7/16), at the Coliseum for a month.³⁰ The performers re-created their programme as presented to the troops, including using 'Peter' the piano, thereby making it possible for those at home to share something of the experience described by sons, brothers and husbands in their letters home from the war zone. In early August, one recently returned concert party was on the variety bill at the Manchester Hippodrome and another began a week-long series of twice nightly entertainment for the 12,000 women munitions workers at Woolwich Arsenal. This was part of an initiative to provide regular and varied recreation for the women, "to get rid of the feeling that 'life is all bed and work,'" stated by Miss Esplin, from the Welfare Department, Ministry of Munitions, and quoted in the *Westminster Gazette*, 2 August 1916.

On 19 August 1916 Ashwell travelled again to France for a month. She took part in a programme, presented in army bases and theatres in Rouen and Le Havre, involving fourteen performers, some of whom were permanently based in France, which included scenes from *Macbeth*, in which she played

³⁰There is a review in the *Era* on 21 June 1916 for a variety performance at the Coliseum which indicates that Ashwell played the role of Amina in a short play, *The Maharani of Arakan*, by George Calderon and Sir Rabindranath Tagore. This could be the reviewer's error as Ashwell was most probably in France at this time and

Lady Macbeth; songs and ‘cello solos; Gertrude Jennings’ one act play, *The Bathroom Door*, with the author in the role of the Prima Donna; and Barrie’s *The Twelve Pound Look*, with Ashwell in her role of Kate. The Base M.T. Depot Band also played and the performance concluded with renditions of *God Save the King* and *La Marseillaise*. Other performances on this tour included scenes from Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* and another Jennings one-act play, *In a Fog*. In contrast to the above party, by this time individual male performers, also under the auspices of Concerts at the Front, were entertaining firing line troops in areas where there were no facilities for ensembles.

Despite having once declared she “should hate to play Lady Macbeth” (*Liverpool Echo*, 5/10/04), Ashwell had a great personal and critical success with the character, although she never played the role in a complete production. “When I was a very small child,” she wrote in *Pearson’s Magazine* (June 1916),

I dreamt of playing Lady Macbeth to kings and queens in vast London theatres... But I never dreamt the most wonderful dream of all... that instead of an ordinary everyday theatre, with an ordinary everyday audience, I should play the part to thousands and thousands of men, far away from their homes and from everyone and everything they care for, in the midst of the greatest war that has ever been known... Those audiences in khaki listened breathlessly to Shakespeare’s great play rendered without scenery... there was no illusion in the surroundings, no accessories, nothing but the beauty of real poetry with its instantaneous and deep appeal to the hearts of men. (ibid)

When this Concert Party programme was presented at the Nottingham Arts Fair in November 1916, the *Stage* was effusive in its praise, describing in great detail her portrayal and its impact on the audience, and concluding that “Miss Ashwell has done many fine things before, but she has done nothing finer or more moving than Lady Macbeth, and it is to be hoped that London may have a chance of seeing her in her new role” (23/11/16).³¹

Not all comments were favourable, however, and while Ashwell was still in France, the *Era* published an article by *Referee* journalist, John N. Raphael, who was based in Paris and commenting on behind-the-scenes aspects of the war. His *Entertaining Tommy*, following a meeting of a small group of soldiers in a country cafe, and without naming names, reported that not all soldiers appreciated the entertainment provided at the camps, considering it to be sometimes too “straightlaced” and on occasions, “patronising” (23/8/16). There is no doubt that compared to some of the entertainment the soldiers may have seen when off duty in Paris, the observations were true. There was also some resentment that officers were given the best seats and priority over ordinary soldiers in meeting the artistes. Ashwell never addressed this response which must have prevailed on some occasions; she obviously preferred to remain positive and

there are no reviews in her scrapbook relating to this event – or else it was a one-off event in mid June prior to her departure for France. However, there is no indication in the review that it was a one-off performance.

³¹At the time of writing *Modern Troubadours* in 1921, Ashwell considered that playing Lady Macbeth in France was “my farewell to the stage as an actor”(p.52), but she did play a role with the Lena Ashwell Players in 1925.

**Figure 30: Programme for Ashwell's London theatre party, Theatre-Des-Arts, Rouen, 26 August 1916.
(Mander & Mitchenson collection)**

go with the majority. It may also have been her consciously ignoring an inverted snobbery, a fear of the 'high arts'. Ashwell, always at pains to break down barriers, writing in the *Era* later in the year, observed,

There is a tendency of the superior person, or there was before the war (there aren't so many superior persons about now), to imagine that the best in literature, art, music and drama was rather above the heads of the people, and that an expensively cultivated mind was necessary for real appreciation. There never was a greater mistake. (27/12/16)

Ashwell returned home in mid September to launch an appeal for funds for the first Concert Party to Egypt and to publish her account of *Shakespeare at the Front, Plays presented Under Strange Conditions, Blankets for Scenery*, describing the response to Shakespeare,

I dare assert that the audiences he would have loved best were those... khaki-clad warriors, who listened spell-bound to his wonderful words out there in France on the very scene where he has drawn for the world the armies of our ancestors, equally gallant, equally gay... if we could foster and provide... national and municipal theatres and concert halls, even as we have national and municipal picture galleries and libraries, it would be one of the simpler ways of adjusting the machinery of our civilization.

(North Mail and Daily Chronicle, 28/9/16)

She also returned to a spat with producer Harold V. Neilson, who in the *Era* was promoting a tour of *Iris Intervenes*, with the "Special engagement of Miss Lena Ashwell in her original part" (4/10/16), together with a revival of the Kingsway production "by arrangement with Miss Lena Ashwell" (ibid), of *Diana of Dobson's*. In response, and in the same edition, there was a brief item: "Miss Lena Ashwell asks us to announce that she is in no way connected with the company now touring with *Diana of Dobson's*. The company is not under Miss Ashwell's auspices, and she is in no way responsible for the production." The next week there was an advertisement for the *Diana of Dobson's* tour but no mention of *Iris Intervenes*. The week after that the *Era* published a formal letter from Neilson's representatives, Chatterton & Co, stating that he "acquired the touring rights [of *Diana*] from Miss Ashwell in the year 1912, since which date he has revived it on four occasions. Miss Ashwell's connection... is of a very material nature... she has been, and still is, in receipt of a certain portion of the weekly takings" (18/10/16). Ashwell made no further comment.

With a visit to Bristol on 12 October Ashwell began an exhausting round of fund raising speeches across the country, mostly presided over by the town or city Mayor. She told her Bristol audience that it was costing £100 a week to maintain three parties in France, one in Malta and another in Alexandria (*Bristol Times*, 13/10/16), and on 24 October she recounted her experiences at a meeting of the Huddersfield and District Women's Committee for Soldiers and Sailors. She spoke in Cardiff and at a special matinee at the Kingston Royal County Theatre in early November, and while she was raising funds in Bromley on 16 November, Harley Granville Barker was speaking on behalf of the cause in London, "laying emphasis on the intelligence and eagerness of the British soldiers' welcome of the best art that these much-needed

concert parties can provide” (*Era* 22/11/16). She then travelled to Glasgow to audition singers, joining the Concert Party at the Nottingham Arts Fair on 21 November. She returned to Cardiff on 27 November, visiting the Coal and Shipping Exchange workers at the Docks, auditioning singers and reciting at the Empire during a gala concert. This visit raised more than £1500 and Cardiff’s financial response was identified by Ashwell as being “far ahead of any city except London” (*Western Mail* 29/11/16).

Meanwhile, trouble was brewing north of the English border. In what seems to be an irrational over reaction, the City of Edinburgh in Scotland, particularly through the journal *The Thistle* and some daily newspapers, early on had taken exception to the stipulation that Ashwell have final say on the selection of artists to entertain the troops. *The Thistle*’s version of this as a ‘Scandalous Insult to Scotland’ (December 1916), had more to do with its traditionally parochial and ostensibly patriotic stance in relation to anything initiated south of the border than with Ashwell’s place in the scheme of things. Edinburgh went out on a limb on this. The rest of Scotland, particularly Glasgow, was happy to support the concert parties, recognising that it was not permissible to identify and ‘target’ Scottish regiments who were all part of the Imperial Army, so an entire programme of Scottish material would not be appropriate, nor would there be particular benefits from performers selected by a Scottish committee. Subsequently, in fact, Scottish artistes selected by Ashwell did form ensembles and played for predominantly Scottish regiments on a number of occasions. *The Thistle* launched a savage attack on both Ashwell, “a theatrical damsel of a very aggressive type” (ibid), constantly and scathingly referred to as “a London actress” (ibid), and on the German Princess patron, Victoria of Schleswig-Holstein. Ashwell seems to have avoided going into print on this, leaving the explanatory letter writing to the YMCA. She did admit, however, “to having enjoyed the attacks which were made on me at this time” (*Modern Troubadours*, p.112). Having identified herself to the Lord Provost of Edinburgh as a Scot, at least by marriage, she was amused by *The Thistle* description of her as one “who comes on the stage alone and pirouettes as an English heroine, who has at last subdued Scotland and placed it under her heel” (ibid). She did regret, however, that Edinburgh “remained angry, at any rate unsympathetic, to the end” (ibid).

In contrast, the *Times* paid tribute to the generosity of the stage during the war, despite the shortage of male actors and other hardships. “It is safe to say that no profession has thrown itself so wholeheartedly into working for good causes... it would be a worse day for charities than is suspected if the Stage were suddenly to turn crusty and refuse to lend the aid of its enormous influence and attraction” (29/11/16).

By way of showing the theatrical profession that its contribution to the war effort was recognised, the writer pointed out that the frequent patronage of the King and Queen and other members of the royal family was a clear indication that they were valued. Not wanting to mention some names and leave others out, the article still managed to refer to Ashwell as “an eminent actress” working in conjunction with the YMCA to organise entertainment for the soldiers. “The task is enormous and the efforts to accomplish it

are more successful than ever seemed possible” (ibid). This was placed in her scrapbook beside a copy of the *Egyptian Gazette* review of the first concert party performance in Cairo (4/12/16). Ashwell had good reason to feel a great sense of achievement for 1916.

The first Cairo performance, for 2000 soldiers in the skating rink of the Ezbekieh Soldiers’ Club, was postponed for a few days due to a road accident in which one of the singers, Grace Ivell, was slightly injured. She recovered sufficiently to take part in the Gala performance given on 9 December at the Sultanieh Opera House, in the presence of the Sultan, the British High Commissioner and high ranking military men. The ensemble was led by Theodore Flint³², vividly described by war poet Siegfried Sassoon in his poem written about the concert party in Egypt.

“They were gathering round...
Out of the twilight, over the grey-blue sand
Shoals of low-jargoning men drift inward to the sound,
The jangle and throb of a piano... tum-ti-tum...
Drawn by a lamp, they come
Out of the glimmering lines of their tents, over the shuffling sand.
O, sing us the songs, the songs of our own land,
You warbling ladies in white.
Dimness conceals the hunger in our faces,
This wall of faces risen out of the night,
These eyes that keep their memories of the places
So long beyond their sight.

Jaded and gay, the ladies sing; and the chap in brown
Tilts his grey hat; jaunty and lean and pale,
He rattles the keys... some actor-bloke from town...
‘God send you home’; and then ‘A long, long trail’,
‘I hear you calling me’; and ‘Dixieland’...
Sing slowly... now the chorus... one by one,
We hear them, drink them; till the concert’s done.
Silent I watch the shadowy mass of soldiers stand.
Si’ent they drift away over the glimmering sand.”³³

The year ended with Ashwell going into print again, in an article for the December issue of *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Where Should This Music Be?*, describing her work at the Front. She writes that there

music, the straightest road to the unseen world of spiritual beauty, fulfils more than its tangible function of cheering up the men, although that is ‘a work of great military value’, to quote the words of a distinguished doctor... Music ministers with magical results to minds distressed and over-taxed.

Shortly after, this was re-printed as a fund raising pamphlet for the Concerts at the Front.

³²Sassoon describes Flint as “The chap in brown”, about whom Ashwell writes: “He was rejected from the Army on medical grounds, but the work he did was fairly strenuous for a delicate man” (*Modern Troubadours*, p.93).

³³This poem was originally published by Heinemann in *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, and this is the source acknowledged by Ashwell in *Modern Troubadours*.

Figure 31: Concert Party and the Cairo Y.M.C.A. Skating Theatre. (Imperial War Museum Ashwell scrapbook)

During 1917 Ashwell travelled extensively throughout the United Kingdom, speaking on behalf of the Concerts at the Front, appealing for funds and reciting in concert programmes. Through these visits many local groups of women volunteers were rallied to arrange fund raising events of great variety. Ashwell's war work now dominated her activities. She seemed to find her stride and was well respected for her total commitment to the cause; as with many women of her time, the war gave her real purpose and responsibility.

In January and February Ashwell was receiving reports of the adventures experienced by the party in Egypt. After three weeks in Cairo, the group, based in Ismailia, performed in camps along the Suez Canal zone and

on Christmas Day had joined a choir of soldiers and sang carols in the different wards of the hospital... At one place in the desert the Royal Engineers laid telephone wires so that the troops ten miles farther on could have a share of the concert... we went to and from the concert by camels. (*Modern Troubadours*, p.101)

By February they had covered the Canal from end to end and in Ismailia "gave concerts to the biggest audiences of the war: Thursday, there were 3800 men, the next concert there were 4000 men, and on Saturday, 6000" (ibid. p.103). The *Halifax Daily Guardian* published one of many interesting observations from members of this party:

generally only possible to give one concert a day, for singing, with the temperature at 120 degrees, proved somewhat exhausting. The singers, however, found open-air work in the desert less exacting than they expected. The sand deadened all other sound and the atmosphere was so clear that every word could be heard by as big an audience as could possibly be got together. (3/3/19)

The Egyptian concert party remained in the area for two years, without a return visit to England. Two of the party stayed in Egypt, with the other four members continuing the work from a new base in Palestine from July 1918, from whence they returned to England late in February 1919.

During 1916 Ashwell noticed "a gradual growth of the feeling that the war was habitual, and that nothing could end it" (*Modern Troubadours*, p.127). This arose largely following the disastrous Battle of the Somme between July and November 1916, during which there were over 620,000 allied casualties, and by early 1917 conditions at the Front had worsened, the fighting had intensified and war weariness was very evident. Of necessity, there was a shift in the work that was possible. By the end of February 1917 there had been nine Firing Line Concert Parties sent at intervals to the Front. They had travelled uncomfortably with pianos in vehicles ranging from a car donated by a Nottingham business man, to a London bus - at times a rather large target which could only travel at night, compelling artists on occasions to walk to their next concert. Conditions were difficult, often appalling and the work exhausting. Ultimately, however, "we could not continue this part of the work owing to the impossibility of getting men. There

were no longer any men over age or seemingly any one medically unfit!" (ibid. p.167). It was not until January 1918 that she received permission for mixed parties of men and women to resume these concerts.

In the meantime, Ashwell directed her energies to finding solo entertainers, such as a ventriloquist and story teller who gave hour long performances everywhere from dug-outs to tents at the firing line, while a Leeds entertainer, Frank Stanley, was the first British entertainer to go to Switzerland where he performed for wounded soldiers interned in Berne and Muren (*Leeds Mercury* 27/3/17). Early in 1918 Eric Williams toured with his Speaking Photo Plays, combining film and the performance of speeches from Shakespeare. He later returned to London to repeat his programme in a West End cinema while Scottish cinemas were showing his programme as recorded entirely on film (*Kinematograph* 7/2/18). Once the YMCA were permitted to send lecturers on short permits, she sought suitable personalities to talk on a wide variety of subjects, including actor/manager, Sir John Martin Harvey, who, after giving lectures in YMCA huts in France during a short holiday from his London work, wrote to say "It has been one of the most memorable incidents of my life, and I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for making it possible" (*Modern Troubadours*, p.167). In December 1917 the poet John Drinkwater, who at the time was manager of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, also undertook a five-week recital tour of the Base camps in France at her request.

By early 1917 Ashwell had gathered a core of hard-working and committed women, working behind the scenes in a London office, to administer, publicise and fund raise for the scheme. Suffragist journalist and subsequently the author of a post-war novel, *Ann*, Olga Hartley, had joined Ashwell in 1915 and worked throughout the war to promote the concerts and fund raising activities. Mrs C.F. Leyel, who had been with the Frank Benson theatre company and later administered the 'Culpepper Houses' herb shops, took charge of raising money "with the courage of an Arctic explorer [she] couples a persistence which most of us have lost at the age of five and pursues her way with ruthless cheerfulness" (*Myself a Player*, p.204). Actress Dorothy Dundas "presided over all the arrangements for the parties, the passports, travelling, the settling of innumerable disputes and difficulties... with faithfulness, tact and wisdom" (*Modern Troubadours*, p.123).

With this support, the first of two imaginative fund raising events took place at the Chelsea Palace on 20 March 1917. The programme for the *Chelsea Revue*, apparently in keeping with the style of the event, "stated that the revue was written by far too many people, under the disability of far too large a committee" (ibid. p.114). Indeed, contributions were acknowledged from an Executive Committee chaired by Lady Lyttelton, as well as large committees of writers, musicians, dancers and designers/ costume-makers, plus a big cast of players, with Ellen Terry as 'The Spirit of Chelsea', inducting Ashwell, as a mere Duchess, into Chelsea society. Elgar composed special music for a new ballet, Augustus John was one of the programme illustrators and lighthearted tribute in a programme note was paid to all the "great

figures in modern Chelsea life, from Carlyle and Whistler to Augustus John and McEvoy.”³⁴ Chelsea, an area in central London, then as now, was the home of many artistic personalities. Something different for jaded charity matinee-goers, as a fund raiser it was a great success, and some of the funniest scenes were repeated in *Ellen Terry's Bouquet*, a further fund raiser at the Lyric Theatre on 29 June, attended by the King and Queen.

The second great fund-raiser took much of the latter half of the year to organise and continued to reap benefit into 1918. This was the somewhat unconventional ‘bazaar’ and tombola, held over three days in December (3,4,5) at the Royal Albert Hall. This ‘Petticoat Lane’ Fair was first announced in October and was a major organisational feat, masterminded by Mrs Leyel, supported by Elizabeth Asquith. A huge tombola, probably illegal if the authorities had recognised it as the lottery it really was, formed a major part of the event; donated prizes came from furriers, dress makers, hatters, jewellers and many other businesses, and included a first prize of two acres of land in the Chiltern Hills, live stock such as a prize bull, pedigree puppies and a pig³⁵, a trip to America and other enticing objects. In addition there were many stalls selling produce, arts and crafts, toys, signed books and flowers. There were specially scripted early evening tableaux of fashion clothes, entitled *The Nymphs of the Forest*, *A Dream of Blighty* and *The Seven Ages of Woman*, and the final night was given over to a fancy dress ball for munitions workers.

In *Modern Troubadours* Ashwell describes the publicity. Following the design of a coloured picture poster, “it occurred to Mrs Leyel that pillar-boxes formed admirable posting stations, and one morning London woke to find nearly every pillar-box in the West End surrounded with this delightful picture” (p.115-6). The Government obviously noted the impact this made, “for afterwards pillar-boxes were strictly reserved for Government posters” (ibid). The Fair received extensive press coverage, which frequently made reference to the many women involved in its success, and an enthusiastic response from the public ensured good attendance and income. The remote *Irish Times*, however, published, in what seems to be the only disagreeable comment about the whole enterprise, a pompous,

I know Miss Lena Ashwell’s ‘Concerts at the Front’ Fund has been doing splendid work and deserves substantial support; but I am doubtful whether the ladies who organised the Petticoat Lane Fair, which opened at the Albert Hall this afternoon, have chosen an altogether satisfactory method of helping it. No doubt, a good deal of money will be raked in, but at what a cost for preliminary expenses [which overall amounted to £3,000] and with how much expenditure of labour which might surely be better employed! The craving for excitement of some fashionable dames seems insatiable. It is better that they should indulge it for a good object than a bad one, but why in war-time should they want to indulge it at all?
(4/12/17)

³⁴Quoted from the copy of the programme in Ashwell’s 1917 scrapbook, Imperial War Museum, London.

³⁵There is an amusing hand written draft of a ‘thank you’ letter from Ashwell to the donor of the pig (in Ireland) in the Mander and Mitchenson collection, England.

Presumably the writer did not understand the long term value of publicity nor the morale booster element necessary after more than three years of war. The 261 tombola prizes were not announced until late January 1918, prior to which about one third of the tickets were sold in the provinces. After expenses £34,000 was raised from this brave and amusing enterprise.

Meanwhile Ashwell, with 4,000 concerts having taken place in France and 1,000 elsewhere, began another round of visits to regional cities in March and April, promoting the idea of Concert parties of local artists going to the Front as 'gifts' from their home town. Supported by members of local branches of Concerts for the Front societies, Ashwell's itinerary included concert matinees in Glasgow (27/3) where a donated antique dresser and Staffordshire china were auctioned; Sheffield (30/4) which included promotion for a Flag Day on 14 April; and Birmingham (18/4), at the Theatre Royal where she was supported by Martin Harvey who "worked up the patriotic feelings of the audience by an impassioned recitation" (*Birmingham Post* 19/4/17). Others were also finding imaginative ways to help: for example, J.G. Russell Harvey and Charlie Thomas, the authors of an "excellent and amusing little book", *Ollendorff Up-to-Date*, were donating the profits from the second edition (5,000 copies already sold) to Ashwell's cause (*Bystander* 4/4/17); and in Cairo, Egypt, monies raised at the Grand YMCA fete, the first such large scale held event there on 12 May 1917, during which the Lena Ashwell Concert Party gave three performances, were used to ensure the continuation of the party's work in the area (*Egyptian Gazette* 14/5/17). The Concerts at the Front also shared, with the Auxiliary Maintenance Fund for YMCA Huts, the proceeds from Lavender Days (when donated bunches of lavender were sold by volunteers), which were arranged all over the country in the summer.

In May she visited Hull, York and Doncaster, making appeals and reciting. Before the war and in the early days she often recited Elizabethan love lyrics. These were replaced with patriotic and vividly descriptive war poems written at the Front, including *Fighting Men* and *St George of England* by C. Fox Smith³⁶; *The Sea is His* by R.E. Vernede³⁷; and the epic, *The Bombing of Bruges*, by Paul Bewsher.³⁸ Like many of her actress colleagues, during the war she was often called on to recite patriotic and epic poems describing the conditions of war and encouraging others to take part. In April 1918 she recited Harold Begbie's poem *The Bread of Victory: Britain's Call to the Daughters of Britain* at a Coliseum event which made an urgent appeal for 30,000 women recruits to work on the land.

In June 1917 she gave speeches and recitals in Leeds, Wakefield and Newport as well as contributing to a YMCA presentation of its war work in London. In July she was speaking in Brighton and Hove on behalf of the YWCA's 'Women's Day' to raise funds for facilities for women workers and awarding prizes at the Munitioneers' Fete near Woolwich, followed by a visit to Harrogate in early August. At this time,

³⁶*Fighting Men* by C. Fox Smith, London, Elkin Mathews, 1916.

³⁷Heinemann, London, 1917.

³⁸Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1918.

much promotional use was being made of Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig's letter to the Concerts at the Front office, saying the concerts,

have been a source of endless pleasure and relaxation for many thousands of soldiers. I am, personally, very grateful for the untiring efforts of those who have contributed to make them such a success, and I know that I am only voicing the opinion of all ranks of the army in France in wishing that your scheme may not collapse through lack of funds.

(*Leeds Mercury* 17/7/17)

Ashwell always took great care to promote any official recognition she received and Haig's acknowledgement of her work was an important step forward.

Local organisers set up auditions for concert party participants, and in the presence of experienced musicians and "leading members of the city", Ashwell heard many potential artists. Describing the process in *Modern Troubadours*, Ashwell writes:

The first requisite... was a good artist, but one had always to consider suitability for the work, which required a certain amount of stability of character, and also a desire to be of use, and sometimes one would choose a rather less efficient artist really because of the atmosphere which the singer or player created... the most successful parties were those in which there was a great differentiation but equally great harmony... generally it was a very great strain, because one's decision as to suitability and artistic value had to be made very quickly...[It was] something to be proud of that in dealing with six hundred people [the number of artists used overall], in spite of the tremendous temptations and difficulties ...we were let down in only three or four cases. (p.122-3)

In Manchester she came up against a leading musician who considered economic necessity the most important criterion for selecting artists. Given her statement above, she was not prepared to take artists who simply needed the work for financial reasons or who, despite their artistic talents, did not appear to understand the nature of the commitment. She regretted having to reject some talented musicians because she felt they would not adapt to the ensemble nature of the work.

During this period Ashwell made a number of visits alone to France, "for the purpose of visiting the different bases, to see the parties and arrange differences, for naturally there were a great number of difficulties and dissensions which some one had to smooth out" (ibid. p.132). She was escorted to the Bases by Mr M' Cowan, head of the YMCA in France, where she gave brief early evening recitals of poetry in each hut, as well as speaking about the concert parties. Her determination to retain a strong personal identification with the Concert Parties brought strain into the relationship with the YMCA. The organisation wanted the Concert Parties to be under the YMCA banner, but, despite what Ashwell considered to be her normally compliant nature and the reasonable arguments put forward, she insisted all entertainments should remain prefixed with 'Lena Ashwell',

my whole object from the beginning had been the demonstrating that the arts were essentially and vitally necessary to human beings, as necessary as the Red Cross, and I could

not see why the professional musician or actor should be submerged in the YMCA organisation... and I always considered my name merely as a label to signify that all the people concerned in the work were professionals. Undoubtedly the entertainment work became extremely powerful, and to a non-professional it must have seemed very pig-headed to insist upon the professional standing, but then Christian organisations have not been treated with the indifference and contempt that the music and drama of this country have suffered under. (ibid. p. 132-133)

Ashwell writes with warmth and anecdotal humour about her impressions on visiting the camps and being a member of the audience; she writes with sadness about the great losses and pain suffered by so many. She had a brief respite, however, during this busy summer, when she managed to arrange for her brother, the adventurer, Roger Pocock, to meet up with her for a few days in Boulogne. Pocock was an extraordinary character, who wrote a number of autobiographical accounts of his life, including *A Frontiersman* and *Chorus to Adventurers*. Having set up the Legion of Frontiersmen in 1904, he was anxious to serve his country when the war broke out. Being nearly fifty, he was too old for active service, but was made a platoon commander mobilizing a Labour Corps which was sent to France to unload trains, build light railways and mend roads. He described their brief holiday as sitting “in the sunshine on the ramparts of the chateau, looking out across the Channel to the milky cliffs of England.”³⁹

CIRO'S 'MUSIC CLUB'

In London Ashwell took on another significant responsibility, that of organiser of musical entertainment at Ciro's for its re-opening on 23 May 1917. Ciro's was a famously notorious and frivolous nightclub in London's West End, given over by its owners to the YMCA for use as a soldiers' club for the duration of the war. The aim was to create a 'French bourgeois café' where soldiers on leave could bring women relatives and friends to enjoy light refreshments and entertainment in a socially acceptable environment, complete with hostesses to greet the patrons. “Miss Lena Ashwell is to be responsible for the entertainments, so they will undoubtedly be exactly what our men like, for Miss Ashwell has had so much experience with her concerts at the front that she is by now an expert authority on soldiers' tastes” (*Evening Standard* 24/5/17).

Ashwell had a great short-term success with Ciro's. In early October 1918, the *Daily News* reported that on some days up to 6000 teas and suppers were being served. Afternoon and evening concerts, in all five hours a day of music, presented in the main hall, which also accommodated the 'canteen' area, were masterminded by Ashwell, “who often obtains some of the best talent in London” (1/10/18), and organised by Paget Bowman. Ashwell used as the resident ensemble an all women quartet of piano and three stringed instruments, with additional guest instrumentalists and singers. Roger Quilter arranged many works by famous composers, including Grainger, Frank Bridge, Faure, Schumann, Gounod, Puccini, Bizet, Mozart, Sullivan, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky and others, “and invariably it is found that

³⁹Roger Pocock, *Chorus to Adventurers*, London, John Lane The Bodley Head, 1931, p.168.

the best is the most liked”, stated music critic, Robin Legge, when he wrote in praise of the enterprise (*Daily Telegraph* 9/11/18). With the creation of the ‘Comrade’s Club’, downstairs in a quieter basement area, for string quartets and other chamber music, *Ciro’s* took on the mantle of a music club, which Ashwell hoped the YMCA would be able to continue after the war. In addition to instrumental music, folk songs, operatic arias, madrigal groups, Shakespeare readings and Sunday evening sacred concerts were presented. In February 1919 a *Daily Telegraph* journalist pleaded with the authorities to maintain such a venue:

it is a hideous thought that the time is very near when *Ciro’s* and other similar institutions for the benefit of soldiers and sailors may be closed down by official command. *Ciro’s* has proved a triumphant success not only in virtue of what Mr Paget Bowman, as agent, so to say, for Miss Lena Ashwell, has accomplished in organisation, but because of its immense educative value... *Ciro’s* has risen to the eminence of a music school in the very best sense of that term. The concerts there are of the highest class, and what is more, it is this highest class music that has come to be demanded by the frequenters of *Ciro’s*, soldiers, sailors and their friends.
(1/2/19)

However, after nearly two years of capacity attendance, on June 14 1919, Ashwell’s *Ciro’s* Concert Party made its farewell appearance and during the evening the artists presented Ashwell with an antique French design diamond and emerald pendant and a volume containing signatures of 300 artists who had worked with her. Expressing her thanks, she said, “in their work with the Army they had been able to show that Art was not merely a luxury, but a vital part of the life of the nation” (*Daily Telegraph* 16/6/19). The *Christian World* reported Paget Bowman’s tribute to Ashwell who “had collected £100,000 in order that this work might be done, laying aside her own career as an actress, and treating her brother and sister artistes with most affectionate solicitude” (19/6/19). Various commentators in the press hoped that the *Ciro’s* style ‘Music club’ would be taken up by others now that it was being closed by the YMCA. By the late summer of 1919, however, *Ciro’s* had returned to its pre-war activity and music clubs to occasional events in churches and local halls.

THE REPERTORY COMPANIES

Meanwhile, the work at the Front continued to expand. The concert parties had always included short scenes or monologues from plays in their programmes. In 1917 Ashwell’s colleagues, Penelope Wheeler and Gertrude Jennings, took up the idea of presenting full-length plays, initially in Le Havre. These were dependent on artists, mostly actresses, staying permanently at a YMCA Base and using soldiers and officers for the male roles. Gertrude Jennings had experienced the success of her one act plays at the Front with Ashwell in August 1915 while Penelope Wheeler, a former member of Miss Horniman’s Manchester company, first visited France in November 1916 to give recitations of Euripides’ *Electra*. Early in 1917 Wheeler set up a repertory company based at YMCA Central in Le Havre, which became the prototype for others including one run by Cicely Hamilton in Abbeville and others; all initially run by

women and set up during 1917 and 1918, at Etaples, Calais, Dieppe, and finally Rouen, under the direction of New Zealand actress, Rosemary Rees.

With soldiers and officers in her cast, any of whom could be called for duty at any time, Wheeler always had ready three fully rehearsed, different programmes. With a new play added to the repertoire every week, the company performed nightly in nearby camps and sometimes in the local theatre, except Wednesdays and Fridays when they performed at the YMCA Central, “entirely for the men; officers were only admitted if there was room” (*Modern Troubadours*, p.177). On Saturdays they gave matinee performances for convalescent soldiers, who were accompanied to the venue by a full military band. Much benefit was ascribed to the preparation and rehearsal process for shell-shocked and injured soldiers, who took part in set building and painting and the making of props. The company shared workshop resources in an old granary in Le Havre with a group of Morris dancers who also visited the camps to perform and teach the men their country dances. Ashwell could also claim credit for initiating this activity, since Miss Daking, of the English Folk-Dance Society, was a member of one of the early concert parties and she remained in France to teach women in the YMCA huts and officers, who went on to teach and dance with soldiers as a form of physical exercise as well as entertainment (*Morning Post* 6/8/18).

The repertoire presented by these companies included many recent West End plays, works by Shakespeare and a wide selection of one act plays, often the most suitable for their simplicity in casting and staging requirements. As Ashwell observes in *Modern Troubadours*,

In nearly all plays there are more men than women, and there are very few good plays written entirely for women. We never had more than two or three professional actors (male) in any company, and, having to rely upon the talent to be found amongst the officers and men, the amazing thing is that we were able to do as good work as we did. (p.186)

Her colleagues appeared undaunted, however, and produced Shaw’s *Candida*, *You Never Can Tell* and, after much debate as to whether or not it was an attack on religion, *Fanny’s First Play*; Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as *The School for Scandal*, *Quality Street*, *The Mikado* and *Cousin Kate*. At Abbeville Cicely Hamilton wrote and produced her modern miracle play, *The Child in Flanders*, later performed extensively by the Lena Ashwell Players. Hamilton wrote an entertaining description, *Drama Under Difficulties*, for the *Daily Chronicle*, itemising all the shortcomings and difficulties under which they worked. These included the makeshift staging: “the presence of unnecessary furniture is not encouraged” (19/12/17); the sudden cast changes: “the needs of the Army in these days come before the needs of the stage” (ibid), and the shortage of costumes: “Where every male lives and moves in khaki it is no good sending your actor out to borrow garments from his friends” (ibid). On the other hand, compensation for the actors and audience was great: an actor having to give of the utmost is most satisfying, while the audience was praised for its imagination and generosity. Early in November, to help the activities of the repertory companies, a press

campaign called for “women’s dresses and men’s mufti suits... suitable for modern comedy” (*Nottingham Express* 2/11/17), to be sent to Ashwell in London.

Despite the above, it was necessary for Ashwell to write to the *Referee* on *Theatre Work at the Front*; a response to an article it had published about canteen theatres which gave the impression

that no theatre work is going on in France with the Expeditionary Forces... [however] there are already in France three strong repertory companies... [entertaining] an average of 18,000 men a month... The work is increasing with great speed, and should run parallel to the concert work, which is now sending five visiting parties a month and has fifteen permanent base parties. (9/12/17)

In 1918 Penelope Wheeler was able to report that

From July 1917 to July 1918, we produced thirty three-act and one-act plays... The men want the best. They would not be satisfied with much of what London accepts. They come to the plays alert and eager, not half asleep and inert like so many London audiences. I see in them the promise of the long hoped-for national theatre.⁴⁰

Also despite the considerable publicity surrounding the fund raising for the Concerts at the Front, and Ashwell’s pains to explain that the troops were not charged for performances in YMCA huts, tents, hospitals or at the Front, she frequently had to explain to the doubters that the rewards were not financial ones. “Sometimes a small charge was made for events at licensed theatres and after the Armistice was signed the YCMA had made a few charges but otherwise the concerts were free and she wanted those at home who had contributed so much to know that this was the case” (*Edinburgh Despatch* 5/7/19). This was her response, reiterated in *Modern Troubadours*, to a letter published on 27 June in the *Despatch*, signed only ‘M.M.’, which claimed soldiers had to pay for the Concert party performances at the Front.

As a development in the work of the repertory companies and a further initiative in the provision of recreation for the soldiers, Ashwell began a project in mid 1917, which did not bear fruit until the following year. While she was in Paris in June 1917, “the city was filled with troops on leave, and I heard many regrets that there were no places of entertainment where the troops could hear their own language, and there was no place where continuous entertainment was given, except, of course, the French theatres” (*Modern Troubadours*, p.187).

She set about to find a suitable, affordable theatre in Paris, where she hoped the permanent repertory companies already based in France could present seasons, together with productions prepared in England. This was something the YMCA were not able to help with, making it very much a personal enterprise as

⁴⁰*The Play at the Front, From Euripides to Shaw*, unidentified newspaper article, Ashwell’s 1918 scrapbook, Imperial War Museum, London.

the posters for the season from June 1918 illustrate.⁴¹ At the same time, she began renting the small Palace Theatre in Winchester, inland but relatively close to the port of Portsmouth and some sixty-five miles south west of London. This provided a base for companies to rehearse and perform while waiting for permits and other details to be sorted so they could travel to France. This was important during the first half of 1918 when troop movement had increased and civilian permits were more erratic, resulting in some last minute cancellation of travel. From this base, performers visited nearby camps at Lark Hill, Warminster and Salisbury Plain; and naval hospitals and ships of the fleet, to give plays and concerts. From brief reviews in the local press in July 1918, it seems the concert parties also used the Guildhall in Winchester for some performances, possibly because it was larger.⁴²

Awaiting official support and a suitable theatre, she acquired rights to many plays including *Eliza Comes to Stay*, *Peter's Mother* and *When We Were Twenty One*, with Eva Moore, Wilfred Foster, Oswald Marshall and Robert Minster preparing for a week of trial performances, commencing 8 April 1918, at the Kings Theatre, Hammersmith. Subsequently, in late April and May, performances of the repertoire for France were given in Winchester. Ashwell engaged Oswald Marshall, previously at the Playhouse, London, to manage the Palace Theatre for her (*Hampshire Chronicle* 11/5/18). She had difficulty obtaining passes through the YMCA to get the company to France and sought help through the Ministry of Information. At this stage Lord Beaverbrook, in charge of the Ministry, was investigating the use of drama and music for propaganda purposes, instead of the scattering over Europe of printed matter, which had been used to date with little effect. Ashwell hoped that

if the Comedie Francaise would be generous enough to invite a British Shakespearean company to play in their historic and world-known theatre, the company could afterwards visit neutral countries with this hall-mark of artistic excellence, and also this sign of co-operation between the two great nations would be invaluable in neutral countries. A good deal of propaganda was being done by the Germans in neutral countries through music and plays, and amongst others, Reinhardt's productions of Shakespeare's plays.

(Modern Troubadours, p.190)

However, while Ashwell was in Paris engaging the interest and support of the Comedie Francaise director, mainly for rehearsal space and matinee performances of Shakespeare's comedies, to her chagrin, Beaverbrook decided that neither English music nor English drama would be used for information or propaganda. The cinema was to be used instead. Ashwell later wrote of this decision: "There are some events in life which fill one with unspeakable rage because of their crass stupidity" (ibid. p.191). It may well have been this decision of Beaverbrook's which made Ashwell sceptical of the cinema as an art form and dubious of its making a positive contribution, especially in the lives of young people. While recognising the impact cinema was making, she was particularly outspoken against its influence in the 1920s.

⁴¹There are a number of these in Ashwell's scrapbooks in the Imperial War Museum, London.

⁴²The Guildhall's capacity in the 1990s, presumably similar to 1917, was 700 seats.

Figure 32: Poster for Ashwell's opening season at the Theatre Albert 1er, 1918. (Imperial War Museum Ashwell scrapbook)

Eventually, however, with the help of a Mr Worthington, of the YMCA Paris Information Bureau, who was responsible for organising leave for soldiers in Paris, Ashwell secured a theatre near the Gare St Lazare, which she renamed the Theatre Albert 1er, and the first performance was given on 29 June 1918. Although Lord Derby and the Corps Diplomatique were present at the opening (*Myself a Player*, p.216), Ashwell was again thwarted by the lack of official support and recognition. It was a difficult time in Paris; the city was under constant bombardment and by the time the company arrived, all leave to Paris had been cancelled and people were leaving the city in great numbers. However, not long after, the tide began to turn in favour of the Allies and performances of such plays as Somerset Maugham's social satire, *Smith*, Haddon Chambers' *The Tyranny of Tears* and *Mrs Gorrings's Necklace* by H.H. Davies, were given throughout that European summer before the end of the war. The company gave six evening and two matinee performances a week, with a change of programme twice a week. It was promoted as an "English Season, Director: Miss Lena Ashwell OBE, English Players in English Plays."⁴³ The *Era* reported on this 'Theatrical Entente Cordiale', playing to appreciative audiences and hoped it could continue after the war (2 & 24/7/18). Ashwell wrote that "at the time of the Armistice, they were playing *The Man Who Stayed at Home*, and actively rehearsing *Twelfth Night*" (*Modern Troubadours*, p.191). She, too, hoped to continue in France after the war, but this was possible only until late February 1919, by which time the company had moved to the municipal theatre in Lille; the Paris theatre having been taken over by an American cinema group. In fact, support for the theatre in Paris had been limited. To the *Referee*, the British businessman appeared to be too busy chasing financial deals (19/1/19), and as soldiers were moved from France to Germany and elsewhere, there were fewer of them on leave in Paris. From Lille the company toured to surrounding towns and worked in cooperation with the Military. It could not be self supporting - the financial arrangement was that "When playing in theatres, half the takings went to the Mayor, two-thirds of what remained to us, and one third to the Army" (*Modern Troubadours*, p.191).

On 25 August 1917 Ashwell was included on a front-page pictorial spread in the *Daily Graphic*; along with the Queen and eleven other women from all walks of life, as a recipient of the new Order of the British Empire instituted by the King. This was the first time women were recognised in this way for their own achievements, which was obviously still something of a problem for the clerk in the office of the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood, who hand addressed Ashwell's award to "Mrs Lena Simson, Sir".

There were many press articles on Ashwell's achievements, as presumably there were for the other women thus honoured, providing a further publicity angle to promote the Concerts at the Front. The YMCA journal, *Red Triangle*, paid tribute to her contribution (31/8/17), as did the *Musical News* in which Paget Bowman wrote:

⁴³This is the wording on a poster included in Ashwell's scrapbooks, Imperial War Museum, London.

Figure 33: Ashwell's 'Dear Sir' letter advising that she was to receive an O.B.E., August 1917. (Imperial War Museum Ashwell scrapbook.

Figure 34: The *Daily Graphic* front page announcement of women recipients of British Empire Orders, 25 August 1917.

Miss Lena Ashwell has already given over 6,000 concerts in France, in Egypt, and in Malta, to say nothing of those in the camps at Aldershot, Canterbury, and on Salisbury Plain, and in numerous hospitals in and around London. In connection with these concerts she has given employment to nearly 400 artists, some of whom might have fared ill during the war but for her efforts. (1/9/17)

John Hastings Turner, author of *Iris Intervenes*, wrote, “may I add mine to the heap of congratulations you will be receiving” and performer Elsie Gough was “very proud to think I have been connected in a small way with your great scheme - having been to France for you twice this year, as well at the home camps... Truly it is a wonderful work.”⁴⁴

Another significant, but perhaps little known, tribute to women was made by former Prime Minister, Mr Asquith, in his preface to the book, *Women of the War*, edited by the Hon. Mrs Francis McLaren and published by Hodder and Stoughton in September 1917. This was a collection of over thirty narratives by women, including Ashwell, explaining their war work. The *British Weekly* quoted some of his comments,

For the first time it has taught us as a nation to realise how large and how decisive is the part that can be played in a world wide contest by those who are prevented from taking a place in the actual fighting line... Nor can it be doubted that these experiences and achievements will, when the war is over, have a permanent effect upon both the statesman’s and the economist’s conception of the powers and functions of women in the reconstructed world. (13/9/17)

This from the man who, when in government, would not support the vote for women. The world was certainly changing.

However well these experiences were thus encapsulated, with “sanity and comparative absence of panegyric”, according to the *Glasgow Herald* (6/12/17) review of the above book, Ashwell’s work continued, with October visits, often accompanied by one of the Concert parties, to Bristol, Swansea, Reading and Manchester. In November she made a very successful three-day fund raising visit to Liverpool where the Lord Mayor’s Khaki Fund made a substantial contribution (over £7,000 was formally handed to her in March 1918), to the Concerts at the Front. Ashwell visited all the city’s places of entertainment, including cinemas, theatres and music halls and was the guest at various ‘At Homes’ hosted by the Mayor. “In three days I spoke twenty-two times... when it was all over, Sir Archibald [Salvidge, Deputy Lord Mayor] almost persuaded me that I might be able to live through a General Election Campaign” (*Modern Troubadours*, p.119). There was no doubt she had become an articulate and respected public speaker.

Indeed, at this crucial time, Ashwell began to take on a more overtly ‘political’ stance in many of her appearances, recognising that thoughts must be focussed on rising above war weariness and planning the

⁴⁴These quotes are from letters written to Ashwell and dated 26 August 1917. Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester.

strong involvement of women in a post-war future. In December 1917 the Representation of the People Bill, which included the vote for women, was passed in the House of Commons with very little opposition. “Most members agreed with Asquith... when he said: “Some years ago I ventured to use the expression, ‘Let the women work out their own salvation.’ Well, Sir, they have worked it out during this war.”⁴⁵ After such a battle, it was a quiet victory, even when the Act became Law in June 1918. There were still issues to be clarified, as the *Era* editorial on *Actresses and the Franchise* pointed out. Actresses who toured constantly could still lose out if not in the same residence for six months, a condition of eligibility to register for the vote. The *Era* urged the Actors’ Association and AFL to work to ensure proxy votes would be available for touring artists as they were for soldiers (13/2/18).

Ashwell was no doubt aware of the progress of the Bill. The *Evening News* reported on her lunch hour address, as part of a series entitled *The Great Unknown*, given to women workers assembled in St James’s Park⁴⁶: “The spirit of the womanhood of England is determined to see the war through to the end... We are not going to try to escape any of the weariness. We know we are a strength behind the armies. The army needs us” (22/10/17). Later, she made a stern appeal to women workers, at a meeting on the post war employment of women clerks called by the Women’s Industrial Council at Caxton Hall. The Council was anticipating post war problems and seeking recognition for the principle of equal pay for equal work. Ashwell stressed that women should impress on each other that,

No woman in any circumstance should work for pocket money. Either she should stand by the regular woman worker and insist on her proper wage or she should take voluntary work, first having discovered that in so doing she was not upsetting those who should be paid... The taking or giving employment for pocket money was a national crime that could never be forgiven nor forgotten.
(*Daily Sketch* 2/11/17)

The meeting resolved that clerical workers after the war “should insist upon adequate salaries and reasonable conditions of service... [and seek] to influence public opinion in this direction” (*Times* 2/11/17). Further women and work issues were addressed at an Aeolian Hall meeting where Ashwell argued that if more women were to be employed after the war, help must be given to make this possible. The establishment of communal kitchens, crèches run by the State, nursery schools run by the education department and training to ensure efficiency were among her suggestions to ensure equal pay and the removal of barriers preventing women getting to the top (*Daily Chronicle* 26/11/17).

Throughout the war Ashwell also had a commitment to the British Homestead Association, an organisation acquiring homesteads and farms to help the rehabilitation and re-training of soldiers after their discharge from the care of the Red Cross. She spoke in support of their work at various meetings in 1917 and 1918, particularly “eloquent in moving the resolution to provide for soldiers suffering from tubercular and neurasthenic troubles” (*Queen* 8/2/19). The organisation urged the government to

⁴⁵This statement is quoted in A.J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, London, Pelican, 1970, p.133.

formulate a practical land settlement policy to ensure productivity of natural resources, giving preference to ex-servicemen, to take full responsibility for all disabled cases and to coordinate all agencies assisting ex-service men and women.

A few days after the November 1917 inauguration of the National Party or Coalition, led by Lloyd George, *The Gentlewoman*, in an article headed, *Purity in Politics, Can the Ideals of the new National Party be realised? A Question for Women*, published an appeal, to which Ashwell was a signatory:

We hope that all British women who put the honour and safety of their country above the interests of an unworthy political system will join the National Movement which makes for honest administration and purity in politics. Women must now take a great share in the political life of the country...[This] Party is pledged... thereafter ...to work for national security, for safeguarding our food supplies and our vital industries, and by the rebuilding of a free and honourable life for all in accordance with the traditions of our race. (3/11/17)

Other signatories included women academics, a union organiser, representatives from war organisations and patriotic societies, St John's Ambulance and the Women's Emigration Association.

Before reconstruction, however, the war had to be concluded (and won) and on 24 January 1918, Chelsea Town Hall accommodated a large National Party Meeting "to urge the vigorous prosecution of the war to a victorious conclusion" (*Morning Post* 25/1/18). General Page Croft put a detailed resolution to the meeting which included a call for conscription in Ireland, condemnation of pacifists, and advice to the government to keep up the supply of man-power to the armies at the Front. It was a patriotic occasion, with more than a dash of jingoism. Ashwell, in seconding the motion to urge victorious conclusion, regretted that something of the horrors of war "could not be brought home to the people who lived in this feather-bed of England" (ibid). In what briefly became a controversial statement quoted out of context and against her (as "thank God for queues"), "she thanked God that the shortage of food was giving the people of England a little - a very little - share of that great suffering which our men were enduring" (ibid). By 1 March, she was obliged to use the opportunity of a speech made in Liverpool, to explain how she had been mis-quoted in January (*Liverpool Courier* 2/3/18).

Her most active involvement with the National Party appears to have been in December 1918, before the election, when the *Newcastle Daily Journal* reported under the heading, *Actress and Election*,

Much interest has been aroused in London tonight in Miss Ashwell's decision to take part in the election... She wants the peace to be worthy of what the boys have done, and wants Mr Lloyd George and Mr Bonar Law to go to the Conference with the strong support of the Parliament. So Miss Ashwell has decided to go to Lincoln tomorrow to help Mr Alfred Davies in his fight against an Asquith-Liberal. (13/12/18)

⁴⁶The *Westminster Gazette*, 22 October 1917, reported that Ashwell addressed her audience as "comrades".

In her scrapbook there is an unidentified newspaper item, headed *Miss Lena Ashwell Plumps for Coalition*, on the Women's Meeting of Davies' supporters at the Theatre Royal, Lincoln. The chair, Mrs W.T. Bell, declared: "The first essential was to take a full and intelligent interest in the problems before the country, and the selection of the men local and imperial who desired to represent them in the great councils of the Empire and the Peace Conference." Ashwell began by saying that she

did not care a bit about politics, but she cared a great deal for this country. There were many things that women meant to have. They meant to have better housing and better education, and they meant to have equal pay for equal work. They also meant to have open competition in every part of the nation's work, for which the best brains of the nation were needed, and coming into which women meant to take their part without any sex barrier whatever... They meant to have freedom for the evolution of the souls of the people. They intended to have beauty and something worth living for so that the children of the future might not be slaves to machinery, but should have some leisure, some happiness, some beauty and some joy brought into their lives. (15/12/18)

She urged her listeners to support Lloyd George's Coalition, "who cared for the working people and whose government had won the war" (ibid). She concluded with recitations of two patriotic poems.

Despite the fact that women were now entitled to stand for election to the House of Commons and the *Era's* observation that the entertainment profession needed representation in Parliament to influence such matters as the Entertainments Tax, censorship and licensing (20/11/18), neither Ashwell nor her colleagues seem to have been inclined to stand. There were two successful male Coalition candidates dealing with entertainment issues - C. Jesson, Secretary of the Amalgamated Musicians' Union and Walter de Frece, who took their seats in December 1918.

Ashwell's opinion was sought and quoted on various other matters: *Lloyds Weekly News* featured her comments on *Women and Cigarettes*, *The Tobacco Controller's Mistake*; a response to his absurd suggestion that "In view of the serious shortage of tobacco in the country, women ought to stop smoking" (25/11/17). She argues eloquently and wittily that everyone should be asked to give up smoking in order to supply the soldiers whose need was greatest but that women smoked very little compared to men and their stopping would not make much difference. On the subject of future theatre, the *Daily Sketch* quoted Ashwell as stating, "I should like to see a theatre, belonging to the municipality or to the nation, and not left to the enterprise of individuals who are there to make money" (26/11/17). Meanwhile the *Daily Express* published a somewhat whimsical piece, *Our Comradeship with France - Monuments of a past that is Dead*, describing her observation on the 'accommodation' by the French of British soldiers, despite many visible monuments and reminders to past differences between England and France (3/12/17). 1917 had been a year in which women were at last politically and publicly acknowledged as major contributors to society. It is sad and ironical that it took a major, destructive world war to bring this about. The year also ended on a positive note for the Concerts at the Front, with the 'Petticoat Lane' Fair raising the profile and money to continue into 1918, and with various articles acknowledging the important

contribution they were making. These included an illustrated account of the concert parties in *Home Chat* (8/12/17), and a Boxing Day report from a base camp praising the work of all those working for the YMCA, “but all of them would agree in giving the place of chief importance to the women whose presence in the huts imparts an air of brightness and human grace” (*Inquirer* 19/1/18).

THE IMPACT OF WAR ON THE THEATRE

Throughout the war many theatre commentators were anticipating what entertainment and theatrical fare might be sought in a changed, post-war world. Ashwell no doubt hoped that her much described observations of the appreciation, by ordinary soldiers, of ‘serious’ music and drama, would be heeded. Indeed, Alfred Barnard, writing in the *Era*, considered that revue had exhausted its resources of novelty and that the charity matinee’s days were numbered as it took away from regular receipts for the theatre manager. He predicted that while “millions of war-worn soldiers and war-worried civilians of both sexes will need probably more entertainment and amusement than they have ever indulged in before” (2/8/16), resulting in a new form of light musical comedy in the immediate aftermath, social reconstruction will mean “earnest, sober and serious efforts to rebuild out of chaos a new social system, more worthy of our civilization than any hitherto contemplated” (ibid). He foresaw that

every man and woman will be inclined to serious effort and studied reflection. Education, habits, thought, work, eating, drinking, and legitimate pleasure will contrast strangely with all that have gone before... both the Church and the Theatre will have to provide fare which will be in keeping with the desire for improvement experienced by all... on lines compatible with the national desire for a saner and more solid social existence. (ibid)

He concluded, however, that all forms of entertainment would still need to contain basic human needs - those of laughter and tears. Theatre manager, Frederick Whelen, speaking at an Ethical Society meeting on *The Theatre after the War*, saw the success of Lilian Baylis’s Old Vic Shakespeare seasons and the London County Council support for educational visits there, together with the increased membership of such groups as the Stage Society and the Pioneer Players, as future and growing antidotes to the light entertainment available for recreational purposes, and necessary, in the short term, to those on leave from the pressures and stresses of war (*Era* 16/1/18). The *Era* predicted that the Censor might be less severe on such serious plays as Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and De Brieux’s *Damaged Goods*⁴⁷, which had been banned initially (and given private first performances), making it possible for playwrights to deal more effectively with moral themes than had been possible before and during the war (5/6/18). This was taken up by E. Temple Thurston in his analysis of the playgoer in the *Era*. He likened the theatre during the war to an anaesthetist, getting the patient, in the absence of other drugs, through the operation. Once recovered and changed by this operation, the patient would seek a greater reality.

⁴⁷*Les Avaries*, translated by John Pollock, which deals with a young man with syphilis, was finally staged at St Martin’s Theatre, London, running for 281 performances from 17 March, 1917. (Glenn Loney, *20th Century Theatre*, New York, Facts on File Publications, 1983, p.83.)

A thousand problems, moral and social, will arise out of the war... must be dealt with, not only by the authorities... but by the dramatist and author, who must and will say what is in their minds. There are many things people have been thinking... which for reasons of patriotism and the will to victory, they neither have dared nor have they wished to say... all are to be spoken... and [no-one] will stop their being said. (9/10/18)

Ashwell was already declaring her hand on the above, but aware that while raising the issues was important, talking about them would not be sufficient.

Throughout 1918, and particularly during January and February, the theatrical trade paper, the *Era*, in both its weekly editions and its Annual, was voicing many concerns about the impact of long term war on the state of the drama. In 1916 West End successes had included *The Bing Boys* at the Alhambra, Brighouse's *Hobson's Choice*, *Peg o' My Heart*, *The Man Who Stayed at Home* and Barrie's comedy *A Kiss for Cinderella*, which moved into the Kingsway over Christmas under the management of Percy Hutchinson. Although it produced "nothing epoch making, nevertheless a very healthy activity has been felt in the theatrical world," declared the *Era* (9/8/16). By then, there had been many charity matinees for war funds with willing and enthusiastic support from the profession. By January 1918, however, the *Era* was reporting that the Actors' Benevolent and the Variety Benevolent Funds were in urgent need of donations to help their own members in need (23/1/18). In 1917 the West End outlook was not so positive: there were very few new plays of note; serious plays about the war, including *The Pacifists* by Henry Arthur Jones and Galsworthy's *Loyalty*, failed, although melodramatic pieces including *The Saving Grace* by Haddon Chambers, and *Seven Days Leave*⁴⁸ by Walter Howard, did well. There were many special circumstances and problems which affected theatre management to a greater or lesser extent: including air-raids and the curfew, which until April 1918 was set at 9.30pm; after this date it was changed to 10.30pm. Other problems included rationing, increased prices and shortages of materials such as paper for posters and promotional leaflets, which the *Era* noted (10/7/18); and fuel, which reduced street lighting. As the nation was exhorted to "Use Less Fuel", the *Era* suggested theatres turn this to their advantage by calculating to what extent they provided warm "communal sitting rooms" (11/9/18), reducing fuel consumed by individual households. This argument, however, was harder to sustain in late October, when a countrywide influenza epidemic threatened to close theatres and other places of entertainment. In Portsmouth, close to Ashwell's Winchester base, the military authorities declared all theatres and cinemas to be out of bounds for the troops until further notice (*Era* 30/10/18). The Entertainments Tax, increased on 1 October, had been damaging for many; an *Era* survey finding that "on an average the takings of theatres, music halls and cinemas... had dropped over twenty-three percent" (*Era Annual* 1918), since that date, and each new wartime budget brought fear of a further increase in the tax and added responsibilities for managers in meeting the requirements of Customs and Excise authorities.

⁴⁸This play ran for 715 performances at the Lyceum Theatre, London, from 14 February 1917.

Early in 1918 the Government adopted the Whitley Report, which, in preparation for an altered, post-war, relationship between employer and employee, proposed councils comprised of representatives of employers' associations and trade unions in equal numbers to draw up agreements as to rates of pay and conditions of employment for their various industries. The aim was to reach legally binding, acceptable conditions to replace 'laissez faire', exploitative, individualism. Mr C. Jesson, a member of the London County Council, writing in the *Era*, suggested the entertainment industries should consider their position along the lines of the report, arguing that higher wages would benefit the members of the profession and help create larger audiences for all places of entertainment (30/1/18). The Actors' Association, alongside an active recruitment campaign to achieve true representation of the profession, began to address the issue of changing from a company to a trade union and in late August a majority vote agreed to this step (*Era* 28/8/18). Given the national debt incurred during the war, Jesson predicted the continuation of the Entertainments Tax, damaging to the theatre unless there were higher wages earned by all workers, many of whom as soldiers had sought out the theatre when on leave. There was a general awareness that the composition of theatre audiences had changed - the dilettante in evening dress had been replaced by khaki-clad men and women who had faced death and did not go to the theatre to be part of fashionable society. It seemed certain that with reasonable wages in their pockets, they would seek out similar entertainments in peacetime (*Era* 6/2/18). Tempting as it may have been, no manager could afford to assume a return to "normalcy" would mean a return to pre-war behaviour by the majority.

One noteworthy and long lasting artistic benefit of the war, as mentioned in the *Era*, was the strengthening of British musical resources (16/8/16). Thrown onto their own sources of talent, local opera singers, composers and instrumentalists emerged to take the place of previously imported soloists, and the many all-British musical programmes promoted by such organisations as Isidore de Lara's War Emergency Entertainments' Campaign gained momentum and popularity as much for musical reasons as patriotic ones. Many of the music clubs and choral societies still operating throughout the United Kingdom had their origins in this period.

For most of February 1918, Ashwell was in France, performing with one of the concert parties. Such was her association with them, that by now many soldiers; themselves referred to as 'Tommy's'; referred to the parties as 'The Lenas' or, to those remaining at a base for some time, as 'The Stationary Lenas'.⁴⁹ On her return she published further comments on her experiences,

Our difficulties have been enormous, but we are amply repaid by the delight which the soldier boys manifest. Just picture a play being staged in a hangar inches deep in mud. An actress in evening dress has to leap from plank to plank to reach the stage. A false step and she would sink over her ankles. I have been over to France with the object of developing the theatrical side of the entertainments... Some of our performances are given in cinemas, which hold 1500 people, and occasionally we are able to get a fairly well equipped theatre. If

⁴⁹From an unidentified newspaper cutting dated 13/3/18 in Ashwell's scrapbooks, Imperial War Museum, London.

the war lasts long enough we may see a National Repertory Theatre established in France. It may pave the way to a similar institution in England - who knows!

(*Sunday Chronicle* 24/2/18)⁵⁰

There was a further round of fund raising concerts, written and spoken appeals by Ashwell in Liverpool, Manchester and elsewhere, and more local artists were sought to perform in concert parties.

Ashwell found time in February to give an address, along with colleagues Lillah McCarthy, Eva Moore and Irene Vanbrugh, at an exhibition, including displays of uniforms, in the department store, Harrods, on the work of women's corps including the WAACS, the WRENs and the RFC. She was part of the profession's 70th birthday tribute to Ellen Terry at the Coliseum on February 27 when she presented the much-loved actress with a laurel wreath as a gift from 'The Boys at the Front'. She appears to have been negotiating a film appearance when *Bioscope* announced, in a list of other projects, that "Another well-known English artist who will shortly be presented by the Ideal [Film Company] for the first time on screen is Miss Lena Ashwell who will be seen in the *Impossible Woman* [by Haddon Chambers], a dramatic version of the novel, *Tante*" (28/2/18), but no further evidence of this has come to light. In addition, she became president of the Union of Lady Musicians, presumably in recognition of her employment of so many in the Concert parties, which was formed around the time the management of Stoll theatres and cinemas announced they would not displace women orchestral players when male musicians returned to England after the war. "As far as strings and the lighter instruments generally are concerned, the women are regarded as improvements upon male executants, and such distinguished composers as Sir Edward Elgar and Sir Frederic Cowen have complimented them upon their playing of their works" (*Star* 31/3/18). In this aspect of the equal employment of men and women, England was to remain ahead of its European neighbours for many years.

On 7 March 1918, the O.P. Club held a 'Recognition dinner' at the Criterion Restaurant to express gratitude to the theatrical and music hall profession for the work done in entertaining soldiers and raising money for the relief of sufferers of the war.⁵¹ Ashwell responded on behalf of 'The Guests' with much praise for the YMCA ("a magnificent organisation"), and its preparedness to work with the profession. She described the success of the repertory companies in France in creating interest in British plays (*Daily Telegraph* 8/3/18).

In June 1918 the YMCA celebrated its 74th anniversary with a number of events, including a fund raising matinee at its London Headquarters, on 11 June, attended by the Princesses Royal, Maud and Helena Victoria, which "included Mr Alfred Capper's exhibition of thought transmission" (*Era* 19/6/18), an

⁵⁰This article was repeated or quoted in other newspapers at the time.

⁵¹Some months later, the *Sporting Times*, in a brief and unsubstantiated statement, paid tribute to performers, saying, "the contribution to war funds, by means of their performances, of about three millions sterling - was probably unequalled by any other body of workers" (16/11/18).

extraordinary experiment he had already performed to 500,000 men at the front, under the auspices of Concerts at the Front. There was much praise for the concert party scheme, now presenting 14,000 concerts a year, with Ashwell declaring that “to help the fund was the best method of sending our love to the men out there” (ibid). On 14 June the National Council gave a presentation of its work, during which Ashwell advised that artists had raised £79,500 for the concerts at the Front (*Times* 15/6/18). Even as she spoke one of the concert parties was on a two-week tour of the Eastern counties, including Ipswich, Harwich and Felixstowe, presenting fund raising concerts. As well as raising money for their own cause, the Concert Parties frequently provided entertainment at other charitable events, such as the garden party in aid of the Royal Medical Benevolent Fund Guild (presumably involving Dr Henry Simson) in July 1918.

While there were still many projects ahead before Ashwell would conclude this chapter in her life, there was a brief gossip column report in *Truth* which appeals as a summary of her achievements and status at this stage:

in South Molton Street I ran against Lena Ashwell, rejuvenated in some miraculous way by her grey hair, and I heard of her successful establishment of the English comedy theatre in Paris. On leaving her I pondered over her inaugurative power and the many big achievements which go - and remain - to her credit, the Emergency Corps, the Three Arts Club, and the Concerts at the Front being the greatest of these. Assuredly she has stamped herself upon her time. (4/9/18)

Six months later, *The Lady* further acknowledged her work with the comment, “It is lucky for England that when its accredited representatives refuse to recognise certain public work as a national duty, private enterprise always comes to the rescue” (13/3/19). The article was referring to all the voluntary work undertaken which often provided the only support for many during the war. This included private hospitals, the Red Cross, YMCA and Lena Ashwell, “who took the work [entertainment for the troops] in hand, gradually won over official prejudice and carried it through” (ibid).

With the dramatically swift “cessation of hostilities”, the *Era*, in an editorial, *Peace and the Playhouse*, also acknowledged the major contribution for which the profession needed to be appreciated.

It has provided the antidote to national depression and has carried on in the face of much difficulty and actual danger... it has given of its best ungrudgingly... often in the face of vexatious restrictions and regulations... whether the nation has been equally fair to the entertainment industry is another question. (13/11/18)

Ashwell took up this point as she prepared to debate another issue of concern with an article in the *Fortnightly Review* on *The Theatre and Rühleben*. She described the theatre work, during two years of imprisonment, performed by English inmates of a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany and posed the question,

What is the matter with the theatre in England? In Berlin Shakespeare has been played continuously during the war; in Paris two Shakespeare plays have been produced within the last few months. Even the Serbians, in their own country before its great national disaster, were able to give many productions of Shakespeare's plays; prisoners of war are able to play Shakespeare in their camps. Why is it, then, that alone in England, with the exception of the plucky enterprise at the 'Old Vic', it is impossible to see any of his works played?
(DCXXII, October 1918).

She also appealed for help to start a British theatre at The Hague, Holland, to where the actors, musicians and artists released from Ruhleben had been transferred prior to repatriation. They were seeking to resume productions and to spread knowledge of British drama. No help was forthcoming from the Ministry for Information. As Ashwell pointed out,

The Ministry is able to spend public money upon the securing of paintings as a record of the war. Paintings have, no doubt, a commercial as well as artistic value, and can be safely stored and considered as a commercial asset... But are we only a commercial nation? Are we quite convinced that the only thing that counts is money? Are we prepared to give up our inheritance in literature and to see other countries able and willing to produce our great monuments of literary art, while we sit idly by and allow, by our inertia, the use of these great works to slip out of our national life... Surely in discussing reconstruction some notice should be taken of the powerful medium of the drama. (ibid)

She maintained this theme when distributing medals and diplomas to Incorporated London Academy of Music students, advising them "to follow the idea of always placing art before monetary considerations" (*Morning Post* 19/11/18).

The *Performer* considered Ashwell's concern about outside commercial interests and the dominance of "revues, and trashy forms of entertainment" (10/10/18), in the theatre, to be "hysterical," while the *Aldershot News* published a letter from 'Aristophanes' following her October speech for the YMCA on *The Drama and the Christian Life*. The writer took issue with her claim that the Press and theatre managers worked against the serious drama, giving the example of empty seats for Ellen Terry's Shakespeare readings in Aldershot, suggesting Ashwell consider human nature ("the unsatisfied craving for mind recreation" 1/11/18), and the inadequate education system. As the end of the war began to be seen as a possibility, Ashwell felt justified in focussing attention on the theatre as an important way of helping a damaged society. She did not want to lose the opportunity to make a fresh start. The day before the Germans signed the Armistice agreement, the *Sunday Times* published her view of the *Future of the Drama*. She argued that theatre could not be seen only in terms of its 'amusement' value because "it has been the peculiar heritage of the English race to express themselves most completely through poetry and drama" (10/11/18). She had seen thousands of soldiers respond positively and enthusiastically to the words and music of great creative talents, presented simply and sincerely, without condescension. She had seen performers stimulated and encouraged by such responses and felt it was time "the nation as a whole should waken to the fact that they are the victim of a system" (ibid).

She continued to express her opinions with articles in the press and public appearances. In a plea for money to continue the concert parties and repertory companies until every soldier and war-worker was on home soil, she published *The Artistic Growth of the Soldier* in the *Sunday Evening Telegraph*. Expressing her continuing disappointment with the lack of support from the War Office, she gave a stern warning to officialdom.

It has been proved - and this is a lesson of the war that must not be forgotten in peace - that art is not a luxury, something external that may be done without, but part of the very fibre of our national life, neglect of which is fatal. My own experience, reinforced by that of all fellow-workers, is that the health, the spirit, the morale of the troops were benefited enormously by the entertainments furnished; that music and the drama played an undeniable part in securing victory. This will not be new to those who have realised the intimate correlation between Art and Life; but may be so to others, and, I hope, will have some influence on our views when normal conditions are resumed. (2/3/19)

The article outlines the changes in taste, expectation and appreciation of the soldiers in music, recitation and plays, as “the more obvious gradually yielded place to finer work” (ibid). In her experience the great composers, poets and playwrights (Shakespeare) began to be “preferred to all others, and listened to with breathless attention, and who shall say with what spiritual refreshment?” (ibid). Performers were expressing similar perceptions in local newspapers as they returned home and reported on their experiences, but for many there were more practical issues to be dealt with as re-construction began.

It was many months before all soldiers returned to the United Kingdom from Europe and the Middle East. Ashwell continued to raise money and organise performances until demobilisation was complete in June 1919. Many performances were given in Germany, to the Allied Army of Occupation for whom morale boosting was essential as they waited to return home. Early in November 1918, before the Armistice, yet another promotional idea to raise funds for concert parties was announced,

a novel form of ‘Window Tax’ (originally introduced in 1697!), originated by Mr Percy F. Corkhill, Liverpool ... assumes the form of a small and most artistic window transparency, easily affixed to the window pane (including motor car windows). It depicts a scene at an al fresco concert in France, an outward sign that the purchaser, in Miss Ashwell’s words, has helped to send ‘mirth and melody, a little love, and a thought of home to your own men, giving them further heart to strive against the terrible hardships we shall never know’, cost 6d. or more. (Liverpool Journal of Commerce, 9/11/18)

The ‘window tax’ fund raising and the presentation of Shakespeare for the troops - *Twelfth Night* in Paris, directed by Ashwell, and *The Merchant of Venice*⁵² at Le Havre - were current news stories, taking a back page, however, to the news of the Allies’ supremacy after more than four years of a terrible war.

⁵²Ashwell’s 1919 scrapbook contains a review, of *The Merchant* at the Grand Theatre, by Jean d’Auray in an undated edition of *Malaceine*. The date was likely to be around 24/4/19, as d’Auray advises that at the same time as this performance was being given, Shakespeare’s birthday (23 April) was being celebrated in Stratford upon Avon. Penelope Wheeler was a “gracieuse et passionnee Portia”, H.A. Staintsbury a strong Shylock and “L’ensemble de l’interpretation s’imposa toute de suite par la tenue et l’homogenite, la conviction et la sincerite.”

Ashwell spent Christmas and the New Year in the devastated areas of France, which she described graphically in Chapter VIII of *Modern Troubadours*. She visited the seven repertory companies now working there, with headquarters in Le Havre, Rouen, Paris, Abbeville, Dieppe, Etaples and Trouville and a repertoire of more than eighty plays. Before this, she was involved in a number of activities including the December election and a series of three Vocal and Dramatic recitals in November and early December at the Aeolian Hall with singer Carrie Tubb, a popular member of the concert parties. Auriol Jones accompanied them at the piano. While apparently not fund raising concerts (they were managed by the music agents Ibbs & Tillett), they were certainly patriotic events, featuring only the music and words of British composers and poets. Ashwell concluded the third programme with Henley's poem, *My England*. She arranged a further event at the same venue a week before Christmas in aid of the Highgate War Hospital Supply Depot, which was attended by Princess Louise and at which she again recited.

As the theatrical profession began to take stock of the situation, the *Era* published the list of nominations for the Council of the Actors' Association, which was hoping to take a strong lead in helping performers back into work (18/12/18). Ashwell and Eva Moore were nominated, and elected in January, then obliged to resign at the 14 February meeting, as the *Times* reported,

regretfully it was decided that their election could not be upheld (following the decision of the association's solicitors that they were not eligible to sit on the executive as they were manageresses). Miss Ashwell, while accepting the decision, informed the Association that it would not prevent her from taking the greatest interest in the progress which the Association would soon establish for the protection of artists, adding that the position of the artist is eminently unsatisfactory and dangerous to the national interest. (1/4/19)

Ashwell's continuing involvement with this organisation is examined further in the following chapter of this thesis.

DEMOBILISATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

In an article commenting on many aspects of reconstruction, the *Guardian* stressed there was almost a greater necessity than before to continue the Concerts at the Front, for all those soldiers still abroad who were there to enforce the final conditions of peace (16/1/19). Inevitably, once the fighting stopped, most people who had not experienced the reality of the situation at the Front, had no concept of the complexity of demobilisation or the need for continued support for the soldiers. Ashwell had been there and knew it was not yet time to stop her tireless fundraising and organisation of artists. However, as a registered wartime charity, the Concerts at the Front had to begin to dismantle its activities. As the Imperial War Museum papers between 27 January and 8 July 1919 show, the Concerts at the Front fund moved out of the control of the YMCA Ladies' Auxiliary Committee. A new committee was formed with the Council of the YMCA taking over the work of the entertainment of the troops, still organised by Ashwell. Funds in the 'Princess Victoria's Auxiliary Committee of the YMCA for the Recreation Huts at the Base Camps

in France' account moved to the 'YMCA Entertainments Account'. Throughout all these changes, Ashwell was the constant and by late June she had ensured recognition amongst her colleagues that the next need, once troop entertainment was no longer required, was support for the 600 concert party artists who needed to find a way back into their profession after an absence of more than four years. At this stage the committee and funds became 'The Lena Ashwell Demobilisation and Reconstruction Fund'. Formal explanation of this was given to the Charities Commission on 8 July, after which £3000 was transferred to her demobilisation fund for artists.

Meanwhile, appeals continued, not only for money, but also for recognition of the value of the artist in the community. This latter was her special plea in the January 1919 edition of the *Play Pictorial* supplement, *The Stage in Association with the War*. Ashwell began her article on *Wartime Music and Drama at the Front* with the statement that

When the war took our unready nation by surprise in 1914, there were two patriotic sections of the nation who were made to feel they were not of any particular use to the community at the moment - the women, and the artists. Women were advised to stay at home and knit... members of the musical and theatrical professions were told they were a peace-time luxury, only useful if they were famous enough to attract philanthropists and millionaires to charity matinees.

She concluded her description of the work carried out during the war with the proud statement that through the work of the Concerts at the Front, "the creative, artistic life of the people was 'carried on', followed the nation over the seas, and proved not only the permanent primitive values of music and drama to the souls of the people, but the real value of the artist to the community" (ibid). She could just have easily added women to her last sentence, particularly in the light of the Ashwell quotation included in her scrapbook at this time, from *Tit Bits*: "When a woman accepts twenty-five shillings for work for which a man is paid four pounds, she does the most monstrous thing economically it is possible for her to do" (11/1/19).

Also in January 1919, Ashwell, with many colleagues, mourned the loss of one of the last great actor/managers, Sir Charles Wyndham, whose funeral and memorial service took place in mid January. He had been very supportive of Ashwell as both an actress and manager. There was further grief, in early February, with the death by drowning of two singers after their car plunged over a bank into the dark, icy Somme River in France. Ashwell travelled to Penarth in Wales to convey condolences to the husband of Emily Pickford, a well-known and popular singer, and visited the relatives of the young baritone, Vincent Taylor. The other members of the concert party rested a few days in France before continuing their tour. In London there were memorial services, at Maiden Lane Church, Westminster Abbey and Drury Lane Theatre, for actors who were killed during the war; these no doubt taking on an extra poignancy for Ashwell as she mourned these two young artists who had set off so eagerly for France only a week before their untimely deaths.

While Ashwell returned to generous Cardiff, seeking money again from the Coal and Shipping Exchange, and took part in a fund raising concert in Wanstead, it was announced that grateful, returning soldiers from the Front would be her new fund-raisers, providing another angle for promotional purposes. Between “February 24 until March 1 (‘Concerts at the Front Week’) discharged men, representing London branches of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers (NFDDSS), will canvass the Metropolis for Miss Lena Ashwell’s concerts at the Front” (*Evening Standard* 10/2/19).

Prior to a similar week commencing 24 March, which included a special appearance by Ashwell at the Grand Theatre, Hanwell (an area she began to develop an association with), the Prime Minister’s wife, Mrs Lloyd George, presided over a meeting at 10 Downing Street, where Ashwell declared that “The moment the Armistice was signed and danger was over people closed their purses to war charities” (*Sunday Pictorial* 2/3/19). However, a number of projects had brought support, such as the canvassing of the Stock Exchange by Charles Watson, who raised £350 for her. At Downing Street, American President Wilson’s letter to the NFDDSS in support of its work, together with a letter from Sir Douglas Haig and a signed photograph of the Prime Minister were auctioned, adding £42 to the event’s total of £600. She was seeking a further £20,000 to continue, until July, the work of the twenty-eight concert parties still working away from England.

Her other fund raising and charitable activities at this time included the presidency of the annual general meeting of the Royal Dental Hospital of London on 20 March, which advocated dental health care for all, especially children, as a matter for the State to take up. She was also present at the NFDDSS event at Luton Assembly Hall at the end of the month, and announced the raising of over £1128 for the Samaritan Free Hospital for Women during an early April matinee at the Merchant Taylors’ Hall, at which Sir Johnston and Lady Forbes-Robertson and Lilian Brathwaite performed. In May, Ashwell arranged a concert at the Alhambra Theatre on behalf of the Loan Fund of the Central Bureau for the Employment of Women. This fund advanced money for training fees or for maintenance during training for those professions and occupations where the services of educated women were needed. Her commitment to the improvement of the status of women was a very strong one and at this time her involvement with such projects obviously gave them status and guaranteed them support.

Meanwhile, as reconstruction projects began to take shape, the *Era* reported on the London Shakespeare League’s deputation to the London County Council (LCC) arguing the necessity for supporting ‘acted’ Shakespeare and the formation of municipal theatres or companies for this purpose (26/2/19). Paget Bowman, Ashwell’s manager at Ciro’s and for the Concerts at the Front, who later became a member of the Lena Ashwell Players, was part of the deputation, which had its request referred to the Council’s Education Committee. The idea of the actor as teacher was put forward; using Shakespeare to improve the

elocation of school children, a perceived educational priority at the time. The deputation considered that government financial support was needed to undertake such enterprises. The *Era* subsequently announced that the Education Committee had voted grants of £350 to projects, including the Old Vic Theatre, to promote performances of Shakespeare for students (28/5/19). The *Era*'s editorial of the same date noted that "Unostentatiously, like many other movements pregnant with promise, the principle of giving grants of public money in support of dramatic representations has been instituted ...the power of the drama as an educative force has been admitted by London's Governing Body." The editorial suggested that the Actors' Association should approach the LCC with the request that a condition of the grant should be that the actors performing in productions thus supported should be members of the Association (i.e. union). Such were the beginnings of local government arts funding in England, together with the first thoughts on funding with 'strings attached'.

The idea of a 'Municipal Theatre' had been put forward frequently; Ashwell was alive to the possibilities and in early March 1919 things began to come together, ensuring her involvement. While the *Times* reported that the Le Havre Repertory Company had just produced, with great success, *The Merchant of Venice*, and would visit the Army of Occupation in Cologne for a week from 19 May while Cicely Hamilton's group was touring French devastated areas in a lorry and performing to Labour Battalions in remote districts away from base camps (5/5/19), the Paris/Lille company, which the *Bioscope* referred to as the "Lena Ashwell Theatre Repertoire Company" (6/3/19), returned to London in early March. Ashwell had hoped they would continue to work in France promoting English drama on a permanent basis. An existing company, with little prospect of immediate alternative employment, would be an ideal vehicle to put ideas into action, such as those expressed by Paget Bowman in a letter, *Reconstruction of the Theatre. Commercialism and Public Apathy*, to the *Morning Post*. This was a plea for public support and recognition of good English drama including Shakespeare, performed by companies not pursuing commercial gain, very much influenced by Ashwell's hope that returning soldiers would not tolerate pre-war West End theatrical fare but would demand good plays:

I have great belief in the good sense of the people. It is true that they will sit through hours of rubbish if there is nothing better to see, because drama they must and will have; but if the authorities will take the cause of recreation in hand and recognise its importance to the community today, with its extra hours of leisure, people will leap to the occasion. We may yet have a Ministry of Fine Arts. (18/3/19)

George Bernard Shaw took up this point at the Annual General Meeting of the Incorporated Society of Authors, Playwrights and Composers in May, expressing the need for the appointment of a Minister of Fine Arts. While Shaw's view of such an appointment was somewhat flippant: "Any political party hack will do... I want an Aunt Sally in Parliament at whom we can throw sticks" (*Daily Herald* 15/05/19), the point was that the arts needed more official recognition. The theatrical profession emerged from the war,

as did society in general, with an increased concern for improving the internal processes of management and employment conditions, as well as looking to a wider audience.

Increasingly, there was recognition that public subsidy, to alleviate financial pressures (“commercialism, a ruling spirit which does not make for the best interests of the community at large” *Englishwoman* September, 1919), was the only way the drama could be improved and made accessible to all. Ashwell took this on as her next big challenge: the intertwining threads of her life at this time were the improvement of the drama (through the British Drama League and the setting up of her own repertory company), and the role of religious faith in reconstruction and particularly the lives of women. It is not surprising that these threads frequently crossed over.

The great force of the theatre can be called upon to help people to evolve an awareness of other people’s conditions and lives, and to inspire the deep forces of humanity which are the source from which spring those high qualities which should be the very essence of reconstruction... Now the theatre, of all places, is the place where people go to get a change of consciousness... [to] cast off their burden of weariness and disappointment. If the entertainment holds some inspiration of beauty and truth... which goes with them, fixed in the mind as a seed for growth, perhaps they need not again pick up their burden. *ibid*)

Although this was written about the drama, she could have equally been writing about the church.

Some of this eloquence may have arisen from the impact of Ashwell’s historic recital, from the lectern within the chancel rails, of five passages of the scriptures in Worcester Cathedral, during Easter week. The *Daily Express* reported, “It was probably the first time in the cathedral’s thousand year history that Scripture passages were used, apart from the regular church service, and the occasion was all the more remarkable because they were recited and not read” (23/4/19). Most newspapers ‘reviewed’ the occasion; the *Worcester Echo* with the description:

standing, a statuesque figure at the choir screen, she declaimed with magnificent effect, and in a clear voice which sounded to the far ends of the Cathedral [with a congregation of up to 3,000], some of the most moving passages of Holy Scripture, full of pathos and imagery, full of beauty, and revealing, in what to many of her hearers must have been a new sense, the sublime language of the Bible. (23/4/19)

The occasion included anthems sung by the Cathedral choir and organ music by Brahms and Parry. Inevitably, Ashwell became involved in the current debate on women in the church. Bishop Welldon, the Dean of Durham, referred to her appearance as an “interesting experiment” (*Weekly Dispatch* 4/5/19), calling on the church to look to ways it could bring in more people to hear its message and advising that this process should involve women, aside from any issue of ordination. The Bishop of London was antagonistic to women taking part in Anglican services and the issue was the subject of a number of debates, yet another matter brought into sharp focus by the raised profile of women during the war. The *Manchester Sunday Chronicle*, canvassed opinions on *Should Women be Clergymen?* and quoted Ashwell

Figure 35: Programme for Ashwell's historic recital in Worcester Cathedral, April 1919. (Imperial War Museum Ashwell scrapbook.)

as saying: “It seems a pity that the church still finds itself unable to make use of the power for good which women are most assuredly able to exercise through that channel. Undoubtedly they will preach outside the church if there is no room for them in it” (19/5/19).

Ashwell developed this theme in an article for the *Evening Standard on Women in the Church, An Influence for its Revival* (2/6/19). She considered it was no longer possible for the Church to interpret the Scriptures so literally – ‘Man’ is a generic word which must include women as equal sharers in the Holy Spirit.

It was the mental outlook of men which prevented the inspiration of women from joining with them for the furtherance of the establishment of the Kingdom of God, and since it is now possible to make use of the inspiration which is pouring through the women as well as through the men, why should not the Church seize the opportunity? The Church has desperate need of life, of being in fuller touch with the needs and sorrows of the world, and half at least of the world are women. It will be a change; it will clear away a great deal of traditional untruth. But if the Church still closes its doors, we need not fret. Christ himself was little in the Temple at Jerusalem, and there is infinite opportunity outside. (ibid)

Later that month, Ashwell, with singers Miss E. Maclelland and George Parker, accompanied by Frederick Manders, gave readings from the bible and songs, “Through Death to Life - From War to Peace via Destruction to Reconstruction” at a special Sunday Service for Men at St Luke’s Church, Kilburn, north London.⁵³ Spiritual matters informed her address to the girls of the Kent Women’s Land Army at the Corn Exchange, Maidstone, in early May. Presenting Good Service Ribbons she declared, “We women have yet to realise that we are very important in the country. It is for the women of the nation to uphold the great spiritual standards of the race” (*National News* 4/5/19).

On 21 June 1919, the Actresses’ Franchise League reconvened with a meeting at St James’ Theatre at which Dame May Whitty outlined the League’s war time record, paying tribute to Ashwell and the Moore sisters who had established, within the first week of the war, the Women’s Emergency Corps.

Achievements including the work for the troops in France; the *Era* ‘Distress Fund’ to help actors and actresses in the early stages of the war; campaigns for the British Women’s Hospital, the ‘Star and Garter’ Home for disabled soldiers and sailors and the Scottish Women’s Hospital were acknowledged. Sir Frank Benson spoke on *The Artist’s Place in Reconstruction* and the meeting concluded with the reassertion of the League as a Suffrage society working towards the removal of all inequalities between men and women. However, not much developed from this initiative and it was not until 1922 that the League began active life again.

Equality and the “democratization of the arts” were the themes of an extended article by ‘Collum’ in the *Daily Chronicle* (29/6/19). *The New Era - Democracy’s Claim to a Share in the Arts; A Demand Created by the War*, could have been written by Ashwell; certainly her agreement with the sentiments expressed

⁵³Quoted from a copy of the programme for this event in Ashwell’s scrapbooks, Theatre Museum, London.

must have led to its inclusion in her scrapbook. Claiming the war had purged many of future acceptance of mere convention and affectation, and citing the French Federation des Artistes Mobilises which was working “to mould art forms to the needs of the French people,” the writer argued for high standard, accessible, British cinema, literature, music (advocating cafes along the river Thames which provided music such as *Ciro’s* had done during the war), and local repertory theatres, together with official acknowledgement that recreation for all was vital to the future of society. Literature available in inexpensive paperback form; a cinema free of American influence; the importance of education in creating interest and enthusiasm for the arts; and the artist as an instrument for change, were all elements in the “democratisation of the arts” advocated so comprehensively and cogently. Ashwell’s article in the *Englishwoman, Soldiers and the Drama*, took up this theme:

Before the war, many artists were intensely dissatisfied with the position of both music and the drama in this country. A widely prevalent attitude, well expressed in the following words, ‘As useless as an actor, a billiard-marker, or a golf professional’, was felt by us actors to be unjust and untrue. (No. 129, September 1919)

It appeared that many now recognised the impact and value of the artist through the success of the *Concerts at the Front*. Despite numerous immediate problems, it must have seemed a very hopeful time for Ashwell and her colleagues.

Ciro’s, as the YMCA social and music club in Central London, was closed, with many expressions of regret, in mid June, and by the end of June most concert parties had returned from the devastated and occupied areas. Some of the performers would have attended the Royal Garden Party for War Workers in late July. Ashwell was sent fifty invitation cards and admission tickets from the Lord Chamberlain’s Office to distribute to those who had worked with her during the war. Most, however, were anxiously trying to find their way back into the profession, although the summer was not an easy time, with many theatres closed. Some continued to give Concert Party style concerts on returning to their local areas and there appears to have been considerable good will on the part of audiences for those performers who had worked for the troops. One enterprising trio devised a special tribute, in the form of a short musical comedy interlude, entitled *A Memory of France*, which began on the variety bill at the Chiswick Empire in late June with Frederic Lake, Constance Wentworth and Eve Dickson recreating excerpts from their *Concerts at the Front* programme. It was still playing in September, at the Coliseum, to warm response. Ashwell was aware of the pressure to find work, particularly for young people, and she was a signatory, with John Drinkwater and six other men, to a letter, “A Call to Youth”, promoting the work of the League of Youth and Social Progress, an organisation aiming to both encourage and promote world-wide the active role of young people in all spheres of work, including government. It sought opportunities for those who, having fought for their country, wanted to make real contributions to its future. “Entrenched privilege and customary authority are too often in the way of progress. We have suffered and still suffer

much from the red-tape official... who wants no change nor any trouble over new effort" (*Manchester Guardian* and others, 29/7/19).

Ashwell concludes her wartime chapter in *Myself a Player* as follows:

There have been a great many books on the horrors of war and the destruction of civilization which it brings about, works full of the sordid brutality and suffering, and no doubt they are all true. I saw it all, but I also saw the amazing selflessness and dignity, the patience, humour, and endurance. Has there ever before been a war where women were able to walk freely amongst men, respected and accepted as fellow-workers for a national cause? A great deal of the civilization which has been destroyed was not worth keeping. There was falseness and insincerity, and the greatest lie of all was steadily gaining ground - that money was the root of all goodness. Foul actions were condoned and vulgarities accepted if there was sufficient cash to back them. When all the fundamental laws are broken, when people go after strange gods, then wars and revolutions have to come... [Now] There is an increasing desire to understand and co-operate internationally; there are those who see no differences in the needs of human beings, who are trying to give and not take; a new world of the spirit is struggling through the chaos. And if I could find words to express myself it would be in deep gratitude that, in a tiny measure, we artists were privileged to serve those who cut the trail and showed the way. (p.222-3)

In the next few months there were a number of events paying tribute to wartime activities, such as a special lunch to honour all Women's War Services, which took place in October 1919 at the Trocadero. Messages of gratitude were sent from the Queen and Queen Mother and it was, as the *Morning Post* noted, an opportunity to show "Women's Appreciation of Women" (25/10/19). Ashwell, as spokeswoman of the organisers of the gathering, read an address by author Alice Meynell praising the voluntary sacrifices made by women during the war. *The Bulletin*, Glasgow, commented that "the famous actress was not recognised by most of the guests at the first glance as her hair has grown perfectly grey. Most actresses would not have allowed it to do so, and I hope it is not a sign that Miss Ashwell does not intend to appear on the stage any more" (24/10/19).

Grey hair notwithstanding, Ashwell was in Glasgow the next day, reciting at a concert for the Abstainers' Union at St Andrew's Hall, with Myra Hess at the piano. With Carrie Tubb she gave a vocal and dramatic matinee recital at the Aeolian Hall, London, on 30 October, *A Tribute to the Fallen*. The music performed consisted entirely of the work of composers who had been killed in the war, including George Butterworth, represented by his famous *A Shropshire Lad*. Ashwell recited poetry written by those with direct experience of the war including Rupert Brooke. The *Times* considered it an important event for two reasons; as a fitting memorial to the fallen and because it "struck at the prejudice of the moment which excludes all references to the war from concert programmes... [it] reminded us that if the war destroyed poets it also made some poetry. It did not show any such constructive effect of the war on music" (31/10/19). The music performed was written before the composers became soldiers; presumably musical composition at the front was less easy than writing poetry. Two further concerts by Tubb and Ashwell, accompanied by pianists Herbert Dawson and Theodore Flint, were given in November, featuring *Works*

Figure 36: Leaflets advertising Ashwell's post-war tribute concerts with Carrie Tubb, 1919. (Imperial War Museum Ashwell scrapbook)

of Living Poets and Composers on 13 November, and *Works of Poets and Composers of the Past (Chiefly Elizabethan)* on 28 November. Managed by agents Ibbs & Tillett, from newspaper reports the audiences were not large, and presumably costs not covered by the box office were paid by Ashwell.

Before closing this chapter in her life, Ashwell found time to write a detailed account of the experience. In the Imperial War Museum collection in London there are extant letters representing correspondence between Ashwell and the Museum's Honorary Secretary, Women's Work Sub-Committee, Miss Conway, regarding the handing over of Ashwell's personal records relating to her war work. Ashwell was at this time planning an account of the Concert Parties, using diaries and letters of participants, which was eventually published in 1922 as *Modern Troubadours*. She had promised the Museum her records, but was not ready to part with the material as yet. She gave the Museum a brief summary, on Lena Ashwell Demobilisation and Reconstruction Fund letterhead, of the facts relating to the concert parties (12/2/20). Not all the correspondence has survived, but Ashwell's secretary wrote on 16 April 1920 to ask whether the Museum would like a short, interim version or would be prepared to wait for the "fair sized book" which "may be some months, if not longer" from completion. There is no short account on record at the Museum, and Ashwell's scrapbooks (although apparently not individual artists' diaries) are lodged in the collection, so presumably the Museum waited until late 1922 for the book and her scrapbooks.

The *Times Literary Supplement* review for *Modern Troubadours* appreciated Ashwell's justifiable pride in the impact of the concert parties. "The public attitude towards music and the theatre has altered so tremendously – and the alteration is due, in part, to Miss Ashwell's efforts" (16/11/22). While acknowledging the initial opposition Ashwell faced, as she describes in the first chapter, the reviewer considered "Perhaps the most interesting thing in the book is its revelation of the constant relief afforded to the wounded and suffering by musical and dramatic performances" (ibid). As this led gradually to the idea of wounded men taking part in performances, the review noted that "at the present time there are several choirs of ex-Service men in London, who have received their training as part of their medical treatment. The initiation of this movement, however indirect and unconscious, is not the least of the feathers in Miss Ashwell's cap" (ibid). However, while wishing "it were possible to say that Miss Ashwell's book had given us as much pleasure as her concerts gave the troops," the reviewer correctly observes that

the information is too diffuse and ill-organized, so that the reader has some difficulty in knowing where he is and in what year. There is also a great deal of vain repetition. Yet the book remains as a record of valuable work and untiring effort on the part of a none too-well appreciated class of the community. (ibid)

Cicely Hamilton described it as "a plea for the future of the spoken drama as well as a tale of work done; and of the two, the plea - though it occupies less space - is perhaps the most important... and the actual motive of the book" (*Time and Tide* 1/12/22). Obviously in sympathy with Ashwell's motives, the review

concentrates on Ashwell's post-war activity and aims for the municipal drama, concluding with the observation that

being, in part, at least, a war-book, *Modern Troubadours* will doubtless be avoided by many; but the day of the taboo is perhaps nearly over... Also, if Miss Ashwell is right when she insists that 'the soul of each of us is what we have felt', there is not much health in the man or nation that avoids the memory of past emotion and stubbornly forgets an experience.(ibid)

Ashwell continued to maintain a balance in her work between the roles of the arts and women in the reconstruction of society. On 1 November 1919 there were local elections for borough council members throughout London and for the first time over one hundred of the candidates were women. In an article in the *Globe* headed *Importance to Women of Tomorrow's Poll*, Ashwell stressed,

The importance of the approaching borough elections cannot be overestimated. The polling will take place tomorrow, and every man and woman in London should make it a matter of the first importance that nothing shall prevent them from taking this opportunity of establishing their power as citizens. (31/10/19)

She urged men and women to rise above war weariness and previous disillusionment with local councils to support the women candidates who had much to offer in the improvement of the local community and home life. She argued that women were best placed to ensure the wellbeing of the community and the administration of local finance, having had much experience, particularly during the war. Ashwell had worked with many local councils during the war and therefore wrote with conviction and credibility. Women were elected onto local councils in 1919 and from minutes of their meetings during the 1920s, there is evidence they played an active role in decision making.

Meanwhile, the theatrical profession, particularly through the *Era*, began voicing its concern and unease regarding the continuation of the Entertainments Tax, originally imposed as a war-time necessity, but still in operation twelve months after the end of the fighting and with no indication that it would be lifted. As Ashwell was planning a return to management, announced in the *Daily Express* on 3 November 1919, the tax was an item she had to consider; ten years later she declared it one of the main reasons why she was forced to end the Lena Ashwell Players. In 1919 managers suggested a scaling down of the tax, while the *Era* was advocating a campaign to abolish what "we fear may otherwise prove to be a permanent imposition" (15/10/19). Another shadow cast on the profession was the untimely death, at the age of forty-nine, of Henry Irving's son, actor H.B. Irving, who many predicted would have "assumed the mantle left by his father as the leader of the dramatic stage" (*Era* 22/10/19). Yet another link with the past was gone, mourned by Ashwell and many colleagues. Perhaps this loss focussed her attention on standards in the acting profession. Following her attendance at a performance of Tolstoy's *Reparation* at the St James's Theatre, she was critical, although her statements did not create a rift between them, of her former protégé, Athene Seyler, in the difficult role of the young wife Liza, who is put through many conflicting emotions by her husband Feyeda. Ashwell wrote a long article, virtually a review, on her

impressions of the production in the *Globe*. Quoting Henry Irving's comment that "the theatre was bloody sweat" (4/11/19), she concluded, "it is a searching, praying, agonizing effort to make reality appear in the theatre. For the sake of the drama our young actresses must wake up. It is no use skating politely on the surface of life. They must dig down, and deep; and they must, above all things, work, and work with courage" (ibid).

She then used the opportunity of speaking at the Christian Service Recruiting Campaign's World Service Exhibition, which took place between 24 October and 6 November, at Leeds Town Hall, to further attack aspects of the profession. Given that the Conference was intent on displaying world wide needs of mankind and the type of services available and possible in relation to these, including training and education resources in many walks of life, her approach was probably inappropriate and too confrontational, but it was widely reported in the press on November 6 and 7. She considered there were many misconceptions about life on the stage, with many people imagining actors lived a life of glamorous luxury when the reality was quite different. She claimed that profits often went to exploitative managers and middlemen while many actors were forced to earn their living by other means. Commercial managers had more to answer for. "There is a triviality, a licentiousness, and a sensuality connected with the stage today which is not the desire of the best artists in the profession, and which is certainly not the desire of the majority of soldiers who are accused of having clamoured for it" (*Evening Standard* 6/11/19).

The Actors' Association was quick to take advantage of her speech:

'Miss Lena Ashwell', said Mr Alfred Lugg, the general secretary of the Actors' Association... 'has done the stage a lasting service by speaking so frankly and courageously. As an association we are in accord with everything that she says. In some cases actors and actresses really are expected to live on air.' (*Daily Chronicle* 7/11/19)

Alfred Lugg went on to give examples of weekly wages and expenses, which included dresses, inadequate lodgings away from home, and fares, declaring that many actresses, particularly, began and finished a touring engagement in debt. The article concluded with Lugg urging the British public to help the players to boycott the suggestive play. The press seized on what followed: disliking Ashwell's general charge, Oscar Asche⁵⁴ challenged the Actors' Association to publish the names of managers who, by paying meagre wages and other means, were said to be making the stage a medium for prostitution and bringing it into disrepute. He offered £500 to the Association towards meeting expenses for a charge of libel if they would name names. Bernard Shaw's response was that "the charges are but too well grounded, and that Mr Asche had better send the £500 at once to the Association in order to help it in its battle for an economic wage for all actors and actresses" (*Daily Herald* 11/11/19).

⁵⁴Asche, born in Australia in 1871, was an actor and producer. His first appearance on stage was with Ashwell in *Man and Woman* in 1893. His most famous role was in his own play, *Chu-Chin-Chow*, which ran for 2238 performances at His Majesty's Theatre, London, between 1916 and 1921. He died in England in 1936.

By November 14 the Actors' Association had considered its position and wrote to Asche asking if his statement was "to be regarded as a direct challenge... [if so], then the names of the offending managers should be published forthwith in the 'Actor' which is our official organ. The matter ought to be threshed out, and publicity is the best possible weapon we could have" (*Daily Chronicle* (15/11/19)).

The issue, however, petered out with the formal acceptance of what became known as the 'Valentine Standard Contract'⁵⁵ for plays and musical plays for West-End theatres, as agreed between the Society of West End Managers and the Actors' Association. This was to be the basis of employment terms for actors in London and its adoption made it more difficult for managers outside London to exploit the services of members of the profession, who could now refer to an agreed example of acceptable practice.

Ashwell, as ever, having raised the issue, moved on. While overseeing rehearsals and making final arrangements for the Lena Ashwell Repertory Company's opening night on 12 November 1919, she made several public appearances that further acknowledged her contribution to wartime entertainments. On the theme of *Entertainment a Luxury or a Necessity?* – "God gave histrionic gifts to man for a good reason; what art can give, that the souls of men and women need" (*Baptist Times* 7/11/19), she addressed 1500 members of the City Temple Literary Society, who "greeted her enthusiastically. With many no doubt it was just a tribute to a handsome and famous woman, but to others of us it was a genuine expression of gratitude to one to whom we owe much" (ibid). Once again defying resistance to expressions of wartime experience in concerts, she took part in the Cheltenham Philharmonic Society's first concert of the season on 11 November. In a programme of choir music, solos and recitations, she performed Bewsher's poem, *The Bombing of Bruges*, *The Sea is His* by Vernede and two fairy stories. She also recited at Cheltenham College where discharged soldiers were housed.

She returned to London the next day to officially begin what she referred to as "the third phase in my life, the experience of failure" (*The Stage*, p.153). Using the £3000 left over from the Concerts at the Front Fund and a large pool of actors and directors whose work she knew and trusted, Ashwell organised a number of concerts in hospitals, then rented the Baths at Bethnal Green on a weekly basis from the Oxford House organisation. On 12 November 1919, the *Era* announced

Lena Ashwell's East-End Enterprise. Tonight... Miss Lena Ashwell, OBE, will start, at the Excelsior Hall, Mansford Street, Bethnal Green, quite a new repertory theatre scheme. The play, to be given at popular prices, is *Leah Kleschna*, by the late Charles McLellan [directed by R.C. Harcourt]... About Christmas Miss Ashwell and Co. will present a new Miracle play, which has been welded together, so to speak, both in dramatic and musical fashion, by Miss Christopher St John.

A playbill advertised nightly repertory, with *Leah Kleschna* and Robert Marshall's *The Duke of Killickrankie*, directed by Cicely Hamilton, as the first two plays. There were matinees on Saturdays at

⁵⁵The full text of this standard contract was published by the *Era* on 10 December 1919.

Figure 37: Leaflet promoting the first performances of the Lena Ashwell Players at Bethnal Green 1919.
(Imperial War Museum Ashwell scrapbook)

2.30pm, and concerts on Sundays at 2.30pm, performed by a instrumental quartet under the direction of Theodore Flint, who also played musical selections during each evening.⁵⁶

There appears to have been little advance promotion of this project, although Ashwell had been working towards it since June when the companies and concert parties returned from their wartime bases. Both talk of a National Theatre and the municipal theatre, consisting of regionally based repertory theatres, and the British Drama League meetings had pointed the way. The Everyman Theatre in Hampstead Garden Suburb, North London, was presenting repertory with success, dependent on ‘subscribers’ giving their support out of enthusiasm rather than for financial gain; Shakespearean actor/manager, Ben Greet, had “suggested that the Drama League make its first venture in Bethnal Green, where Shakespeare could fill a hall holding 1,300 people and hundreds turned away” (*Manchester Guardian* 4/6/19), and John Drinkwater had considered that £5000 a year would guarantee the existence of a regional company performing good plays (*Birmingham Mail* 4/6/19).

Despite the apparently auspicious circumstances, Ashwell was compelled to declare,

it would have been impossible to start such an organisation as we attempted had not the first company been composed of those who had served in the War areas. We had grown accustomed to play anywhere, under the most adverse conditions, without scenery, without lighting. The war had accustomed us to a biscuit box to sit on, and army blankets for the setting. We had no dressing rooms or dressers. (*The Stage*, p.159)

Even so, it was unfamiliar territory and would never be straightforward. Ashwell writes that “it was some time before we succeeded in getting an audience, though we changed the programme every week and our charges were very small” (*Modern Troubadours*, p. 215). However, the audience gradually increased and there was hope for a further season after the summer, abandoned when the Oxford House authorities decided there was more money to be made using the hall as a cinema. She then found a small hall in Hanwell, “not far from the Lunatic Asylum; the lunatics did not find their way to see our plays, but the Labour Mayors did” (ibid). The Mayor of Stepney (Major Attlee), convened a meeting of mayors who agreed to help the company establish a presence in their boroughs, for performances once a week during the autumn and winter months.

Thus began an enterprise, known initially as the Once-a-Week Players, referred to by Ashwell as ‘The Roundabouts’ (*Myself a Player*, Chapter 10), and subsequently as the Lena Ashwell Players, which “is done in memory of those who fought, and the great army of those who died, and of those still with us who have come back to the bitter struggle for existence” (*Modern Troubadours*, p. 218), and which lasted for ten years.

⁵⁶Quoted from a publicity leaflet included in Ashwell’s scrapbooks, Imperial War Museum, London.

CHAPTER FOUR: 1920 to 1929 ‘Pioneer’

ASHWELL’S ROLE IN A CHANGING THEATRE

Ashwell’s role in the decade after the Great War has been the most neglected aspect of her life. This and the following chapter of the thesis record in detail a period of cultural history about which little has been written. During the 1920s she played a significant part in establishing procedures and creating expectations of theatre for the general community which set the pattern for the future. Her persistent commitment to the concept of a National Theatre alongside municipal theatres influenced all her activities. In many ways, the 1920s saw the culmination of everything she had undertaken to date, from the plays she sought to make accessible to a wide audience, to the creation of repertory companies with broad educational aims and the involvement of the community in the whole experience of the theatre arts. Despite her perception of personal failure at the end of the decade, the seeds were sown and the future of the arts in Britain was assured, although they did not properly flourish until after the Second World War. The foundations laid by Ashwell have never been acknowledged – the following aims to redress this and to encourage further research into this neglected period. Ashwell’s activities detailed in this chapter are concurrent with those described in the following chapter – during this decade she was the founder/director of a touring repertory theatre company, the Lena Ashwell Players, described in Chapter Five. From an organisational point of view, it seemed appropriate to separate this period into two chapters to more clearly record the different areas of achievement, especially as the Players survived for less than ten years, while other initiatives were continuous and more long-lasting.

Post-war theatre in England involved many contradictions and much re-assessment, but in historical terms it has, to a great extent, been aligned in content and status to the frivolous and largely forgettable mood of the so called ‘Roaring Twenties’, when most people let their hair down after the war and sought amusement and new freedoms, abandoning previous inhibitions. Behind the apparently mindless façade, Ashwell and some like-minded colleagues were seeking the realization of ideals which had emerged from their wartime experience. This was sometimes described, as at a meeting at the Lyceum Club in February 1920, as The New Movement of the Theatre. Mrs Herbert Cohen, introducing the issue, declared, “a real effort should be made to establish popular non-commercial theatres in our midst for the elevation, not only of the masses, but of the so-called better classes, who need it really much more than any other” (*Era* 11/2/20). Norman McDermott, director of the Everyman Theatre, Hampstead, considered

theatre a vital factor in social organisation... there is an audience which demands good plays... The theatre must... be disassociated from the idea that it was a place where large sums of money could be made easily. Until this is realised there is no real hope of a theatre worthy of its place in our social organisation. (ibid)

The growing perception of theatre as an important instrument in social re-organisation had been given considerable impetus by Ashwell’s accounts of the common soldier’s response to the concert party

programmes and by her stated intention of continuing the process in peacetime. An *Era* editorial urged constructive debate and support to

transform what is looked upon by the majority as a form of amusement into one of the greatest methods of artistic education... at the disposal of any nation. One fact established by the war is that amusement and recreation are absolutely essential to modern civilised life, and the theatre has been granted State recognition if not State help... The next step is to gain popular recognition of its value as a factor in national education. It has been so recognised in every European country but our own... the help of everyone interested in the question - both those who for the moment are opposed to theatrical performances and those who are convinced of their usefulness, is urgently needed. (11/2/20)

It was to be a slow process, however. At a meeting held in London in late May to discuss the Municipal theatre, it was evident there were major concerns and misconceptions, including fears by members of the profession that municipal authorities would want to be involved and make artistic decisions. Ratepayers feared increases to pay for it and municipal officials feared they would be made use of by people wanting to put on unsuitable material. George Bernard Shaw suggested the municipal theatre should be regarded primarily as a social rather than educative movement; one which would help reduce local social problems (*Era* 26/5/20). In the light of this and the continuing debate, the *Era*'s comment,

there is reason to believe that before long municipally governed dramatic performances will be a regular feature of the life of the community. We may be permitted to express the hope that the performances will be placed under expert management, and not left to officials of the various municipalities... The cooperation of Dame [sic] Lena Ashwell is an assurance that the project will be rightly administered in at least one direction (21/7/20),

was, sadly, over optimistic. However, London County Council was an early leader in support for the arts, taking several initiatives in recognition of the importance of access to theatre. These included the putting on of special late trams, advertised as 'theatre cars,' and dramatic literature classes offered at the Council's evening institutes. Apparently, the interest shown in these courses "is evidenced by the fact that no fewer than 50 centres entered for a Shakespeare performance competition" (*Era* 16/5/23). Railway companies were now using illustrations of places of entertainment in their promotional material, indicating "that we are advancing in the estimation of the legislative classes, and that slowly but surely the entertainment industry is taking in the public mind the place which it has for so long been denied" (*ibid*). The *Era* was less positive in 1924, declaring,

Indifference to the art of the drama in England throughout the centuries has only been varied by open hostility. Inequitable laws were enacted and vexatious restrictions imposed without consultation with those who are chiefly affected. Beyond a fugitive scholarship or two, no subsidies are ever given to theatrical enterprises, of whatever public utility they may be; no efforts are made to encourage the art of acting from any standpoint. When the County Council grants facilities for the school children to attend performances as part of their education the committee is surcharged with the cost... Where the regeneration is required is in the attitude of the Administration to the theatre. If the state looked more kindly upon the drama, public opinion would take the same course. (9/4/24)

The profession had many immediate concerns during the period of re-construction; despite her other commitments, Ashwell's considerable involvement in these concerns reflected her strong interest in the profession and the matters that directly affected the operations of her company, the Lena Ashwell Players, which had begun life in 1919 as the Once-A-Week-Players. Out-goings versus income would always be an issue. Potential audiences had less available money for theatre tickets than during the war and ticket prices were in a state of flux, with calls for reductions while production costs rose (*Era* 21/7/20). In April 1920 it was announced that railway executives were intending to withdraw a long-standing concession rate (up to 25% off usual prices) for touring companies and artists and to charge for the previously free luggage truck. A deputation from the profession confronted the Ministry of Transport, which led to further discussions and eventual retention of the concession (*Era* 5/5/20). Although this additional expense was not incurred, the attempt to impose it is indicative of the hard times faced in post-war England. As the *Era* declared, "The cost of running a theatre today has risen out of all proportion to its earning capacity" (24/11/20). For many, the answer lay in converting their theatres to cinemas, which led to such observations as:

The necessity of finding a way to win back the public who have deserted the theatre for the cinema is becoming increasingly imperative. It is appalling to think that the people of this country are becoming more and more inclined to do without the spoken word in their entertainments. (*Era* 27/4/21)

Aside from the novelty factor of cinema, the *Era* considered

indifferent accommodation supplied in the cheaper portions of the theatre as compared with the often luxurious seating at the cinema is responsible for much of the preference shown for the latter. Little, if any, improvement has been made in the pit and gallery... and the bare seats are just the same as those provided in Elizabethan times. The sight line from the gallery... leaves much to be desired, particularly when the front seats are reserved at a higher price. Quite a third of the occupants of the gallery can only get a sight of the stage by craning their necks and leaning over in the most uncomfortable position. Only drastic structural alterations could remedy these defects. (19/10/22)

In addition, acoustics were not always good, the days of great acting seemed to have passed and fewer managers seemed to be taking a personal interest in their theatres. There were many anxious statements in the *Era* from those concerned for their future and a greater evidence, in advertisements, of the devising of theatre ticket incentive schemes, attempting to off-set the lack of physical comfort in theatres as compared to the new cinemas.

In May 1921 the coal strike, which had begun in October 1920, was adding to "adversity in the theatre" (*Era* 25/5/21). The *Times* reported that the number of theatrical productions making money in London "can be counted on the fingers of one hand – and then there may be a finger or two to spare" (12/5/21). It observed that "the most successful productions are serious plays... the lighter entertainments... are encountering the greatest difficulties" (ibid). Theatre managers appeared determined to carry on as long

as possible. When a general stoppage was first threatened they met the Transport Minister, who urged that “in the public interest the places of entertainment should be kept open... But the reduction of the late train services has made things extremely difficult” (ibid). There was no desire to add more workers to the unemployed. It is likely Ashwell found that, given her company was performing locally in residential suburbs, her audience was not affected by the reduced train service – in fact, it may have increased numbers of those attending on foot.

Actor/manager and dramatist, Seymour Hicks, painting a gloomy picture of West End theatre and the dearth of good plays and players since the war, advocated the return of the actor-manager, who would know how to balance a theatre budget and get the best work from actors. He chided the profession for helping the charities of ‘Lady Snodgrass’, rather than helping other actors or seriously good causes (*Era* 13/4/21). However, changes to the theatre were inevitable, and the days of the actor-manager were over. So too, if managements were to survive, was the tradition of elaborate staging, popularised by Irving and Beerbohm Tree. In June 1921, with the prospect of a settlement in the coal dispute, the *Era* advocated “Economy in Production”, opting for “The Charm of Simplicity”, declaring that “Splendour in mounting has only a fleeting appeal. Shakespeare on a draped stage is often more effective than if embellished with a wealth of pageantry” (15/6/21). This was another constraint in Ashwell’s favour.

In the late summer of 1921 the *Era* reported on severe unemployment amongst members of the theatrical profession. It had offered free advertising in its listings section for a couple of weeks, which uncovered many destitute, long term out of work performers with no means to promote their availability (31/8/21). This situation suggests that as Ashwell’s work became better known, she would have been inundated with requests from actors to join the Lena Ashwell Players. Recovery was not an easy process and as the *Era* observed, “The delay in the long overdue boom in business which was expected with the coming of peace is affecting the theatre more than any other department of enterprise” (11/1/22). The list of problems for managers included high rentals, patrons seeking lower ticket prices, and no incentives or help from the authorities. It is clear that Ashwell would not have been able to present the Players in mainstream London theatres as costs would have been prohibitive.

In addition, inconsistencies and vagaries in censorship and licensing procedures continued to create problems for those wishing to produce new plays. A play rejected by the censor could be performed by a play society or for members of a group, and often attracted a large audience. The *Era* pointed out that some actions, if written down were likely to be censored, but if performed on stage without written description, could escape the censor (who read the play before it opened), while still, perhaps, incurring the wrath of audiences (4/4/23). The issue continued to be debated throughout the 1920s and beyond, but Ashwell did not engage in the confrontation as she had before the war. When the Bishop of London and

other high ecclesiastics proposed that London County Council take over dramatic censorship from the Lord Chamberlain, the *Era*'s response sounded very like Ashwell's 1908 argument:

A committee would emasculate a play depending on the individuals' particular opinions... when the play finally emerges there will be nothing left worth producing. When it goes into the country all the little borough councils will want to have their go at it, and the touring manager will be faced with the prospect of having his play prohibited at any town included in his list of bookings. (15/8/25)

When a coroner, remarking on the suicide of a depressed man (who had seen the play *Rain*¹ the night before his death), inferred the play had been an indirect cause of the tragedy, there were calls from others to ban such plays. The *Era*'s response was "If that principle is to be pursued, many of the finest examples of dramatic literature will be banished from the stage. Shakespeare and Ibsen will be among the most distinguished victims" (22/8/25).

By early 1922 there was strong resentment in the theatrical profession over the continuation of the wartime entertainment tax. The *Era*, citing letters from managers, persistently presented a strong case for its abolition (1 & 8/2/22). At the seventy-seventh annual festival of the Royal General Theatrical Fund, in October 1922, chairman Sir Gerald du Maurier declared their biggest problem was the Entertainment Tax, which was putting smaller theatres and companies out of business. He considered politicians lacked understanding about the nature of theatre work, failing to perceive the hard work and commitment required. In both *Myself a Player* and *The Stage*, Ashwell blamed the Entertainment Tax as a major contributor to the closure of her Players in 1929 (op.cit. p.244).

However, as the General Election approached in 1923, there was hope that a change in government would bring relief from the tax. The *Era* thought the Labour Party "should be unanimously in favour of the abolition of the tax, since the Trades' Union Congress passed a resolution to that effect" (4/1/23). It thought the theatrical profession, with such influential friends in the House of Commons, "should contrive to get substantial concessions both in the amount of the tax and the manner of its collection" (ibid). This hope was dashed when the April 1924 Budget ignored requests to reduce or cut the tax. Further disillusionment followed. The *Era* reported on a House of Commons meeting where

420 M.P.s had pledged... to their constituents to vote either for the entire abolition of the tax or for a substantial modification of its incidence. If these members remain faithful to their promises total abolition of the tax is as good as won. All that is asked for is fair-play for those whose very livelihood is being taken away. (25/4/23)

¹This play was adapted by John Colton and Clemence Randolph from W. Somerset Maugham's story in which a missionary tries to reform a 'bad' woman. It premiered in New York in November 1922, then at the Garrick Theatre in London in May 1925.

In the interim, the *Era* begged theatre patrons to understand that they were paying twice as much for other commodities since the war, and should recognise that the tax had to be paid. The purchase of lower price tickets to avoid it, pushed the cost back to the theatres, already facing difficult times (20/6/23).

It is perhaps not surprising an amendment to repeal the tax failed - the Government's annual income from the tax was estimated at close to £9.5 million. However, it was a wartime tax and "at the time of its imposition an assurance was given that it would be repealed" (*Era* 4/7/23). It was estimated that the tax amounted to between 13.5% and 15% of the gross receipts for theatres. "As a result of this tax, fewer people are going to the theatre" (*ibid*). Attendees occupied cheaper seats than previously and the theatre was suffering accordingly. For the cinema, the imposition of the tax was a penalty making it even more difficult "to compete with America" (*ibid*). During the debates on the tax, reference was made to the profession's wartime contribution and some explanation was given on the nature of the business of theatre compared with other industries. Some MPs were proposing a gradual reduction in the tax, and its eventual withdrawal. Sir W. Joynson-Hicks, an advocate for the tax, referred to a leading actor's salary of £700 a week for ten weeks, "this being equal to the salaries of seven Secretaries of State" (*ibid*), conveniently ignoring the fact that most people in the theatrical profession earned nowhere near this amount or that the leading actor might not work for half the year. The assumption that theatre and entertainments were a luxury and only for those who could afford them persisted. Inevitably, the *Era* reported on the betrayal of their constituents by more than two hundred politicians who had not voted in support of the repeal as they had promised - there were only one hundred and fifty-three 'ayes' (11/7/23).

For the next twenty-two years, the tax remained, with governments promising, and sometimes granting, reductions and concessions, but the theatrical profession, despite many campaigns, remained disillusioned. Cicely Hamilton waged a vigorous campaign against the entertainment tax in 1944. Only educational plays, which did not include all plays aimed at young audiences, were free from the tax. "Cicely wrote numerous letters... [working] with the League of Dramatists to oppose it. She claimed that managements' reluctance to pay the tax prevented children's plays of hers from being performed. The campaign seems to have worked, since the tax was abolished in the Budget of 1945."²

In January 1924 there were signs of an upturn in manufacturing, and new road and building works, with better employment prospects for many. The disruption and uncertainty brought about by the General Election, held on 6 December 1923, was over. While more advertising was needed to promote the theatre, there was optimism when it appeared the Christmas season had given "a great impetus to patronage of places of amusement" (*Era* 2/1/24), as people regained spending power. But industrial unrest continued throughout the 1920s, culminating in the General Strike of 1926. There was a rail strike early in 1923 which disrupted touring companies and audiences, although the Lena Ashwell Players were based in London at the time and generally used road transport for their equipment. Since the 1920 strike, road

²*The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton*, op.cit., p.233.

transport had improved and theatre companies had a viable alternative to get to their next engagement. The *Era* urged the government to recognise the importance of entertainment at this time. “There are many turbulent spirits abroad at the time of trade disputes, and many a disturbance is allayed by the soothing effect of a theatrical performance” (23/1/24) - a statement which echoes Ashwell’s comment on her wartime experience.

The imposition of ‘Summer Time’, when the clocks were changed to increase the daylight hours at the end of the day, created more problems. This experiment of tampering with time had been tried for a number of years, beginning in May. Theatres found it had a considerable impact on their audiences, who preferred to pursue outdoor activities long after theatre curtains rose. It forced later starts or changes in programming, particularly for variety theatres, many of whom could no longer sustain the first evening show but faced artists still wanting the same pay for a single show. The profession had hoped to confine Summer Time to the months of June to August (*Era* 19/5/23), but in 1924 the New Daylight Saving Bill was introduced into Parliament, providing for its permanent adoption and fixing the period from the first Sunday in April to the first Sunday in October. The *Era* urged support for the Theatrical Managers’ Association’s protest against this as it

practically knocks on the head the ‘first house’ at the music halls, and has a disastrous effect on the theatres, for the sun is still shining when the doors open... Under normal conditions, places of amusement are only just able to scrape through the ‘dog days’ [summer months in the theatre], and the transference of an hour of daylight from morning to evening robs amusement caterers of any chance of ‘getting out’.

(20/2/24)

It was pointed out that miners, agricultural interests and farmers were against it too; the main beneficiaries being sports players. Ashwell experienced problems on fine summer days in places like Rugby and Bath, but by involving such groups as tennis clubs, she was able to attract the very people staying away from London theatres. The autumn, despite another General Election,³ was a more positive time. Audiences, apparently used to elections by now, had increased, but, as the *Times* explained, this may have been in part due to the Wembley Exhibition and Olympia Motor Show attracting many visitors to London.

As indicated by the difficulties experienced by the Lena Ashwell Players (described in the next chapter), 1924 and 1925 did not see much improvement. In April 1925 the *Era* considered “It is appalling to reflect how little relief has been allowed in the entertainment profession since what were regarded as war measures, and therefore only temporary, were enacted” (4/4/25). Besides the Entertainment Tax, there were regulations restricting the sale of refreshments, including chocolates⁴, in theatres, while Cabaret

³There were three elections in less than two years; in November 1922, December 1923 and October 1924.

⁴This had been an issue for some time. For example there was an *Era* editorial on ‘Playgoers’ Rights’ protesting against restrictions on the sale of chocolates at theatres and cinemas as an infringement of liberties of the people (12/5/20). Another article, ‘Theatre Chocolates - A Manifesto from Managers’, was a statement from Theatrical

entertainments, permitted unrestricted hours, refreshment sales and free of entertainment tax, were increasing. The *Era* claimed decision-makers were ignorant of the value of the industry, and the journal hoped that once the Registration of Managers' Bill had been passed through the House of Commons, attention would be turned "towards obtaining an amendment of the licensing laws by which the present chaotic conditions will be swept away and fair play will be given to all who ... provide wholesome entertainment" (ibid).

The *Westminster Gazette* reported West End theatres to be "in the throes of a great depression" (6/4/25). Although "small houses are always expected during Lent... it is several years since the depression was so pronounced as it is today. It is stated that only four West End theatres are doing well" (ibid). A correspondent had suggested that "the unpleasant nature of the plays and the discomfort which those who cannot afford the best seats have to suffer" (ibid) were contributing factors. At this time Frank Vernon's book, *The Twentieth Century Theatre*,⁵ was published.

It is a pleasure to find a book that is so well informed; for the most part so sound in its judgments, and yet so wittily and racily written that it reads like a fascinating novel. The subject is really the partnership between literature and the theatre... The playhouse is now making an intelligent appeal, and one of the reasons, he [Vernon] paradoxically maintains, is the rise of the lighter forms of entertainment - revue and musical comedy. This development has had the effect of forcing serious drama in an upward direction; the competition has squeezed out a 'superior vintage'.
(*Era* 14/1/25)

Vernon acknowledged Shaw, William Archer, and J.T. Grein, as the men of the nineties who paved the way for the literary drama and "stood for the disinsularisation of the English Theatre" (ibid). This trio, and the Court Theatre, "which not only produced ... plays... written in the new spirit, but provoked the writing of new plays [were] followed by Miss Lena Ashwell's tenancy of the Kingsway, the Frohman season at the Duke of York's, and Mr Granville Barker's management" (ibid). Vernon's book, although only accounting for the first quarter of the century, charts the rise of serious drama and its strength post-war. He accords Ashwell a significant and important contributory role in this, which later accounts of the period ignore.

In the light of this, the *Era* took to task a "morning paper" which had declared the stage to be in the grip of a "decadence boom" (18/4/25). The *Era* argued that, given the plays have been passed by the censor, dramatists were seeking, in dealing truthfully and realistically with unpleasant subjects, including "sex problems", to uplift and expose bad behaviour for what it was.

The drama has the right to claim that it is a reflex of our contemporary life... if that life is decadent it is not the fault of the dramatist, but rather that of the people with whom he deals.

Managers' Associations about the benefits of being able to sell chocolates, published in the *Era* (29/6/21); and an *Era* editorial which called on Government Fairplay for the theatre (6/7/21).

⁵George Harrop, London, 1924.

We have heard it freely asserted that 90 per cent of the youth of the country is morally corrupt. We trust this estimate errs greatly on the side of exaggeration, but if it comes anywhere near to the truth, the playwright who points a moral from that position must use the material at hand if he desires to paint life as he finds it. The decadence of the drama, therefore, must inevitably be due to the decadence of the people... Unfortunately playgoers have a habit of not taking to themselves what is said and done on the stage, and of failing to fit the appropriate caps to their own heads. After all, the merit or otherwise of a play is to be judged by its effect on the public; if it has a debasing influence it is to be condemned, but if it preaches a wholesome moral it is entitled to consideration whatever be the medium by which it is reached. (ibid)

Certainly many of the plays written in the 1920s dealt with subject matter and characters previously not mentioned on stage, including *A Bill of Divorcement* by Clemence Dane (1921), *Fallen Angels* by Michael Morton and Peter Traill (1924) and *Outward Bound* by Sutton Vane (1923), all of which were presented by the Lena Ashwell Players.⁶ One critic, Hubert Griffith, was quoted as regarding truly ‘unpleasant’ plays to be those containing

sentimental improbabilities, fortunes inherited, young men ‘making good’ in the Colonies and returning millionaires, wickedness defeated and innocence triumphant... enough to send an adolescent into the world with the worst possible equipment – a sentimental view of life unsquared and unsquarable with realities. (Era 31/8/27)

The war certainly put paid to a number of these scenarios, familiar fare on the stage prior to 1914⁷. In July 1925 a meeting was called in London for managers and authors to discuss the writing of suitable, marketable plays, particularly for provincial theatres. Clearly there was no shying away from addressing every issue that had the potential to help theatre regain lost ground. From the *Era* and the *Stage*, the trade papers of the time, it is clear the 1920s saw a plethora of attempts to air and share problems and resources. This was clearly a shift from the pre-war commercial self-interest approach. It was a much more united profession, facilitated by the growing strength of the Stage Guild, that survived the General Strike and its aftermath in 1926. The strike, which stopped all rail transport and newspaper publications (among many other stoppages), ran for nine days from 4 May 1926. Ashwell’s company had, the previous evening, opened a five-week season in Rugby so did not need to call on the assistance of the Theatrical Managers’ Association and the Stage Guild’s quickly co-ordinated road transport operation to help touring companies honour their provincial bookings. Many West End theatres were obliged to close as audiences had no way of knowing whether they were open or whether they could get home after the performance. Overall, however, as is usually the show business story, an “indomitable spirit prevailed” (Era 19/5/26), although there was a longer term corrosive effect, with a continuing coal dispute and growing unemployment creating a pessimistic outlook and making it impossible for companies, such as Ashwell’s Players, to reduce growing deficits. 1926 was, in a sense, the beginning of the end for the Players - from this time on unable to eliminate the accumulated deficit.

⁶See Appendix Six for details on the subject matter of these plays.

⁷These scenarios, however, continued to be part of the fare offered to cinema goers.

At the end of the year, when the *Stage* summed up the achievements and production highlights, it was clear the general strike had cast a long shadow. The successes of the year were “on the more or less frivolous side” (16/12/26), with managers tending to “play for safety”. From the new plays listed in the West End ‘repertoire’, Ben Travers’ *Rookery Nook* appears to be the only one to have survived past the decade.

It was generally noted at this time that women formed the bulk of the audience for theatre in London, although not for cinema where ticket prices were cheaper - a phenomenon that had become more noticeable since the war (*Era* 24/2/26). Besides the losses to the male population during the war, the earning capacity of women had been increased considerably when they took over and retained previously held male jobs. Also, women were apparently more prepared than men to confront the issues portrayed in the ‘new’ drama.

On 20 April 1927 the *Era*’s editorial was headed *The Unpopularity of the Theatre* with some of the offending characteristics listed as “dingy and uncomfortable houses, stagnant advertising, inadequate staffs... inefficient orchestras... shows of poor quality with incompetent casts and impoverished mounting.” The competition included an attitude of puritanism left over from the days of Cromwell: “there are people to this day who would not go into a theatre even if a religious service were to be conducted there” (ibid), and the “constant increase of cinemas, cabarets, dance halls, broadcasting, and the advent of daylight saving.” It seemed the theatre was in danger of ceasing to have any importance in the life of the nation. Once again members of the profession were urged to address these problems and to work with the British Broadcasting Corporation to create greater awareness of the value of theatre. As ever the *Era* offered the support of its columns, but it was not a paper which reached the general public to any great extent.

After the war, the *Era* made numerous observations about the increase in American plays and musicals being presented in London, raising such questions as *Are American Plays Superior to English?* (21/9/27) and discussing how *Americanising the English Stage* (22/2/28) was disadvantaging British playwrights. It was considered that English managers were not good at visualising new plays, so looked to the ready made foreign market, assuming a Broadway success would do as well in London. Given the costs of mounting such productions, the journal considered the profit insufficient to justify importation and suggested it would “be more remunerative for managers to take a risk with home made plays and allow the money spent on amusements to be kept in the country” (ibid). American cinema also came in for criticism, with the *Era* implying that audiences were starting to tire of the prevailing “bathos and sickly sentiment” (21/3/28), together with the over-exploited situations and characters; long since banished from the obviously more sophisticated stage.

As the new season got underway in October 1928, however, the *Era* was enthusiastic about future prospects.

It could be maintained that the present wave of prosperity in the West End is directly due to the series of disasters earlier in the year. The actor-manager and the men of the theatre are returning and the commercial speculator with one play in hand and nothing up his sleeve is leaving the theatre... the word 'policy' is in the air... The English theatre has been built up by men with a policy, and the examples today of continuous, successful management are to be found at the St James', the Aldwych, the Haymarket. (3/10/28)

There was a real sense the theatre was climbing out of a number of bad years and that all the soul searching and determination to improve conditions was beginning to pay off. But all this was too late for Ashwell.

THE STAGE GUILD

Given the above, the 1920s saw considerable changes for organisations within the profession concerned with the employment conditions of their members. There was a short-lived actors' strike in 1920, followed by threatened industrial action by the National Association of Theatrical Employees (technical/backstage workers) when the Society of West End Theatre Managers rejected its proposed new scale of salaries (*Era* 24/11/20). Although a strike was averted, managers were under fire again in March 1921 when the Actors' Association decided to boycott all managers who did not pay the minimum wage and otherwise observe the standard contract (*Era* 9/3/21). Given the over-crowding in the acting profession, there has always been a limit to the strength of actors' unions; there will always be others to take the place of boycotting actors. The status of the Actors' Association was not high, nor did it have the support of the whole profession. Admission to membership was possible after a certain period of professional work. Some, like Granville Barker, were keen to see actor training recognised, with courses and diplomas such as those proposed by the University of London becoming part of the method of qualification. The Association was under increasing pressure during the post-war period to present a stronger front to help its struggling members, but by 1924 its direction appeared misguided.

Ashwell was present at the Association's meeting in late April 1924, when around six hundred members of the profession gathered to discuss "the steps considered necessary to close the theatrical profession to undesirables" (*Era* 28/4/24). Arthur Bouchier saw the need to prevent overcrowding of the profession by the unqualified, especially unskilled moneyed amateurs who took work away from professionals and undermined standards. He wanted safeguards against undesirables, including bogus managers who could not pay their actors unless the show was a success. Ashwell was present when Bouchier had raised this issue in February at the Actors' Benevolent Fund annual dinner, suggesting the remedy "was to educate public taste so as to make it more difficult for the incompetents to please. Good work in that respect was being done by Miss Baylis and Miss Lena Ashwell, who were taking the best work to the doors of playgoers who could not get to the West End" (*Era* 6/2/24).

Following discussion, a resolution was put supporting the Actors' Association in any steps thought necessary to close the profession to such people. Charles Wyndham's stepson, manager Bronson Albery, proposed an amendment limiting the authority to be given, considering it inappropriate to give the Association the power to determine whether a person was an actor or not or to compel all actors to be members of the union. With this stance members might be obliged to support a strike affiliated to other unions. Ashwell spoke out in support of Albery's tempering influence, asking the meeting

to carefully consider exactly how the resolution would act. It was necessary... that the entire profession, from top to bottom, should back up every effort to make every improvement ...that was possible... [but] it would be wise to consider before they launched out in anything that might not meet with the wishes of the entire profession. It was a most important profession. She had fought for it, and would die for it. But she did not agree with the resolution. She was proud to second Mr Albery's amendment. It was a difficult problem to keep out what were regarded as undesirables. If they had an examination they might throw out... one who may afterwards have proved to be the greatest genius of the world. Irving was told to 'go back' because he was such a bad actor when he started. (ibid)

Ashwell was in turn supported by Lady Wyndham and Norman McKinnel; the latter, while respecting the work of the Association, felt it was not in its present form well placed to judge and legislate, even as the only representative body for their profession. The amendment lost the vote and the original resolution was agreed. Within a month, the Stage Guild, offering an alternative to the Actors' Association, had come into existence. Following a "crowded" meeting on 6 June, the *Era* carried a full-page advertisement listing Ashwell as one of eighty-two temporary council members and announcing that this council had "no intention of governing the Guild, the management... will be decided by the Members of the Guild; but they do desire to set a lead to all artists of the British stage who believe in the policy here set out" (11/6/24).

As well as aiming to be an Association of the whole dramatic profession, the Guild's principles included self help and protection, remedying of grievances and abuses, settlement of disputes with managers, establishment of a definition in relation to qualifications for actors, provision of facilities for actors, with a co-operative, representative situation not encroaching on the individual's rights and creativity.

The Stage Guild has been formed to carry into effect the above principles... [and] is opposed to coercion and to affiliation with the extremist and political section of Trades' Unionism. The Guild's main objects... raising of the status of the art of the Theatre and the protection of the artist. Membership ...depends solely upon competency and artistic merit. If you earn a living by your art, you will not be excluded... Does not consider the manager to be the enemy. Membership cost will be within the reach of the lowest ranks. (ibid)

Gerald du Maurier chaired the next Guild meeting at the Globe Theatre on 20 June. "There was a large attendance... A resolution pledging... to make it fully representative of the actors and actresses of Great Britain was carried almost unanimously" (*Era* 25/6/24). The Actors' Association had decided recently that actors should come under the description of industrial workers and be associated with the trade

unions of musicians and the National Association of Theatrical Employees, to which Du Maurier asked, “Are we artists? Is acting an art, or is it only an industry?” (ibid) and wondered whether actors should be associated with unions. The Touring Managers’ Association announced it would cease to exist as a separate entity, its members (many of them actor-managers) becoming part of the Stage Guild. Eva Moore quoted the dictionary definition of ‘cooperation’, stressing the need to work together and regretting that the Actors’ Association required any of its Council members, who turned employers, to retire from the Council (as she and Ashwell had been obliged to do in 1918. See page 214 of this thesis). There was concern that an actor, as a trade unionist, would lose his freedom and might be forced to go on strike for causes he did not agree with. Ashwell saw there was “a real and grave menace in the form of the ‘closed shop’, and [the] probability of them being dragged into further difficulties by people whose own livelihood was not at stake” (ibid). Concerned that closed theatres (through strike action) would never be reopened again, she declared “The theatre is a necessity - it is not a luxury at all. It is just as much a necessity as are doctors and hospitals” (ibid). The meeting approved the setting up of the Stage Guild and many new members were enrolled.

By July 1924, however, there were steps to combine the resources of the Stage Guild and the Actors’ Association as the needs of the profession became more pressing and negotiation between managers and the managed, if necessary through arbitration, was seen as more appropriate than strike action. In July 1925, although not re-appointed to the Council,⁸ Ashwell was one of only four women elected (with Eva Moore, Anne Saker and Ida Molesworth), alongside nineteen men, to the Managers’ Section of the Guild. This committee worked closely with the Artists’ Section and was considered to be largely responsible for the introduction into Parliament of the Registration of Theatrical Managers’ Bill, which came into effect in January 1926 (*Era* 11/7/25). This new bill, discussed, developed and debated over a number of years, took into account the touring manager, of which by the 1920s there were many throughout the United Kingdom. The previous bill registering theatre managers had been in force since the 1840s and covered only managers of theatre buildings not companies. One of the main concerns was to ensure a system where only registered managers could operate, with the principal aim of forcing out the bogus manager who reneged on contracts with actors or failed to pay them. The ultimate penalty was loss of an operating licence, which was issued on credentials by county councils.

A year after its formation, the Stage Guild had over fifteen hundred members, including some of the best-known names in the profession. One benefit of membership (previously offered by the Actors’ Association) was honorary medical assistance and Ashwell’s husband, Sir Henry Simson, was included in the list of “distinguished specialists... [who] are now at the disposal of members free” (*Era* 25/7/25). The *Era* noted that both employer and employed were represented by the Guild, rendering the settlement of disputes “an easy matter” (ibid). The adoption of standard contracts, providing for the “accepted

⁸ Ashwell was re-elected the following year for a further year-long term as a Council member.

minimum wage, payment for rehearsals and a solution to the ‘week-out’ problem satisfactory to both parties” was credited to the Guild, providing “all the benefits of trade unionism without its perils” (ibid). The Guild was also desirous of encouraging British playwrights through its members commissioning plays and developing reading services which gave priority consideration to British plays.

The Stage Guild was most successful in the mid 1920s, but by 1927 the original ideals had not been realised. The Actors’ Association still existed alongside the Guild and many Guild members either perceived or experienced situations where internal arbitration between managers and performers usually resulted in managers obtaining the upper hand or actors feeling that complaints would jeopardise future work opportunities. The *Era* acknowledged that support was not strong for the Guild at its Annual meeting in July 1927 but urged moral and financial support from the rank and file of the profession (3/8/27). In 1928 the Standard Contract for touring, which had been introduced in 1919, was no longer holding up and many in the profession began to look to the example of the powerful and successful American union, Actors’ Equity, as the way forward. The *Stage* supported the Actors’ Association in its move in this direction, while the *Era* hoped the non-industrial approach of the Guild would prevail, considering the theatrical profession could only succeed if it maintained sympathetic public opinion. Industrial action was the fastest way to lose favour with the public (24/10/28). The trade union element eventually prevailed; the acting profession considered the American way as the only way to organise its future and British Actors’ Equity, established in December 1929, has remained the organisation which acts on behalf of its members to improve conditions and maintain standards.

It was in Ashwell’s interests to remain closely in touch with professional issues. She relied very much on good will from her company members and kept faith with them by actively participating in efforts to improve conditions, gain recognition for the professional nature of the work and stamp out exploitation. She maintained an active involvement with the Stage Guild until the formation of Equity, by which time she was no longer running a company and illness prevented her from such commitments. Given Equity’s early assumption of the characteristics of a trade union, and Ashwell’s preference for the Stage Guild’s approach, it is unlikely she would have been very sympathetic to Equity’s methods, while retaining an appreciation of its necessity.

Critic Frederick Whelen⁹ noted that in the immediate post-war period,

women are the controlling force in the theatre. They write plays, manage theatres, are the chief reformers in stage matters, actively prominent in such movements as the recent trades union movement, make up a great proportion of the audiences - in fact, without women the stage of today would be in a parlous state. (Era 26/1/21)

However, formal leadership of professional organisations by women was still uncommon. The appointment of Lady Wyndham (actress Mary Moore) as the first woman president of the Actors’

Benevolent Fund,¹⁰ at its twenty-sixth annual dinner in February 1922, was therefore significant. However, it was not until March 1928 that women were admitted to the Executive Committee, which managed the Fund.¹¹ In 1924 another male dominated 'club', the O.P. Club, accepted its first five Lady Associates: Ashwell, Mrs Kendal, Ellen Terry, Lady Wyndham and Sybil Thorndike (*Era* 24/9/24). This departure from tradition may have been connected with the Club's desire to have a strong female presence at its October 1924 *Saint Joan* dinner, in tribute to Thorndike for her successful creation of the role in George Bernard Shaw's play.

Despite the achievements of women during the war and their apparent overall altered post-war status, former members of the Actresses' Franchise League felt compelled to make a second attempt to revive the organisation at a meeting on 28 July 1922. There had been a similar attempt in 1919 but people were out of touch with the work of the League and exhausted from the war effort. Ashwell did not attend this gathering, being one of those recognised as "now busy in other directions" (*Era* 2/8/22). As at the 1919 meeting, she was given credit for much of the League's early war work and achievements, including the Women's Emergency Corps; "from that one scheme sprang all the women's war organisations that came into being, except the British Red Cross" (*ibid*), and for the Concerts at the Front. The meeting noted an offshoot from the latter activity was the "camp concerts at all English training camps... run by Inez Bensusan for the League's play department till the war ended" (*ibid*). The meeting recognised that the League's original aims had been realised when the Representation of the People Bill, which gave women the vote, was passed, together with "the Parliament Act, which allowed women to sit in parliament; [and]... the Sex Disqualification Removal Bill, which went far to give women equal rights with men" (*ibid*).

However, many inequalities persisted and the attendees considered there was much work to be done in the fight for equal job opportunities, equal pay, the protection of disadvantaged women and children and the co-ordination and support of women's organisations. A committee was elected, with many of the same women (Eva and Decima Moore, Bensusan) who initiated activities pre-war. The League was committed to working with other women's groups and in the following year congratulated Mrs Hilton Philip, the first actress and third woman to take a seat in Parliament as a member of the House of Commons (*Era* 18/7/23). No doubt Ashwell agreed with the principles of the revived League and remained in contact with its activities, but her energies were most decidedly directed elsewhere, and no mention is made of

⁹Whelen was lecturing to Golders Green and Hampstead Garden Suburb Ethical Society on *Women and the Stage*.

¹⁰Ashwell retained an active involvement with this organisation during the 1920s, attending meetings and social events. She spoke at the meeting on 3 March 1925 which was reported on in the *Era* 7/3/25.

¹¹When announcing this development in 1928 the *Era* declared, "There is every reason why ladies should be given positions on the executive of any society and none why they should not. Generally speaking, they are more reliable than men, are more provident, less erratic, have infinitely more tact and patience, make up in strength of mind what they lack in physical force, and, above all, have that woman's wit which has become proverbial. It is not to be wondered at that in the suggestion to reform the censorship, it should be insisted that women have a place in its constitution" (8/3/28).

her attending future meetings of the League or having any involvement on the committee. Cicely Hamilton, co-director of the Lena Ashwell Players, would have kept Ashwell informed on changing attitudes as she pursued journalism alongside work with Ashwell's company. Her articles such as *The Backwash of Feminism* (*Time and Tide* 8/9/22) and *Women and the Stage*,¹² were shrewd assessments of prevailing attitudes. In the latter, she sums up the achievements of, and problems for, women in the theatre during 1924, including actresses, playwrights and managers (Lilian Baylis the only other woman manager mentioned besides Ashwell), and mentions the Players establishing headquarters at the Century Theatre. Much has been written about Lilian Baylis and her unique style of management. She had a strong public profile, largely focussed on the Old Vic Theatre. In November 1921 a public appeal was launched to raise £30,000 for essential building work on the Old Vic. The *Era* provides an effective summing up of Baylis' work at this time, her position similar to Ashwell in many ways.

What, it may be asked, are the authorities themselves going to contribute towards the saving of the Old Vic? Placed in one of the poorest parts of South London, the theatre has drawn to the neighbourhood classes of people who would otherwise not have been seen near it... the theatre is the rendezvous week by week of pupils from secondary schools and colleges. The theatre is thus a public asset, and as such should enjoy special privileges. (*Era* 16/11/21)

At the other end of the spectrum, another company with the aim of providing access had been established by the actress, director and manager, Eleanor Elder. This was the Travelling Theatre of the Arts Service League, which by December 1923 had completed its twelfth tour, of over 4,000 miles by road, throughout Scotland and Northern England (*Era* 25/1/23). This company, established in 1919, performed in barns, schoolrooms and theatres, and remained in existence until 1937, giving performances of standard drama repertoire, as well as singing ballads, folk songs and performing ballet pieces. There were other similar small scale companies, formed after the war, who carried their own props and basic sets, for one-night stands all over the country.

THE BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE

In June 1913 there had been an attempt to establish a British Drama League. In many ways, the time was not yet ripe, and with the outbreak of war, the idea was put in abeyance. Post-war, the mood had changed, and reconstruction was an ideal time to launch an organisation dedicated to the improvement of the drama. In 1918 the establishment of a small dramatic society at the Vickers-Maxim works in Kent had revived the idea, taken up by London based practitioners with the aim "to assist the Development of the art of the Theatre and to promote a right relation between Drama and the life of the community."¹³ As teacher and founder member of the League, Elsie Fogerty, wrote, "Among those interested from the first were Lena Ashwell, Lewis Casson, Edith Craig, Roger Fry, Mrs Robert Mathias, Michael Sadleir and

¹²This article was placed alongside *Women in the Medical Profession*, *Woman's Leader* 2/1/25.

¹³*The British Drama League 1919-1959*, published by the League, London, 1959.

Lord Howard de Walden – who became the first President.”¹⁴ The inaugural public meeting took place on 3 June 1919,¹⁵ convened by the League, with Lord Howard de Walden as President and five vice-presidents including Ashwell, Arnold Bennett, Lord Rothermere and the M.P., J.R.Clynes, who was a strong advocate of the League’s role in education and regional participation. Others involved included John Drinkwater, Harley Granville Barker and Geoffrey Whitworth (honorary secretary and a principal behind-the-scenes organiser for the National Theatre), with many theatre organisations such as the Stage Society and Pioneer Players supporting the plans to provide propaganda for the theatre; help regional branches to support local activities; and provide a library of scripts and other resources. The League was not intended to be a play producing society, rather it planned to organise conferences, lectures and play competitions, provide technical and research advice, “to cooperate with municipalities, schools, trades unions and kindred bodies for the encouragement of the drama as a means of intelligent recreation for all classes” (*Era* 4/6/19). It also intended to publish, through Chatto and Windus, a regular journal, *Drama*.

Ashwell was a Vice-President and/or active participant in the League from 1919 to at least 1946.¹⁶ She chaired meetings, spoke at conferences, took part in lecture programmes and adjudicated amateur performances. Always a strong advocate of cooperation and the sharing of resources, at the 3 June Haymarket Theatre meeting Ashwell launched a strong attack on the current state of the London theatre, setting off a debate which continued for some time. The League provided her with an ideal and continuing opportunity to speak her mind. On this occasion she declared that “the present state of the drama filled her with unhappiness and made her very angry and bitter” (*Era* 4/6/19). She saw no change from the war years when “people had flocked to London from all parts of the Empire [and] ...there was no place where they could see plays really representing the national ideal” (*ibid*). The *Stage* quoted her as describing much entertainment presented to be “rotten, low and suggestive” (8/6/19). This prompted other newspapers to seek opinions from theatrical personalities and playgoers, including playwright Henry Arthur Jones. He agreed with Ashwell about “the degraded condition” of the drama, but was hopeful of improvements and growth in response to “the tastes, habits and characters of the people” (*Daily News* 5/6/19), while *Reynold's Newspaper*, whose headline was *Our Drama is Not Decadent*, furnished optimistic counter comments from producers Arthur Bouchier and Edward Laurillard and actress, Lillah McCarthy (8/6/19). The *Era* ran articles by Bouchier, *The Drama is All Right, An Antidote to Pessimism* (11/6/19), followed by Ashwell’s *IS the Drama all Right? Reply to Mr Arthur Bouchier* (18/6/19). She argued her words had been used out of context, given that she had spoken at the Drama League meeting for fifteen minutes, and that her full argument sought consideration of ways the drama could be free of commercial pressures in order to develop appropriate means to best express the national dramatic

¹⁴*Fogie, the life of Elsie Fogerty, CBE*, compiled by Marion Cole, Peter Davies, London, p.72.

¹⁵The above mentioned history of the League (p.2) puts the date as 22 June, but press reports date from 4 June.

¹⁶Ashwell is listed as an office bearer in Drama League publications between 1919 and 1946.

literature. However, the debate helped create greater awareness of the Drama League and its objectives and its officers and supporters seized every opportunity to promote the aims.

In June the *Referee* reported Ashwell's address to the London Council of Public Morality in St Martin's Vestry, "ostensibly on behalf of the British Drama League, but... we went into questions of the National Theatre, municipal theatres, the Censorship, Shakespeare and musical glasses and what not" (29/6/19). The writer took issue with her use of the continued, but in his view inappropriate, division of the theatrical world into commercialism and highbrowism because it perpetrated class antagonism. He considered Ashwell and her colleagues should be seeking to encourage "commerce in good plays, to attract to the stage as much intelligence as possible" (ibid). This was certainly the objective of the League's Ideals of the English Theatre Conference at Stratford on Avon during the last two weeks of August 1919. Given lengthy coverage by the *Era*, the Conference made clear the League's aims; principally the introduction of state support for the theatre (including a National Theatre and municipal theatres); the involvement of educational institutions at all levels in the promotion of understanding about drama and theatre, and the provision of high quality theatre accessible to all (*Era* 20,27/8 and 3/9/19).

THE MUNICIPAL THEATRE

In February 1920, the *Era* reported on the British Drama League talk given by W.H. Kerridge on *The Municipal Theatre Abroad and At Home*. Kerridge had worked at the Municipal Theatre in Zurich, Switzerland, and described, to an audience which included mayors and members of local authorities, its funding base - subsidy from local rates, local companies, donations and the box office - and its management structure and method of operation - with a Board of Administration, an Artistic Director and a Business manager and a permanent company of actors. Certain services were provided to the community, such as performances for school groups and reduced price events for the poorer residents. Kerridge explained the financial implications in real figures, indicating the extent of the local subsidy and the role of the theatre within the community. He distinguished between municipal and state theatres - the state one being subsidised by government taxes, not the local rates. However at this time local councillors in England were still not prepared to consider a penny or two on the rate to subsidise theatre, which Kerridge described as being considered in Europe "somewhat in the same light as public libraries, museums, and schools" (18/2/20). It is very likely that Ashwell, and some of the Mayors with whom she was in discussion regarding the Lena Ashwell Players, attended this event and Kerridge's information would have been of interest to her at this time. Indeed, at a League dinner in June, Geoffrey Whitworth noted that following this talk,

some London mayors had begun to take a serious interest in the movement. But meanwhile it was doubtful whether a borough council had power to subsidise a theatre. That was a question to be decided, and the League must undertake that - getting if necessary, legislation, putting the theatre on the same level as public workhouses, which were partly

maintained by the rates. It should be made possible for a borough council to levy, say, a farthing rate for the support of a municipal theatre. (*Era* 2/6/20)

On this occasion, also, Frederick Whelen noted that the Labour Party favoured the idea of the municipal theatre, “which, if it secured power, was far more likely to inaugurate a municipal theatre than was a Conservative or a Liberal Party” (ibid).

On 4 June 1920, the local government journal, *The Municipal Journal*, in its Notes and Comments Editorial section, included an article, ‘Subsidising the Stage’, commenting on a Lyceum Club meeting on 31 May at which the Labour mayors’ support for municipal drama was expressed. The article declared that rate payers should not have to subsidise actors: “if the drama cannot get on without rate aid, it had better get out... it is hardly playing the game to look to the municipality to provide people with cheap amusement, even though such amusement may be classed as educational.” Ashwell responded in a letter to the journal published on 18 June 1920, arguing that public baths, supported by the rate payer, were not intended to subsidise bath attendants but were rather seen as a necessary part of the healthy life of the community and that “The Labour Mayors believe that a little healthy bathing in the fine atmosphere of good dramatic literature... may be for the good of the mentality of the race.” She concluded: “The municipal finances are well protected and it is unlikely that a subsidy for such entertainment can be procured, but would not a halfpenny or a penny on the rates for this purpose be better spent than in the cause of maintaining prisons, hospitals, workhouses?”

The *Era* reported on the *Municipal Journal*’s comments and quoted verbatim Ashwell’s letter of response, prefacing this with acknowledgement that it seemed local authorities were not yet ready to consider subsidy (23/6/20). It is significant that Ashwell was at the forefront in raising the arguments and comparisons on subsidy for the arts and the *Era*, supportive of her approach, announced in the same issue that four borough councils, those of Camberwell, Fulham, Southwark and Battersea, had agreed formally to work with Ashwell to provide a public building, usually the Town Hall or local baths, free or at charity rates for performances once a week by her company. At Fulham,

The [Establishment] committee expressed the opinion that the Borough Council would be well advised in giving its whole-hearted support to an experiment of this kind, as there is no doubt that high class dramatic performances are of an educative nature and would provide healthy and enjoyable amusement for the people of the borough at popular prices. (ibid)

At the Drama League’s annual meeting in 1920 at the Haymarket Theatre, Ashwell spoke of the success of her company’s work in Bethnal Green, confidently expressing the view that “it was possible to carry on the work at easy prices and at the same time on a basis which paid for the evening’s entertainment” (*Era* 30/6/20). She advocated the formation of another committee of the League for the consideration of the growing power of the cinema, “for she believed it needed a little advice from other sides and sections of the community” (ibid). Ashwell’s work towards borough involvement was seen as the League at work in

furthering its aim for municipal theatres. Just as she had wanted entertainment for all base camps during the war, now in peace time she was working towards a local theatre for all towns or, at least, an ongoing relationship between audiences and a theatre company.¹⁷

This situation continued to be debated throughout the 1920s. Ashwell was a clear advocate of local authority support for the arts. While realistic about the attitudes to be changed and the limited possibilities, given the demands on ratepayers for post-war reconstruction activity, she considered that some small government assistance would widen accessibility and assist the theatre's educational role in the community - all closely related to the aims of the Lena Ashwell Players. In June 1925 there was a new Public Health Bill before the House of Commons, giving discretionary power to any local authority to provide or contribute towards the expenses of any entertainment given in any park or public pleasure ground under its control, restricted however, to a penny rate. There were some, including the *Era* editor, who feared this would be a disaster for commercial enterprises - partly on the basis of competition but concerns related also to perceived municipal inefficiency and bureaucratic expense ("Nothing that municipal bodies lay hands on seems to make good." 27/6/25). There was the fear that entertainments run by the municipal authorities would "be in such a favoured position with regard to regulations and restrictions and the opportunities to undercut their competitors, of which they would avail themselves to the full" (ibid). The *Era* considered that if public money was to be used, it should be to equip existing theatres and facilitate enterprises already underway but burdened by many costs and restrictions. The *Stage* was more positive in welcoming the possibility of council help, taking the view that attitudes were changing, an "outcome of the increasing measure of local government that Parliament accords" (27/8/25). Given Ashwell's five years of advocacy it is impossible to ignore her role in the change of attitude. By this time, while the minutes of local authority meetings (to be considered later) indicate that support was rarely easily won or unanimous, Ashwell had succeeded in getting some local mayors and councils on side sufficiently to get reduced rents for some venues and she was in a position to call on their presence to lend performances public recognition. As the *Stage* pointed out,

To find authority not adverse, not suspicious, not even indifferent, is a gain of no little magnitude to the stage. It means - especially when authority desires to go further and become an active participator in amusements - a reversal, a complete overthrowing of policy that had nothing but bigotry and incompetence to recommend it. The change has been brought about by the more representative character of municipal institutions. (ibid)

¹⁷At the same meeting, The Master of the Temple declared, "the great need of the moment was a new puritanism which would not oppose the Drama, but would educate it and consecrate it to the highest possibilities that could be fulfilled. He thought the League could work hand in hand with the Church in awakening public opinion to the opportunities afforded by a correct interpretation of life. They should aim at making the people more conscious of the fact that the drama, besides being a business and an amusement, was an immense power in shaping human lives" (*Times* 26/6/20).

And, as will be explained in the following chapter, it should have been added, by Lena Ashwell and her Players.

There were many times it seemed Ashwell was before her time and the last years of her company in the late 1920s were marked by many changes which were too late to help Ashwell. As she was beginning to wind up her operation, the *Era* announced yet another first, when London County Council granted financial support towards the redevelopment of Sadler's Wells Theatre, for Lilian Baylis's Old Vic company to use as a second home, mostly for opera and ballet. The *Era* hoped this would be the beginning of a general move towards official help for municipal theatres, citing government subsidies for such activities in Europe. The editorial concluded:

we have municipal housing, lighting, power, water, transport, baths and libraries. Why not include municipal theatres? Surely the function of the Drama in civic life is an important one: important enough at all events to claim a certain amount of assistance from the governing powers... The type of theatre we advocate... would no more compete with commercial managers than do public libraries... with booksellers. In the same way municipally aided Drama might be expected to foster interest in the theatre in general. Its aim should be to produce that type of play which the ordinary manager is inclined to avoid for financial reasons, and so to keep alive many treasures of our dramatic literature.(13/3/29)

By this stage Ashwell knew to her cost that this would remain a rhetorical question for some time to come.

DRAMA AND THEATRE IN EDUCATION

Given her position on the state of the theatre and cinema, it is logical that Ashwell developed a strong advocacy of the educative role of drama and theatre, for both audiences and students. She wanted to create a more aware audience as well as further understanding of life processes through drama. She was present at the Annual Conference of Educational Associations at University College, London, in January 1920, when the Drama League initiated a discussion on *National education in and through the Drama*. President, Sir Sidney Lee, spoke on the neglect of the drama and the League's aim to introduce into the education system a just conception of dramatic literature. Consequent to this, on 13 March 1920, a British Drama League deputation was received by the President of the Board of Education, H.A.L. Fisher, "with reference to the need for a better recognition of the drama by the state" (*Times* 15/3/20). The deputation, including Sir Sidney, Ben Greet (whose Shakespeare Players performed extensively for school audiences) and Geoffrey Whitworth, placed before Fisher the League's Conference resolutions on the importance of establishing a National Theatre policy 'adequate to the needs of the people'; departments of theatre and dramatic art at universities; the promotion and support for collective and individual efforts for the development of the art of acting, the drama, and of the theatre, as forces in the life of the nation (*Era* 17/3/20). Further resolutions included the commissioning of an inquiry into relations between the state and the theatre and the need for recognition of the importance of drama in the curriculum of colleges and

training schools. Fisher was sympathetic to the notion of dramatic arts being an important element in national education, welcoming the League as a body that might exert a very considerable influence in this direction.

Dealing with... the National Theatre, Mr Fisher pointed out that our system of education was local, and ...if the Government were to do anything in... aiding the theatre... [it] should be initiated by local enterprise and local contributions should form part of it. Now that English literature was being seriously studied at the universities... they might hope for very promising developments. (Times op.cit)

This deputation had some impact, as indicated by Ashwell's letter to the *Times* on 29 March 1920. Headed *Education and the Theatre, Miss Lena Ashwell's Plea*, she declared "[we] must rejoice at this substantial recognition of its educational value" when she noted the subsequent "great revolution in the educational world when the London County Council decided to grant a subsidy to pay for the attendance of school children at ... performances of Shakespeare's plays" (ibid). However, she wanted organised support for the best productions of contemporary drama as well "and the public's recognition of its responsibility in this matter, would be the foundation... to the establishing of a municipal and national theatre, thus rescuing the theatre from its present commercial outlook, which many feel is not in the best interest of the state" (ibid).

During the 1921 Educational Associations' Annual Conference, Ashwell addressed the Training College Association, appealing to the teaching profession to give drama a proper place in education, otherwise "Shakespeare...[would continue to be] regarded in the light of a card-index or encyclopedia of information... [and] Drama ...the unfortunate Cinderella of the arts, ...was never going to get the slipper (*Stage* 13/1/21). Ashwell's by now familiar theme was the need for a vital theatre throughout the whole country, to put the people in touch with their emotional natures and imaginations. To illustrate her point, she used her experience as an actress (while declaring this was not a term she liked: "They were all actors") saying:

when reading the poetry of a new part she was often stirred to tears, but they were tears... shed in secret. 'No actor can really succeed until he or she has cried, and cried hard and bitterly – but in secret. But if you cry in public you are done'... The natural instinct of the English was to express themselves through poetry and the drama, and the power Shakespeare gave us is never used in this country - the power for stirring up the great feeling within us – because Shakespeare is never played. (ibid)

Although she acknowledged the work of the Old Vic, she considered that one effort could not cater for the millions of people who would remain "forever limited" without appreciation of Shakespeare. She concluded with comments about the cinema, objecting that without sound, there was "no real expression of human imagination or human powers... there was no language which could stir the human conscience as did the English language" (ibid).

She contributed to many conferences on the role of the drama in education, chairing a discussion on this subject at the English Association Conference, London University, in May 1921. “Until recently education had been regarded as the repression of emotion. But savants and others had now the feeling that there might be some education in expression of emotion. There was no way of getting that so completely as in the theatre” (*Stage* 2/6/21). Other speakers gave examples of the value of drama in the lives of young people; in the encouragement of creative and imaginative development. This was long before what became known, in the 1950s, as the ‘theatre in education’ movement. Ashwell was convinced that the theatrical profession had to adapt as much as the education authorities, but while “the nation regarded them as of no account in education, every effort they made to get into touch with the community seemed to be doomed to failure” (*ibid*).

Her address to the New Ideals in Education Conference at Stratford Upon Avon in early August continued in a similar vein: “[It was] curious that for centuries there had been recognition of the drama from the literary point of view but that there was in education a deep distrust of the actor and the theatre” (*Era* 10/8/21). She regretted the current state of the theatre, controlled as it was by men who were businessmen first and foremost and who had never written a play, acted or switched on the lights on stage.

Early in 1921 the Drama League drew up, for the Board of Education, a list of eight essentials for the study of dramatic method in training colleges, stressing voice and diction training and practical activities. This was included in a report, published by His Majesty’s Stationery Office in 1921, on *The Teaching of English in England*. In the section on Education and the Professional Stage, the report noted

with satisfaction that Miss Lena Ashwell... is continuing in peace time her efforts to popularize good plays. By arrangement with the Mayors of some of the London Boroughs a repertory company under her direction... has given performances in various Town Halls. We hope to see this co-operation between the stage and municipal authorities extended to other parts of the country. In promoting such co-operation the recently founded British Drama League might well find one of its most fruitful activities. (p.325)

On 19 April 1922 she spoke forcefully at the eighth annual New Ideals Conference on *Drama and National Life*, declaring,

The whole idea of our education has been to make the brain efficient for money earning. But we have to look after the heart. If the people lose their drama they also lose their language, and that is always a sign of national decadence. Let them set up as the aim of their efforts the universal establishment of civic theatres, associated with the educational system and with the local municipal authorities. (*Times Educational Supplement* 29/4/22)

She asserted that “the art of acting was to stimulate without feeling emotions, by imaginative projection into the playwright’s conception” (*Stage* 27/4/22). This was part of the debate on whether child actors could separate themselves from the characters and situations they were playing. Other lecturers on aspects of the drama included Dr Rudolf Steiner and Cicely Hamilton (attacking the commercialism in modern

drama). Ashwell also took part in the debate on *Drama and Education*, a few days later, which was chaired by Harley Granville Barker.

In July 1922 Ashwell was the principal speaker at a meeting of the National Council of Women at Watford, speaking on *The Drama as a Factor of General Education*.

It was for the thinking and intelligent people to see that there was a fine theatre for them to go to. In foreign countries drama was recognised as a feature of national life. They had State and Municipal Theatres on the Continent. During the war, when 'Big Bertha' was shelling Paris, they had many theatres playing good works - four of Shakespeare's tragedies among them... We have allowed a machine to take a prominent place in our national life that should be occupied by the theatre... the cinema... could never equal a spoken play. (*Era* 12/7/22)

In early January 1924, Ashwell, with her partner from Kingsway management days, Norman McKinnel, and Ben Greet, took part in a jointly convened British Drama League - Child Study Society meeting at University College. While Greet expressed amazement at the dramatic instinct shown by children, urging teachers to develop this, Ashwell commented on the altered relationship between the educational world and the theatre, noting that "when she first entered the profession it was really considered detrimental to any woman if she was able to think at all. The idea of any woman having brains or being a 'highbrow' would have been a definite obstacle. Today there was a complete change, which should be of great benefit to the public" (*Times* 9/1/24).

In 1926 the Adult Education Committee of the Board of Education published a major report on *British Drama*,¹⁸ which *Drama* declared was "a survey of what is certainly the most remarkable artistic development that has occurred in this country since the war."¹⁹ The report considered the relationship between drama and theatre, both professional and amateur, and education. While recognising that "the greatest acting [and directing] is the prerogative of the professional artist... and that drama reaches its highest realization as a form of art in the professional theatre," the committee considered that all

the educational benefits which are inherent in seeing the drama are equally inherent in participation in the drama, and participation confers many benefits which are not conferred by the witnessing of a play. We conceive... that drama reaches its highest realization as an instrument of education in the hands of the amateur. (ibid)

At the same time the Committee gave full credit to

such professional productions as those of ...Lena Ashwell, the Old Vic, and the Arts League of Service, where avowedly educational ends are known to be served by professional means. The connexion (sic) between education and the very highest artistic standard is also recognized in the welcome allusions to the National Theatre as the keystone, as it were, of the arch of educational drama. (ibid)

¹⁸Published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London.

¹⁹Volume IV, No.11, April 1924, p.141-2.

While an advocate of this point of view, a year earlier Ashwell had been compelled to write to the *Daily Telegraph* in response to critic Horace Shipp's article on the Little Theatres, in which he appeared to endorse an American critic's view that the British play was not as good as the foreign one. Ashwell's opinion was that this was not the case – what was lacking was encouragement for British work. “The laudation of things foreign is a peculiarity of our time. To me it seems strange that a country with a dramatic literature second to none should be so ready to hand the palm to others” (4/2/25). She then took issue with Shipp's praise of the amateur over the professional company in England. She considered amateurs, because of the occasional nature of their productions, had the opportunity to give excellent productions, but they did not need to sustain this quality over time as did the professional. Amateurs were able to create an audience of friends and relations for short seasons which was not the case for the professional. In addition,

amateur players have no difficulty in securing from the leading playwrights the performing rights of their plays. But the professional repertory companies find between them and the plays of such authors as J.M. Barrie and G. Bernard Shaw the businessmen who regard such permits to us as dangerous to the commercial interests of their principals. Much of the thankless spadework of popularising the best drama is being done today by the repertory companies playing in Bristol, Liverpool, Birmingham and in my own Century Theatre. Yet Mr Shipp ignores our efforts altogether, and gives us no honourable mention in his estimate of the forces at work making for a real, representative British drama. (ibid)

The *Stage* gave full coverage to the Drama in Education issue with three lengthy and supportive editorials in two months (on 22/4/26, 29/4/26 and 24/6/26). Ashwell was one of about twenty practitioners who had presented evidence to the Adult Education Committee in the process of their report preparation. The outcomes of many of the recommendations, although too late and too long term to benefit Ashwell's company by creating a more informed audience, are still in evidence today. One of the most significant recommendations was that universities introduce lectureships and courses in theatre studies. At the time, London University offered a diploma in dramatic art and Liverpool University had a lectureship in the art of the theatre – otherwise drama was studied within English literature courses. The League welcomed the Adult Education report at its Annual Conference in London on 29 and 30 October 1926. Granville Barker considered it to be “a landmark in the revival of the drama... with that official document to refer to, no one could ever say again that the movement in which they were interested was not a vital and national one” (*Stage* 4/11/26). As guest speaker at the City of London Vacation course luncheon, and in the company of Sir Henry Hadow, Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University, who lectured on Music In Education, Ashwell spoke on the role of art in freeing the feelings and making recipients “ready for adventure and to be fearless... People get more into their consciousness when they are enjoying themselves than in any other way” (*Times* 11/8/26). With the same positive attitude, Ashwell, Barry Jackson and Cloudesley Brereton spoke on *The Festival Spirit in Drama*, chaired by Geoffrey Whitworth, at the Conference of Educational Associations on 30 December 1926.

The discussion continued throughout the decade – by early 1929, for its debate on *Shakespeare and the School*, the League advocated a combination of three factors to ensure a full study of Shakespeare. These were the text to study; the performance of scenes by students; and visits by the students to professional performances; the last “a factor which needed the cooperation of not only the school authorities and the dramatic profession but the administrative authorities” (*Times* 2/1/29). The League considered the choice of plays to be a matter for school authorities, but it was important that students be given the opportunity to act out and have access to performance of the plays. Ashwell was already offering access to the plays through the Lena Ashwell Players, wanting only the kind of support that would enable her to continue.

THE NATIONAL THEATRE

On 29 December 1922 the Conference of Educational Association’s debate on *The Duty of the Educational World in Regard to the Idea of a National Theatre* reflected the close relationship at this time between the idea of a National Theatre and the educative role of drama and the theatre. The *Times* reported Ashwell’s belief that much civic effort was needed before

we are worthy of a national memorial to Shakespeare... she believed the civic idea was profoundly useful; it meant cooperation between the artist and the community. There need be no expense to the rates. The whole of our recreation is at present purely in a state of industrialism. There was no cooperation with the people to secure something which could not be measured by money: therefore the art itself was in a very low state. Every actor longed for a National Memorial Shakespeare Theatre, because such a theatre would represent the very finest work our art could provide for the people. (30/12/22)

Geoffrey Whitworth, Secretary of the League, also spoke in support of a national theatre, which he conceded would require subsidy - private or public.

The League’s major project for 1924 was involvement, in collaboration with the Theatre Managers’ Association, in the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley Park. Proud to be entrusted with such a project, the League announced the exhibit would be an historical one, using models to illustrate the development of the English stage from medieval times to the days of Irving’s Lyceum Theatre (*Times* 5/12/23). For various reasons it was impossible to deal adequately with the contemporary theatre; and as the *Times* declared, “The plain fact is, the actual live drama cannot be brought to the Exhibition, and the visitors who desire to see it must... inspect it in its own home, the London theatres. But they will probably find their way there, without invitation” (24/10/23). To avoid creating the impression that it considered only the theatre of the past to be worthy of serious attention, the League initiated a competition, in association with *Country Life*, for the best architectural design for a future National Theatre. The winning design, and runners-up were added to the exhibit before it closed (*Times* 5/12/23). The British Empire Exhibition was seen as a good time to revive the idea of a National Theatre, which had flagged somewhat of late. The design competition hoped to show the abilities of British architects, whose brief was to create a structure housing two theatres, not at this stage site specific.

As ever, Ashwell seized the day when a resolution, declaring that in the interests of art and education, a national theatre in London would be welcomed, was passed at a meeting of the League at the Exhibition on 27 June 1924. She observed that those wanting a national theatre did not just have “a bee in their bonnet.”²⁰ It was as important as the large and expensive museums and galleries

in which we gather the art of generations that preceded us. At the national expense it was thought necessary to keep the bodies of butterflies for public education. We want to have a standard with regard to the theatre. A national theatre was one where the fullest possibilities of the stage could be expressed. Half the time people in this country were forced to play in buildings entirely unsuitable. Architecturally they were doubtful buildings, but from the point of view of the actor they were often death traps... Our country has always led in the drama and it is leading now; but we want a theatre where the plays of the genius of our national life could be played continuously. A national theatre is just as necessary as a hospital. When they break their legs people go to hospital, and when they break their hearts and have no imagination left, they ought to go to a theatre. (ibid)

The 1929 annual conference in Northampton focussed on pushing forward the National Repertory Theatre scheme. The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary had declared sympathy with the idea, providing a practical and agreed scheme could be devised. The League, through a questionnaire, had supportive responses from some 170 leaders of British opinion on the aims for a National Theatre. A special edition of *Drama* was produced by Granville Barker on plans for a National Theatre. Others, however, like Shaw, were sceptical that such a project would ever receive sufficient public support: “The nation does not care tuppence about a national theatre. Politics, sport, religion, hospitals, education, and even to a limited extent music and painting are popular enough to force themselves on governments; but the theatre, no!” (*Stage* 31/10/29).

Although Shaw had been involved, his letter to the League conference pointed out that for a number of years the Shakespeare Memorial Committee, ‘sitting’ on some £90,000 in donations, had been inert and unable to agree with the more broadly based National Theatre group, which was seeking more than just an appropriate tribute to Shakespeare. The Drama League provided an active, committed forum for debate, determined to advance the work of “the pioneers of the repertory movement, Miss Horniman, Miss Lilian Baylis, Miss Lena Ashwell and Sir Barry Jackson” (Lord Lytton, *Stage* 31/10/29). The conference ended with a stronger than ever determination to further the process towards a national theatre. Shaw’s criticism and the League’s statement of intent galvanised the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre Committee into action. Members of Parliament, and representatives of all areas of the theatrical profession, including Drama League members Ashwell, Geoffrey Whitworth and others, were present on 25 November 1929, at the House of Commons, to hear expressions of support and the proposal to appoint a panel to select a joint committee to draw up an agreed scheme (*Stage* 28/11/29). In the same edition of the *Stage*, there was an item on the vote in the House of Commons to introduce a Bill, proposed by the Socialist MP for

²⁰A National Theatre, Miss Lena Ashwell on its Necessity. *Bath & Wilts Chronicle* 30/6/24.

Peckham, Mr Beckett, to enable local authorities to spend an amount up to a penny rate annually on the establishment of municipal theatres. There was still a long way to go.

The League did not focus entirely on educational drama and the municipal and national theatre and over the years provided a forum for many discussions, such as the debate on Sunday opening for theatres.²¹ At its Annual Meeting and Conference in 1921, with some 120 affiliated societies as active members, the League considered Ashwell's proposal that the council "report on the practical working and constitution of a club in London" (*Era* 6/7/21). She insisted "that such a club should be for ladies as well as gentlemen... lamenting that there was a tendency on the part of men to have such things to themselves" (*ibid*). She thought

The club... [would be the] nucleus of many things... a source of information... a centre... a reference library... [and] might be developed on the lines of... the Royal Society of Medicine, or the Burlington Fine Arts Club. She thought a club would create a greater interest in the drama and might hasten the day when the country would have a Ministry of Fine Arts... What was wanted was a dramatic rendezvous. (*ibid*)

Bernard Shaw supported the scheme to a certain extent but felt the Council should investigate what could be done regarding a club before being given permission to go ahead and establish one. It was not until January 1929 that a Club Room was created for the League, at Adelphi Terrace where the Library was also housed.

In keeping with the League's regional involvement, an annual conference was held in the late autumn, in a large centre involving the university, the local borough council (usually the Lord Mayor hosted a reception) and theatre personalities. In November 1921 it took place in Sheffield, with playwright St John Ervine as guest speaker. The annual meeting was held in the summer, usually in London. By the end of 1922 the League considered itself to be "the only organization in the country ready to deal in a practical and disinterested fashion with any theatrical problem which arises."²² Reference was made to the first four volumes of published plays in 'The British Drama League Library of Modern British Drama', published by Basil Blackwood of Oxford, with the incentive that "no real renaissance of our drama can take place without a new impulse towards the writing of plays" (*ibid*). The League's other activities included eisteddfods and the organisation of performances by member groups for fund raising purposes. In May 1923 Ashwell judged the Open Acting Competition between London amateur dramatic clubs, and awarded the winner the Drama League Trophy (*Era* 9/5/23). The League also worked in association with the radio station 2LO, providing lecture/ recitals on the history of dramatic representation. Ben Greet's company performed a series of mediaeval plays, in Southwark Cathedral, on wagons in the streets and at the Chapter House, which were broadcast in January 1925 (*Times* 19/1/25).

²¹ There was a report of the meeting in the *Era* 26/1/21. Shaw and Arthur Bouchier were in favour, but others wanted a day of rest for the profession.

²²A.B. Walkley, 'Reading Plays', *Times*, 6/12/22.

In November 1923, at the beginning of the League's annual conference, George Bernard Shaw unveiled a tablet in tribute to playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan at the house where he lived in Bath between 1771 and 1772. Shaw delivered a paper praising Sheridan and urged the establishment in Bath of a municipal theatre (*Times* 27/10/23). Two days later the *Times* reported that by this stage the four-year-old League had

been compelled rather to hide its light under a bushel, but nevertheless... it has carried out a great deal of good work... assisting the development of the drama. This is its avowed object, with a subsidiary one of 'promoting a right relationship between drama and the life of the community as a whole' ...three hundred other societies have become affiliated to the League – among them the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, the Stage Society, the Oxford University Drama Society, and the Manchester Playgoers. It gives practical assistance to... affiliated societies; ...sends producers, trainers and even dressers, to small communities to help in the production of plays... recently also has started to publish plays which might otherwise never have seen the light of day... Its members particularly disclaim the suggestion of being 'highbrow', and this is especially to the good, as it is the suspicion of being 'highbrow' that has done so much in the past to spoil otherwise excellent work done for the betterment of the theatre. (29/10/23)

In 1924 the League's Annual Conference was held at Liverpool on 24 and 25 October. On the first day there was a reception given by the Lord Mayor, followed by a public meeting at which Ashwell, along with Granville Barker and playwright Lennox Robinson, was a speaker. The conference discussed subscriptions payable by affiliated societies and payment to playwrights for productions and play readings of their works. Many playwrights were losing legitimate earnings, pressured by groups who declared their performances to be for charity purposes. It was urged that a royalty basis of payment be adopted. Bernard Shaw was quoted as having "roundly cursed [at a previous London meeting] all societies which performed for charity, and gave his blessing to all societies who could prove that any money they made went for dramatic work" (*Times* 27/10/24). Given that dramatists had to make their living, it was resolved to gather more information from producing societies to put before playwrights.

The significant advance for 1925 was the major growth of the League's library. In December 1924 the Carnegie Trust gave the League a substantial grant, of £750 per annum for three years, "to establish a centrally based library of all such books as may be of living importance to students or practitioners of theatre art... dealing with the modern theatre, both at home and abroad... [as well as] a section for illustrated books and costume designs" (*Times* 5/12/24). The League's first library had been established in a room in Covent Garden in 1921; the nucleus of the collection being a few sets of plays purchased for loan to amateur societies and Miss Horniman's donation of manuscripts and prompt copies of the 200 plays produced during her management of the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester between 1908 and 1917. The first librarian, Mary Dalston, was appointed in 1922. The Carnegie Trust had previously given the League a smaller grant to purchase plays for loan distribution to affiliated societies and over "the past 12 months over 6,000 plays and theatre books have been in circulation" (*ibid*). A condition of the grant was that the

library made its material, through postal distribution, available throughout the country and that the library itself be accessible for visitors. The Carnegie Trust was already actively involved in music education, and support for the League was seen as an extension of its educational policy.

The League moved quickly; in March the *Era* reported, “the new library of the British Drama League is now established at 8 Adelphi-terrace W.C.2. There is a book capacity of 8,000” (21/3/25). The library was opened on 27 March by Lord Eustace Percy, President of the Board of Education. At the Hotel Cecil lunch afterwards, speeches, broadcast on radio 2LO, were made by Lord Burnham, Lord Percy, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Miss E.S. Haldane (from the Carnegie Trust) and Ashwell. By June 1925, 6,000 volumes had been purchased or donated. Gifts included complete sets of the magazine, *The Mask*, from 1914 and the dramatic publications of Wells, Gardner, Darton and Company. In addition, the late William Archer’s 1500 volumes of theatrical books were on loan to the League, pending establishment of a National Theatre, when, “by the terms of Mr Archer’s will, the books will be handed over to the Library of that Institution”²³ (*Drama*, June 1925, Vol. III, No.3).

In early 1925, as Ashwell prepared for a return to the stage,²⁴ the League continued its role as advocate for the development and improvement of the theatre arts, and held a number of meetings to discuss stage design, including historical accuracy on stage (*Times* 9/1/25). In August the League held an exhibition of community and repertory theatre design (containing some 135 items from around the country) at University College, Oxford, where Sir Michael Sadler, Master of the College, declared:

The Drama League really set a standard for amateur productions of drama... they had got very near the centre of a great change, not only in English habit, but in the relations between one class and another... [he] believed they would find the growth in many men of a new sense of obligation to the community, the desire to add to its real pleasures and happiness by intellectual and artistic cooperation... Headquarters gave advice to members about the production of plays and the reading and criticism of plays. It sent lecturers or speakers, and did many other services which in former days there was no one to do... it has also an excellent library. (*Times* 3/8/25)

It must be said that there was something slightly patronising about the League’s style, which implied a sense of rightness about the way things should be done, and some of the language used (for example, ‘Headquarters’), appear to be remnants of wartime terminology. However, the League continued its play publication series and active involvement in drama in education initiatives, while lecture programmes included a series on the development of the stage from earliest times to the present day, instigated by the

²³The BDL library was disbursed in the early 1990s, before which its influence and coverage was wide-spread. Fisher Library at Sydney University has many of the British Drama League/French’s Acting editions of play scripts which were the mainstay of amateur and small repertory theatres in far-flung outposts of the British Commonwealth such as Australia, where a branch was established in NSW. Ashwell’s company performed many of these plays—most were premiered in London’s West End theatres between 1900 and 1930. These plays had considerable influence on the nature and content of theatre throughout the English speaking world up to the Second World War.

²⁴Ashwell was preparing for her role in St. John Ervine’s *The Ship* with the Lena Ashwell Players. This is described in detail in the following chapter.

Board of Education and the British Broadcasting Company. In the autumn of 1924 Ashwell organised a course of lectures at the Century Theatre; her topic was *Macbeth*, Clemence Dane talked about *Hamlet* and Ophelia, while Ashley Dukes, William Archer, W.J. Turner and Mrs John Penlington covered a diverse range of topics from the Elizabethan stage, Drama and Democracy to the Japanese stage.²⁵

In 1925 the League became affiliated to a wider movement to strengthen the theatre. Four years earlier, critic J.T. Grein had sought to establish a League of Nations Theatre, using a company of actors to take plays into Europe and to promote similar ideals to those of its namesake. There was a great desire to find ways to restrict the possibility of further wars (*Era* 17/8/21). This was a very ambitious and expensive concept and by 1925 there was a much more realistic approach to working together. The *Times* reported that

G.K. Chesterton presided at the inaugural dinner of the International Theatre Society... [he] said the attempt of the ITS to create a cultural link between the nations had his warmest sympathy... The Spanish Ambassador, speaking of *Spanish Drama and the International Theatre*, said art was the channel for making nations understand and love one another. Dramatic art was, he thought, more efficient than any other for that purpose. Miss Lilian Baylis declared that Shakespeare had taught people to know something of continental life.
(2/11/25)

The Society was a French initiative and one of the instigators, M. Gemier, attended the British meeting the following year. Now, apparently called the Universal Society of the Theatre, “the British section of this Society is now well established on the basis of representation from existing organizations. This seemed a more practical method of proceeding than that of establishing an entirely new Committee” (*Drama*, December 1926). Ten organisations, including major training institutions and professional societies, were represented on the Committee with Ashwell one of the three Drama League representatives. This committee proved too unwieldy, so an Executive was appointed, with one representative from each of the principal organisations. Ashwell represented the League, and assisted with the plans for Sybil Thorndike, as St Joan and Medea, to represent Britain at the Dramatic Festival in Paris in June 1927 (*Drama*, June 1927).

The late twenties saw remarkable growth in the size and activities of the League. In 1927 what became an annual two-week Easter School for Amateurs was set up in London, with distinguished members of the profession teaching and lecturing to enthusiasts from around the country. On 1 July 1927 Ashwell chaired the Seventh Annual Meeting of the League in London, at which it was announced that membership numbers had risen from 1620 at the end of June 1926 to 2037 at the end of June 1927. The magazine, *Drama*, had a monthly circulation of over 3000 copies. By this time there were 1114 affiliated societies, many of whom took part in the first National Festival of Community Drama, organised in a series of local

²⁵It has not been possible to ascertain exactly when these took place, although the overall programme was included in the League’s Annual Report, published in *Drama*, June, MCMXXV, Volume III, Number 3.

heats by the League, with six community theatre groups selected as finalists who were judged in London in late February 1927. For the smaller scale village groups, the League, with the appointment of Margaret Macnamara as Community Theatre Secretary, organised a competition for plays written by members of Village Societies. Ashwell lent the Century Theatre for a matinee on December 9, 1926, at which four of these short plays were performed, adjudicated by Ashwell and John Drinkwater (*Drama*, June 1927). The July meeting debated the League's commitment to a National Theatre and a resolution was passed reaffirming the League's "support of the movement for a National Theatre", urging "the speediest prosecution of the project consistent with the establishment of a playhouse which, as regards site and endowment, shall be worthy of a national institution" (*Drama*, July 1927, pp.153-4).

In April 1928 Ashwell attended a farewell dinner in honour of Sybil Thorndike and Louis Casson on the eve of their departure for a ten-month tour of South Africa. "Lord Gorrell, who presided, said the British Drama League, founded in 1919, had 900 affiliated societies in 1927 and today they numbered 1400. Their two guests had done much to keep the torch of drama alight today in England" (*Times* 16/4/28). The Annual Conference took place in Sheffield, after which the *Era* acknowledged the League's standing as a strong organisation and representative of the theatre and drama, with nearly 4,500 affiliated groups, of which 1650 were registered amateur societies (14/11/28).

PUBLIC SPEAKING AND RADIO WORK

Ashwell had honed her oratory skills and gained considerable confidence and status during the war. In the 1920s, aside from her role as an advocate for the Drama League and the Lena Ashwell Players, she was invited frequently to speak on a wide range of issues, and to preach at religious meetings. She took part in many debates and chaired meetings, as well as writing letters to the papers on behalf of organisations who sought her support to promote their cause. From extant correspondence²⁶, it appears that when she was paid as a lecturer, this was accepted in the form of a donation to the Lena Ashwell Players.

She spoke at the Halcyon Club meeting in January 1922 when play and novel writing was discussed (with Cicely Hamilton and Hugh Walpole) and was described subsequently by the gossip and fashion writer, Mrs Aria, as "ubiquitous in her industries" (*Era* 1/2/22). She apparently spoke with "smiling self-possession", pleading with persuasive eloquence "for more imagination in all the arts" (*ibid*). She then addressed the O.P Club in February 1923, lamenting the lack of recognition for theatre as part of the national life.

²⁶In Ashwell's reply to a request to lecture on *A State Theatre* to the National Union of Teachers in October 1925, she advised, "With regard to the fee, I generally get ten guineas in London which I like to have sent in the form of a donation to the Players. If, however, you cannot afford this fee will you kindly let me know what you usually pay and no doubt we can come to some arrangement" (Letter to Miss A. Ferrari, 13/2/25, Fawcett Library, London). The likely date of the lecture was 29 October 1925.

Today we have art galleries, and a certain amount of recognition by the London County Council that colleges of music are as important as other colleges, but the Academy of Dramatic Art were told they would have to pay full taxation... The modern idea of success means the amount of money a play can realise. (Era 8/2/23)

Others such as Henry Arthur Jones (speaking to the Gallery First Nighters' Club around the same time) and Barry Jackson (founder of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre speaking at the Critics' Circle dinner on 8 June 1923), found the theatre was not in a healthy state (Era 13/6/23), while Sir Thomas Beecham agreed, contending that music was as dead as the drama (ibid). The *Era*, however, ventured

to think that there are, at a score of theatres in the West End today, plays quite as worthy as *Diana of Dobson's* and *Irene Wycherley* (eg. *Loyalties*, *Secrets*, *Bulldog Drummond*, *Treasure Island*)... The impression gathered from Miss Ashwell's remarks was that nothing good could come from the commercial manager. They were out to make money at any price, and the least that concerned them was the moral uplift of their patrons. (8/2/23)

The *Era* considered that without mention of seasons such as those at the Court and Royalty theatres and certain managers and businessmen who had presented worthwhile programmes, it was not a balanced view.

Miss Ashwell... has already done commendable work by getting the loan of Town Halls at a nominal sum for the presentation of 'people's plays', pins her faith to the establishment of buildings in every town similar to the National Gallery, on a similar scale, which should be devoted, under municipal auspices, to plays for the people. We applaud the distinguished actress's public-spirited scheme, but we do not think it will be assisted by proclaiming the faults and ignoring the virtues of existing places of entertainment. (ibid)

When she addressed a crowded meeting of the Gallery First Nighters' Club on *The Actor and the Modern Stage*, she referred humorously to the fact that she was often described as a Jeremiah for her gloomy outlook and predictions. She mentioned Irving as a fine example of the actor/manager, who pursued a certain policy and always had an objective: "the production of the best plays in the best manner possible. At the present time there are very few theatres that have any policy at all" (Era 18/3/23). In the course of her talk, she criticised the attitude of the author towards the actor in not permitting alteration of a single word. She declared immense admiration for Shaw's plays, "but brilliant as they are from an intellectual point of view, they require no display of emotion on the part of the actor, and most other present-day plays were deficient in the same respect" (ibid).

At this time Ashwell developed the notion, presumably taken from current research into social and cultural trends and attitudes, that playgoers attending West End theatre were largely from the 'C3 mentality', by which she meant they were happy to accept mindless entertainment and not seek out a higher expression of the arts. This prompted the *Era* to ask "Are Audiences Imbecile? Surely Miss Lena Ashwell is letting her eloquence get the better of her when she refers to the modern playgoer as 'A person of C3 mentality.'" On the whole, it is so much better for actors and actresses to keep to their acting" (14/11/23). However, when playwright and former *Observer* critic, St. John Ervine, addressed the Fabian

Society on the subject of *The Drama and the Audience*, he declared, apparently in agreement with Ashwell, "It is no good blaming the dramatist, the casts, the managers. You must go away from here in a state of humiliation, and blame yourselves!" (ibid). Undoubtedly Ashwell presented similar ideas when she spoke at the Repertory Players' Annual Dinner in November 1923 (*Era* 21/11/23), and at a luncheon of the National Liberal Club in early 1924 (*Era* 6/2/24).

As the 1920s progressed, Ashwell became more outspoken about the content and style of American films replacing the theatre as a recreational pursuit. She was the first woman to address the Royal Society of Medicine in January 1925, when she said she believed the drama

was not a luxury but a necessity, yet it was taxed as a luxury on the same footing as tobacco, and the legitimate drama was taxed far too heavily, as compared to the kinema. In the war the necessity for the recreative influences of music and the drama was discovered by the military authorities, and artists worked very hard to meet the national need... theatres of this country were giving place to the kinema on every hand. Ours was the only country in Europe where there was no cooperation between the public and the dramatic artist. It is humiliating to think that only one theatre - the Old Vic - regularly produces Shakespeare's plays. The kinema is bankrupt as regards doing anything to stimulate the higher faculties of the mind, and as the sole means of recreation for the people it is doing great harm, especially to the youth.
(*Stage* 22/1/25)

When she spoke to yet another gathering, of the First Night Playgoers' Club, in February 1925, she declared that "millions of British folk were forced to witness shoddy, stereotyped American film plays, wherein love was usually treated as a sickly frenzy rather than an inspiration and a beautiful thing" (*Westminster Gazette* 23/2/25). She stated "it was significant that ...Shaw would not consent to his plays being adapted to the films. He espied the great danger of the omission of the spoken word" (ibid).

In January 1926, the O.P. Club held a Young Brigade dinner at the Criterion, to honour younger members of the profession including Esme Church.²⁷ Israel Zangwill spoke of his concern with the reducing audience for West End theatre and the invasion of American influences, warning against too much idealism. He saw hope in the repertory theatre movement and local self-help and suggested the Entertainments Tax be "applied to the establishment of a national theatre on the lines of the Comedie Francaise... [and] he would have a woman like Lena Ashwell as one of the directors" (*Stage* 21/1/26). Ashwell's response was to stress the need to maintain a youthful purpose and to support the pursuit of English interests in the face of foreign attempts to "seize the centre of their intellectual and aesthetic life" (ibid). For her, the solution "lay in the repertory system... [and] in groups of actors co-operating with other groups of actors; not the star system, but the co-operative star system, as it might be called... In the words of Henry Irving, let them keep aloft the oriflamme of the British drama" (ibid).

²⁷Esme Church was a leading member of the Lena Ashwell Players. See Appendix Five.

Ashwell, under the auspices of the Six Point Group,²⁸ gave an afternoon lecture, on 11 March, on *Drama for the People*. The *Kentish Mercury* reporter expressed pleasure at hearing Ashwell speak, recognising, perhaps, that she was destined not to realise her ambitions immediately:

Perhaps it is left to the future to realise how much [she] has... accomplished... the indomitable courage and enthusiasm which has triumphed over many difficulties... [She] has the people's interests at heart... [this is] at the back of her fine undertaking to meet the need as well as possible until such time as the authorities awake to a sense of their responsibility. (26/3/26)

On American film content and the degrading effect on viewers, Ashwell declared

We cannot afford to fill our minds with horrible things, or to educate our young people on them... it is appalling to think of the number living in this so-called civilisation who have no food for their souls, or any realisation of the value of beauty in their lives... It is a lie to say that our people don't want the best. They do, but... not enough enterprise is exerted for them to get it. (ibid)

She was a vocal supporter of Lilian Baylis' aims and achievements at the Old Vic, and it is disheartening to find that Ashwell's work, without a central London theatre base, did not receive similar recognition or a place in theatre history. She considered the Old Vic Shakespeare productions were maintained

through great stress, and ...with a courage beyond all praise. But individual efforts such as this should not be necessary. We should possess National Theatres, as other nations do, where people's needs are studied... There are to-day actors who do not hanker after high salaries, and who have more ambition to be of service to the people than to be run after by them, who have an idea of giving rather than getting. These are content to make enough money to get along with, and, incidentally, it is they who make it possible for a company like the Lena Ashwell Players to be run without a serious loss. (ibid)

Ashwell genuinely believed that wartime work had changed the attitude of performers to their role in society; from her experiences and the apparent attitudes of many of her company, particularly the women, this was clearly the case.

Ashwell's public speaking career should be seen in the context of the purposes for which it was pursued. For her mostly sympathetic audiences on these occasions, she was an important representative of her profession and she expressed things they wanted to hear. She was not completely against cinema, she admired greatly artists such as Charlie Chaplin and accepted the popular power and influence of this growing industry, but she did want audiences to question what they saw.

²⁸The Six Point Group, founded in 1921, was a political pressure group, working for women's rights in six specific areas where it was felt that reform was long overdue. The group intended to campaign for legislation to be passed through Parliament on child assault, the widowed mother, the unmarried mother and her child, equal guardianship, equality of pay for men and women teachers, equality of pay and opportunity for men and women in the Civil Service. Its members included Elizabeth Robins and Cicely Hamilton (*The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton*, op.cit. p.192).

Most films... [are] made by people who had no brains at all. In fact I very much doubt if those people have ever seen anything of ...civilised life. They appear to be appealing to the greatest possible number of fools. In those films the heroine was the kind of girl 'any sensible girl wants to smack at sight'; the villain was always the employer, and the employee always the hero. That might be true in America, but it did not represent the facts in this country. She had seen many horrible things in France during the War, but since then she had often had to shut her eyes to the ugly things shown in films. Unless people took care, they would become so accustomed to watching ugly things that they would lose the love of the beautiful altogether.²⁹

As was usually the pattern, Ashwell pursued this theme when she spoke to the Putney Brotherhood in February 1929. Except for the wireless, she recognised that the cinema was the most affordable form of amusement for most people, but she was concerned with its message. "The idea is suggested that the greatest happiness a human being can obtain is wealth, the possession of motor-cars, and the constant indulgence in night clubs."³⁰

At the end of 1922 the British Broadcasting Company (replaced in 1926 by the British Broadcasting Corporation) acquired the exclusive licence to broadcast programmes using the wireless. It is not necessary here to go into the arguments that raged for and against broadcasting as a competitor for the live arts. These have been examined elsewhere (for example: *Era* 23/5/23). However, as an articulate public speaker, Ashwell broadcast as a lecturer and performer on the new medium of radio during the 1920s and 1930s, although the extent of her work in this field is not known as most broadcasts at the time were live and not recorded for posterity. Talks she gave on behalf of the British Drama League, and undoubtedly some of her Shakespeare lectures, which were published in *Reflections from Shakespeare*, were broadcast but not recorded. Radio 2LO London was supportive of the League's work and the most likely outlet for drama. There are a few extant references to Ashwell's appearances. In August 1926, included in the evening listings for a local London radio station, possibly 2LO, was a British Legion Programme presentation of a Lena Ashwell Concert Party. Presumably this was a re-creation of the wartime programmes. Ashwell recited a number of poems including *The Sea is His*, *St George of England* and *Yesterday in Oxford Street*, with songs performed by Carrie Tubb.³¹

Apparently it was not until May 1934 that Ashwell took part in a radio play. An unidentified newspaper item, under a photo of Ashwell, announced she would "play the part of Vana-Kai in the one-act play, *Bathsheba of Saaremaa*, tonight at 10.15. This will be the first time she has taken part in a radio play."³² Two months later the *Evening News'* Wireless Correspondent noted that "Miss Lena Ashwell, the distinguished actress, is to make another appearance at the microphone in the Canadian programme, devised by Jack Inglis and Roger Pocock, to be broadcast next Tuesday" (19/7/34). The name of the

²⁹Quoted from a speech made by Ashwell to the Greenwich Group of Toc H (*Kentish Mercury* 5/4/28).

³⁰Quoted from an unidentified newspaper cutting dated 11/2/29 in Mitchenson & Mander collection, England.

³¹Quoted from an unidentified newspaper cutting dated 4/8/26.

³²Quoted from an unidentified newspaper cutting in the Mitchenson & Mander collection.

‘play’ or documentary, which appears to be the dramatisation of an historical event in Canada, is not included, but other members of the cast included Lieutenant Colonel Vanier, taking “the part of Jacques Cartier, the leader of the 60 French pioneers to Canada in 1534” (ibid), and Raymond Massey.

The only known extant recording of Ashwell’s voice is the BBC Sound Archive disc of a national broadcast with Shaw, of his *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, on 22 April 1938 (presumably as part of Shakespeare birthday celebrations), and part of the campaign for a National Theatre. Ashwell played Queen Elizabeth to Robert Donat’s Shakespeare, with Mary Hinton as the Dark Lady (Mistress Mary Fitton) and George Woodbridge, the Beefeater. Shaw introduced the short play, describing how it was written as an appeal for a National Theatre from an idea by Dame Edith Lyttleton. The setting is the Palace of Whitehall; Shaw’s imaginary venue for the siting of the National Theatre. Ashwell was nearly seventy at the time of this recording, but her voice is strong and clear.

Perhaps Ashwell’s response to issues relating specifically to women best demonstrates her diversity of interests during the 1920s. The examples included by no means cover all her involvement at this time, but they do demonstrate her strong commitment to the influence of women in the shaping of society. Post war there was a determination to better organise many previously unquestioned procedures. The Charity Organisation Society was a product of this period. Ashwell was a strong supporter and at a meeting in Battersea explained the Society’s work and modus operandi. The focus was on charity for those genuinely in need, while at the same time offering protection for the giver against fraudulent claims. The Society investigated cases of need before advising potential donors. Charitable work had become much more sophisticated and wise, and Ashwell’s experience was highly valued and her views respected (*South Western Star* 27/1/22).

When, in late October 1922, Ashwell gave the inaugural lecture, *Women in the Drama*, in a series on *Women in Public and Social Work* at Blackheath, George Mackern, Principal of the local Conservatorium of Music, introduced Ashwell, describing her war work. She expressed her pleasure at his mention of this, “for it was then that her profession – formerly regarded as a luxury – was developed into an essential part of the national life” (*Kentish Mercury* 27/10/22). She said “Foreign countries were doing far more than England in performing the standard works of Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw and Barrie” (ibid). The *Mercury* also reported on Ashwell’s lecture, *The Women of Shakespeare from a Woman’s Point of View*, at Deptford Hall, during the autumn Municipal Suburban Lecture series. After dealing with Shakespeare’s early life,

[she] protested against the statement that actors must experience, in their own lives, the emotions they were called on to depict on the stage. As one who had played the part of heroine in each of Shakespeare’s plays³³ she could assure the audience that to suggest such a thing was to deny the human brain its greatest attribute, the power of imagination. In the

³³This was not true, although she had studied the roles over time.

early plays Shakespeare portrayed women as buoyant, radiantly happy, constructive creatures who invariably set difficult matters right, but in the middle period of his life there was a marked change, and he introduced women who were the cause of trouble. In his latter days, Shakespeare introduced women whose characters were marked by a wonderful dignity and beauty, quite unlike his former heroines, and clearly indicated his belief in and admiration for a true woman. (8/12/22)

This was the basic premise of her collection of lectures published as *Reflections from Shakespeare* in 1927. In March 1923 she took part in the Hardwicke Society's Ladies' Night Debate on *Publicity in Modern Life*. Hamilton was also a participant. Ashwell proposed the motion: 'That publicity is the bane of modern life', saying that while "there was a great deal of good achieved by certain kinds of publicity, our modern life was much injured by publicity which was not a benefit to the human race" (*Times* 26/3/23). She was concerned with the nature of public reportage on Law Court cases.

Lately the stories of unhappy affairs were not confined to the cases in the Courts, but were spread out all over the world in order to feed the sensational desire of the child mind. The morbidity which these stories aroused in the nation was a very real injury. It was a great evil to endeavour to increase the money value of a newspaper by bringing it down to the level of the lowest common denominator, the child mind: that kind of person ought to be helped up the scale of evolution and not to be pushed down. (ibid)

In another address to a community group, the East Lewisham Women's Municipal Society and Citizen's Association, in June, she said

her hearers had no doubt read in the Press about the 'stunt' for removing the word 'servant' from the English language. I belong to that proud community who are servants of the public. I think the biggest word in the whole of the British language is the word 'servant'. The first servant of the country is the Prime Minister, and some time ahead there will be that fearful menace, a woman Prime Minister. By that time let us hope she will have learned English, and forgotten to shape her pretty lips to 'stunt'. (*Era* 20/6/23)

As well as speaking in public, Ashwell went into print for causes she supported and in May 1924 the *Times* published her letter headed *London Business Girls*.

The 'campaign week' of the Y.W.C.A. to provide a central club for girls and women working in business and the professions in London, opens on May 26. May I now appeal to the host of women who do their shopping in London to help those who serve them? They can hardly be indifferent to the welfare of those on whose ready understanding, civility and patience it depends whether the task of shopping is satisfactory, quick and pleasant, or the reverse. All women go shopping and apart from those whose means enable them to make large contributions to the fund, I believe that a very large number would be glad to make 'a woman's gift to women' in so good a cause. I am told that the cost of a 'yard' of brickwork, containing some 84 bricks is about 10s.; of a cubic foot of stonework is anything from 10s. to 20s. and of a 'square' of 170 slating is about 50s. A great many bricks and stones and slates will be wanted, but if the multitude of women shoppers will send to the Y.W.C.A. Forward Movement at 26 George Street, Hanover Square, cheques or postal orders for as many bricks or stones or slates as they can afford, they will have the satisfaction of feeling that they have 'built themselves into' a fabric, the walls and roof of which will speak as a

perpetual expression of their fellowship with the multitude of their sisters who work for their living. (24/5/24)

As with similar projects Ashwell 'fronted' with letters, newspaper articles or on committees, the extent of her involvement with such projects has not been fully ascertained. Her public profile and espousing of women's causes, obviously led organisations, such as the Y.W.C.A., to seek her assistance and lend her name to their cause. How much time she devoted to such campaigns is not known, but there are extant letters indicating occasions when she declined involvement through lack of time or other commitments. This response was obviously rare, given the diversity of causes she did help.

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

"Both Father and Mother were deeply religious, not being in the conventional way just content with formulas, but living every day what they felt to be the Will of God" (*Myself a Player*, p. 20). Having been part of a family where religion was discussed, "long before I was able to understand" (ibid. p.21), throughout her life Ashwell explored a number of religions and constantly sought understanding through the scriptures and teachings of others. Prior to the First World War, she was introduced to a system of spiritual and mental development advocated by American doctor and author, James Porter Mills. By 1937 she ran The Fellowship of the Way, carrying on his work in London. She was also influenced by the beliefs and writings of those interested in mysticism, meditation and eastern religions such as Count Hermann Keyserling, Adela Curtis, Claude Bragdon and Sir Oliver Lodge, as well as by the Church of the Old Catholics, before her final commitment to Moral Re-Armament after the Second World War.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find her a key speaker at the Church Congress in Birmingham in October 1921. Seemingly by now never at a loss to turn her thoughts quickly to aspects of society being debated publicly, Ashwell's subject was *Recreation*. Her speech was not without emphasis and exaggeration. She considered "The modern theatre is being divorced from its real root, that root being part of the religion of the nation... It is superficial. It is dealing with merely surface emotion instead of being deep-rooted in the religious life of the community" (*Times* 13/10/21). In the *Era*, Sydney Coltson took exception to "Dame (sic) Ashwell's indictment of the modern stage" (19/10/21), arguing that there were many thoughtful plays in London theatres and that it was easy to forget that "managers are not philanthropists... they want to live as do actors in their employ... Is not the truth of the matter that the stage is going through a period of transition, in common with the rest of the world?" (ibid).

The *Era* noted, in the continuing debate the following week, and picking up on the religious connection, that "The mission of the drama is not to bequeath plays to posterity" (26/10/21). While this is a valid argument, the reality is that plays do remain as evidence for the future and are used to assess the period of their initial production. As someone very aware of the future, Ashwell presumably sought drama that would reflect well on her generation.

When preaching at the Eccleston Guildhouse, London, she brought the same honesty and openness as she applied to the theatre.

St Paul has not been regarded as the friend of women. If any fence is to be made a little higher to limit the progress of women, it is always St Paul who is referred to. I do not know how the young women of to-day feel, but the women of my earlier days had extreme difficulty in finding out what their position was in regard to the great creative scheme. The idea in Milton, 'He for God only, she for God in him', seemed to be in one's veins, and we could never escape from the uncertainty as to what a woman was. She was part of the human race, and yet not part of it; able to do certain things and inhibited from doing other things. We women have... to remember, when we come across these very difficult things in modern life, that the soul is always regarded in the deep symbolism of religion as feminine. It is an old idea. We have it in the Greek, 'Psyche', and in the Zend-Avesta, where the speaker, who says, 'What maid art thou who art the fairest maid I have ever seen,' was addressing his own conscience. Women are always worrying about something. They want this and they want the other thing, just because they are women. What matters is the soul, and the only thing that matters about the soul is that it is the place where can be born the greater life.

(*Scarborough Mercury* 12/5/22)

At this time Ashwell seems to be taking on a role of spiritual adviser, indicative perhaps of her own deepening religious search and commitment. She was writing about it³⁴ and being invited to address diverse groups of people, not just those connected to the theatre. It was a time of considerable soul searching and the desire for a better world following the trauma and destruction of the war. Representing the International New Thought Alliance, she was present at the November 1923 Conference for the Universal Brotherhood Campaign, promoted by the League of Nations Union, the Women's International League, the National Society for Lunacy Reform, the Howard League for Penal Reform, the Women's Housing Councils, the Animal Defence and Anti-Vivisection Society, the New Education Fellowship, the International New Thought Alliance and the Theosophical Society (*Times* 17/11/23).

This campaign began in October, and continued in various parts of the country until the end of December. The opening discussion at the London Conference was Brotherhood and the Peace of the World.

Lena Ashwell said the body she represented was endeavouring to get hold of something which would bring one into direct contact with that Greater Power. The only way to understand each other nationally and internationally was to learn how to love God. It was an easy phrase but a difficult enterprise. She believed that the future of the world largely rested on the energy and the creative thought of women. (ibid)

À propos this event, The *Gentlewoman* wrote,

In spite of her splendid and inspiring activities in connection with the New Order of Meditation [International New Thought Alliance or The Fellowship of the Way], of which she is the chief representative in England, Miss Lena Ashwell... still keeps in touch with an art of which at one period she was a leading brain. Already Miss Ashwell has started upon her New Year season of dramatic productions at the cosy little New Century... the programme for the near future, which includes the popular little concerts that did so much to

³⁴See Appendix Three: The Purpose of the Theatre published in the *Scarborough Mercury*, 5 May 1922.

ease and cheer the souls of our soldiers at the front, promise many dramatic novelties. Chief of all, on January 8, is St John Irvine's *The Ship...* in this the great actress and preacher will herself appear as Mrs Thurloe... One cannot, of course, wish Miss Lena Ashwell to lessen her activities in the direction of what no doubt is a higher and altogether more important mission than that of seeking to interest the modern playgoer. But, oh, how the better departments of our stage market must have missed her! In the meantime, even when she is not on the stage herself, you have the broad expression of her dramatic talents in the general scheme of things at the New Century. (3/1/25)

Of course, at this time Ashwell was sustaining her theatre to a much greater extent than the above implies, but after the closure of her company in 1929, by which time she was sixty, she devoted the greater part of her time and energy to religious pursuits.

BOOKS

Ashwell was the author of four books, published between 1922 and 1936, which were in part autobiographical as well as explaining her approach to theatre from the perspective of a performer, director and manager. The inter-dependent relationship between theatre and the wider community is her constant theme, even in the publications of her lectures on Shakespeare and in this her books differ from most autobiographical accounts written by contemporary colleagues. Ashwell's second book³⁵ was the publication, in October 1926, of her series of lectures, *Reflections from Shakespeare*, given originally to raise funds for the Players and edited by her brother, Roger Pocock. Ashwell was not a Shakespearean actress – early in her career (some 20 years previously), she had played the Prince of Wales in *Richard III*, Portia in *Julius Caesar*, Emilia in *Othello* and a one-off performance of Rosalind. During the war she had performed excerpts from *Macbeth* – seemingly insufficient to make her an expert from the actor's point of view. At the time of publication, however, she had directed a number of the plays, and her company, the Lena Ashwell Players, had presented twelve of Shakespeare's works. She did not include all Shakespeare's plays in her analysis, but focussed particularly on women in the tragedies, the historical context and Shakespeare's contemporary relevance. Ashwell knew serious writing about Shakespeare was a male prerogative at this time and would have been prepared for a degree of condescension in the response to an actress having an opinion on the subject. In 1929, when addressing members of the Stratford-on-Avon Shakespeare Club, she recounted how, after the book was published, "a distinguished literary man", hearing that it had been written by an actress, despite recommendations, declared he would "not dream of reading it" (*Stage* 24/10/29), presumably because he considered the views of an actress not to count when studying the works of Shakespeare.

Although critic W.L Courtney recognised that Ashwell had "produced a volume full of interest and... of real importance to the theatrical public,"³⁶ he asked his readers to remember, in order to have the right

³⁵Reference to the first of these, *Modern Troubadours*, is made in the previous chapter of this thesis.

³⁶Quoted from an unidentified newspaper article dated 22/10/26, Mitchenson and Mander collection.

critical attitude towards the work, that she was an actress (not a professional writer) committed to expressing “her acceptance of the role of British citizenship [by] ...contributing [her] quota to the general stock of intelligent work or sympathetic amusement” (ibid). He acknowledged Ashwell as “an actress of very considerable ability... capable of strong enthusiasms as well as worship at several altars” (ibid). He was conscious of the strong personality which she brought to her characters on stage and therefore to her view of Shakespeare’s women. “She feels intensely, her chief trait being the keen imagination with which she has realised for herself the characters she represents... [she] is best in plays which have a touch of melodrama – or which involve the grievous wrong-doing and agonised repentance of some fascinating heroine” (ibid). He uses this apparent understanding to point out that Ashwell brings many of these same qualities to *Reflections from Shakespeare*. There was, however, a condescending tone about his statement that “She always strikes straight for the womanly interpretation,” even though he concluded that Ashwell was “a critic of Shakespeare worthy of all respect” (ibid).

The *Times Literary Supplement* noted that Ashwell covered a lot of ground – “Astronomy, religion, mysticism, history, ethnology, histrionics, science and art of many kinds, with an agreeable dash, too, of autobiography, are woven by the actress-critic into her discussion” (11/11/26). Ashwell did not intend it for ‘the over-instructed’ (p.16), but “so various, so animated and so sincere a book as this cannot fail to reveal to many that Shakespeare is really worth seeing and reading. And some experienced playgoers will respond with pleasure to some of Miss Ashwell’s shrewd remarks about performance on the stage” (*Times Literary Supplement* 11/11/26).

‘O.V.’ writing in *Time and Tide* considered the limitations of the book related to the fact that it was based on a series of lectures, suffering in places from “the jerkiness of hurried jottings or from a discursive tendency” (24/12/26), but identified her theme as

Shakespeare’s significance to modernity...[and that] It is the dash of Elizabethan in Miss Ashwell that has enabled her to retain her belief in the immortality of Shakespeare’s appeal. The zest with which she refers to the struggle of her early years and the flaming courage with which she has pursued ideals merely outlined in this book, but which she has put to the test of practice in an arduous life - these are not Georgian... impressions given with an exuberance touched with observant shrewdness. She writes as a commentator fresh from the actual stage and as one who has considered the reactions and interactions of her art, not merely left them. Though her history may run riot at times, her handling of character and situation has the certainty of an actor-manager interpreting the inner professionalism of an actor-dramatist... emphasises the ‘mixed characters’ of Shakespeare’s women (ibid).

He concludes that although Ashwell “disparages the intrusion of personality on the stage, she has been unable to prevent a lively gaiety and a vigorous preference for black and white from penetrating her authorship” (ibid). Meanwhile, playwright St John Ervine thought ‘An Actress’s Workshop’ would be a more suitable title as Ashwell gives the reader access to her dressing room preparations for characters she played or would have liked to play. He regretted the influence of Colin Still (author of *Shakespeare’s*

Mystery Play) in Ashwell's reading of *The Tempest* but he did not consider this reduced "the value of her studies of Shakespeare from the point of view of the actress who may have to act in his plays."³⁷ Ervine describes Ashwell's approach to Shakespeare's women (associated with the playwright's own relationships with women) and indicates that her "habit of studying a part in a Shakespeare play is to ignore tradition and learned discourses, and to concentrate on the author's text" (ibid). He takes exception, as did other critics, to Ashwell's view that Desdemona is a 'consummate liar' over the handkerchief and at length explains her behaviour as a frightened young woman, who is being lied to by Othello. Overall, Ervine welcomed the book as provoking discussion and containing many useful statements and observations.

It was also given a brief mention in Norman Marshall's review page, *The Month's Books*, in *Drama*. Marshall considered the book's value lay in the insights it provided for producers: "the psychological problems are handled freshly and sanely, from an essentially modern point of view, with the clearness and firmness with which a producer learns to delineate character" (February 1927, p.72). He regretted, however, that "a book of such general interest and usefulness should cost so much [21s.]" (ibid). From this statement, it might be assumed that Ashwell aimed it at the British Drama League members' market and that the book was used, even if borrowed from libraries, by aspiring and amateur directors.

Ashwell's third book, *The Stage*, was Number 3 in the Life and Work Series published by Geoffrey Bles in November 1929. Other titles included *The Army*, *The Architect*, *Nursing*, *Play Production* (by Basil Dean), *The Surgeon*, and *The Bar*, all written by highly regarded practitioners. The aim of the series, as stated on the back cover, was for professionals to write about their work – "its problems, its difficulties, and its pleasures – in their own way and in the light of their own experience," in the hope that the books "will be of interest to fellow-members of these professions and of help to those who are about to choose, or commence, their life's work." Ashwell placed her own experience into the wider context of the theatre as it had been when she began her career through the changes it had undergone in the intervening thirty-five years. At the end of the book she gives a clear indication of her attitude.

The machine, with its cinema, talkies, radio, gramophone, its countless and most effective instruments, may aid and support Religion and the Arts, but it is still only a mechanism, cold steel, dead iron, sounding brass. It is not alive, it has not a soul, it is not human, it cannot fill the place of the divine and the human realities. (p.192)

Some of the material in *The Stage* was included in Ashwell's autobiography, *Myself a Player*, published in 1936. Ashwell chose her title well – she obviously saw herself as an active participant in life, rather than an observer or commentator and her autobiography (and her other books) bears this out.

Miss Lena Ashwell's life has been unlike that of most players, and her book is not like the usual theatrical autobiography... [she] seems never to have lost all that air of a creature wild,

³⁷Quoted from an unidentified newspaper, dated 16/1/27. Mitchensen & Mander collection.

or wild-wood, elusive, natural, unconventionally direct... Miss Ashwell's career as actress and as actress-manager is not the principal subject of her book, nor that part of the story that most impresses the reader. All the time there is another and deeper story being told: the story of her development, through happiness and unhappiness, as a woman, and beneath that again as a living spirit. Her private life is not kept out of sight; and behind the story of the Kingsway Theatre lies a much more interesting and psychologically important story of private relations. Miss Ashwell's proper and peculiar work lay on the far side of her management of the Kingsway... The chapters on these achievements during and after the War are enough by themselves to set this book apart from the ordinary theatrical biography, as the career of its author has been set apart from the ordinary theatrical career. A chapter on The Changing Theatre shows a healthy dislike of the modern 'producer' by one trained under the actor-manager, and some shrewd criticism of the cinema. Indeed, Miss Ashwell is no lover of the modern theatre, nor of a good deal of modern life; and at the close of her candid and confiding book, she reveals her means of escape from it.

(Times Literary Supplement 14/11/36)

Myself A Player has been quoted throughout this thesis and has provided considerable insight into her personality. She writes with passion and conviction about the theatre and was not afraid to express an opinion or make judgements about developments and conditions which pleased or displeased her. She is honest about her failures and disappointments and expresses her ideas, particularly in relation to the works of Shakespeare, with clarity and confidence. Unlike the autobiographies of contemporaries such as Eva Moore³⁸, there is limited detail on the roles she played and the people she worked with – except where they impacted on her development and wider role in the community. She barely touches on the social aspect of her life in the theatre, preferring to convey her impressions on, and aspirations for, the role of theatre in society.

Throughout the 1920s, anxious not to squander what she saw as positive outcomes from the war, Ashwell pursued a relentless schedule of public appearances and meetings and continued to go into print on issues that concerned her. She fought for better conditions and an improved status for members of the theatrical profession and for women in all walks of life, and made a strong commitment to the work and ideals of the British Drama League, of which she was a founding member. In addition, she found time to publish three books. At the same time, as will be seen in the following chapter, she was directing, managing, and promoting her company of Players (with three separate casts constantly touring throughout most of the decade) and seeking support for such endeavours through the involvement and commitment of the state.

³⁸*Exits and Entrances*, op. cit.

Chapter Five: 1920 to 1929 ‘Pioneer and Patriot’

THE LENA ASHWELL PLAYERS

The previous chapter described the post-war theatrical environment in which Ashwell was working and which she sought to influence and change. This chapter will examine the work of the Lena Ashwell Players, the company set up by Ashwell at the end of the War in 1919 to put her ideas into practice. In the ten years of the company’s existence, performances were given in thirty-five venues in London and surrounding districts. Some of these were one-off visits; others involved regular weekly performances between late September and mid April every year. In addition, Ashwell tried out and used nine theatres throughout the country for summer tours between May and August and established an inner London base at the Century Theatre from 1924. In the course of my research a detailed examination was made of the Players’ visits to all areas for which information was available – through local council minutes, local newspapers, theatre archives and extant programmes and flyers. For the purposes of this thesis, however, it has been necessary to be selective, and Battersea, Ilford and Bath, as well as the Century Theatre, are considered to be representative examples. Brief details have been included on the other venues, which are listed in relation to their proximity to each other, moving (as it were) around a map of London and the surrounding areas, beginning in the inner city and east end. It is intended that this approach will give sufficient idea of the nature of Ashwell’s work during the 1920s, despite the fact that each venue had its own problems and special characteristics. Organising the material for this chapter presented some difficulties given the concurrent nature of much of the company’s work – venues that failed had to be replaced, creating logistical problems for the company and making a simple geographical or chronological account in this thesis impossible. In order to give as complete a picture as possible, I decided to start with a description of Battersea, in many ways the ideal Ashwell sought, and to follow this with the other main London focus – the Century Theatre and the role of the Players in the theatre scene of the 1920s, before looking at their wider community role, firstly in the inner London boroughs, then further afield, finishing with Ilford. The Summer tours out of London conclude the chapter, with Bath as the final example.

Although there are some inaccuracies, Ashwell’s schedule of performances, included as an appendix in *Myself A Player*, is also included as an appendix to this thesis to give an idea of the company’s schedule between 1919 and 1929. During this period there were hundreds of reviews and news items in local papers, many of them paraphrasing press releases. Limited space resulted generally in only superficial praise for the actors and there was little critical analysis of the plays¹. Not many of these are quoted, although at least one review of new plays or those with notable production styles has been included where possible. Newspaper quotations mostly relate to particular events promoting the company and their *modus operandi* or statements made by Ashwell and company members. It is important to note that

¹For details of the Players’ repertoire between 1919 and 1929, see Appendix Six.

Ashwell (and others on her company's management team) frequently attended performances in all the boroughs, addressing audiences to encourage their support and promote the ideals of the Players. Local newspapers were attracted particularly to reporting such occasions.

By August 1920, six London boroughs were working with Ashwell and weekly visits had been agreed, whereby the same company would perform at each place, travelling extensively throughout London. "Mounting... will not be elaborate, the stage setting consisting of curtains, with just a few articles of furniture indispensable for the proper presentation of the play" (*Era* 11/8/20). The *Times* and the *Stage* announced Ashwell's venture in October, advising that ticket prices ranged from 8d. to 2/4 including tax. The initial schedule was:

Monday evenings... Fulham Town Hall, Tuesdays... Battersea Town Hall,
Wednesdays... People's Palace, Mile End, Fridays... Shoreditch Town Hall... Saturdays...
Camberwell Baths. In addition the scheme has the support of the Mayors of Bethnal Green,
Hackney, Islington, St Pancras, Southwark, Woolwich and Poplar. (*Stage* 7/10/20)

From then on, the *Era* generally charted the progress of the Players with brief news items related to developments and associated activities, such as other groups attempting to establish profit sharing stock or repertory companies in suburban theatres, built between twenty and twenty-five years earlier and which had gradually gone over to variety or were likely to be converted into cinemas.

That the people outside the West End are prepared to patronise serious drama is shown by the success of the Old Vic and Hammersmith, and, in a minor degree, by the welcome extended to the Lena Ashwell Players in the Town Halls of various districts. (*Era* 21/9/21)

In most places there seemed to be no dispute about the overall quality and diversity of the company's work, and those who spoke on its behalf always acknowledged the contribution being made to the quality of life in the community. However, it was paying audiences that Ashwell was chasing to survive and frequently audiences proved elusive or fickle – turning up in large numbers for popular or familiar repertoire but not willing to make a weekly commitment. Bad weather, elections, competing entertainments and venue discomfort were all deterrents to regular attendance. Pleasing all of the people all of the time was never going to be possible – some areas such as Greenwich could not get enough Shakespeare, others sought only light comedy and steadfastly stayed away from anything else. In some areas lack of support or antagonism from the local council made an effective relationship unworkable for the company and in a number of places Ashwell had to cut her losses and move on quickly. There is no doubt considerable time and effort was taken by her to develop, negotiate and maintain communication and concessions with local authorities, community organisations and the local press. Given that over the ten years thirty-five venues were tried, of which half were abandoned, it is possible to surmise that the company's survival would have been possible if more of the initial venues, like Battersea and Greenwich,

Figure 38: Map of London and surrounding areas, with places visited by the Lena Ashwell Players 1919 to 1929 indicated in colour. (Geographers' A-Z Map Company Ltd., Sevenoaks)

had been more quickly successful, freeing her time and energies for more fund raising and promotional activity.

BATTERSEA

Battersea, in the south-west, was central to Ashwell's work in the London boroughs. It was one of the earliest centres visited by the company and one of its most successful and long standing commitments. The company began performing in the Grand Hall, Battersea Town Hall, on 19 October 1920, with weekly performances on Tuesday evenings between late September and April every year until April 1929. The Hall was managed by the Public Amenities Committee of the Council of the Metropolitan Borough of Battersea, the successive mayors of which were early supporters and consistent advocates of Ashwell's work. Bookings for the Hall were reported to meetings of Council, recorded in the minutes from July 1920² and announced in the press. The first such statement clearly indicated the situation:

The Public Amenities Committee of Battersea Borough Council has now prepared its programme for the season's dramatic performances and concerts... they must be self-supporting. The expense of productions are being kept as low as possible, but it is essential... the hall be filled at each performance, in view of the low prices charged.
(*Era* 4/10/20)

Early on, the local newspaper, the *South Western Star*, declared its hand with:

the idea is to create a regular centre in Battersea for high class music and dramatic performances. It is an attempt to bring all that is best in music and the drama to Battersea... it [is] a serious reflection on the local government system that no part of the cost can be borne by the rates. Even if a portion of the cost did fall on the rates, the improvement in the minds of the people and the social uplift would ultimately tend to reduce the rates. Young people would no longer be driven to the low pleasures of the streets. (8/10/20)

While local council minutes often appear pedantic and repetitive (as no doubt so were the procedures to reach agreement before the meeting stage), they give useful indications of current pre-occupations and small steps of progress made as Ashwell sought to achieve local involvement in her objectives. For example, Battersea Council successfully requested that London County Council require proprietors of music halls and cinemas to exhibit plans of the seats and prices charged, and to display seat prices in a permanent manner inside the Halls on the walls or support pillars (24/11/20). This was an indication of the consideration being given to establishing standard ticket prices accessible to everyone (a concern of Ashwell's), a move away from the commercial free market in which the West End theatre operated.

In many boroughs, Ashwell and her company management, through suggestions made to Councillors and appropriate officers, had some part in improvements to the facilities and promotion of their work.

²The Public Amenities Committee generally met two or three weeks before the Council and submitted reports of their proceedings to the Council meetings. The minutes quoted are from Battersea Council meetings available in Battersea Library, London.

Battersea Council spent a considerable amount of money on curtains and other stage improvements³ and agreed that “a handbill, giving particulars of the entertainments in question, ...be enclosed with the Rate Demand Notes, when next served” (Minutes 27/9/22). The Council also agreed to “the display of an advertising board in front of the central balcony, Municipal Buildings” (ibid). Of particular help, given the lack of money to advertise, was the Public Amenities’ Committee plan to publish, “in connection with advertising the Committee’s activities during the forthcoming winter season” (Minutes 21/7/26), for an initial six month period, a monthly sixteen page Diary of Events. This contained details of Grand Hall events, local notes of interest and advertisements. “The circulation will consist of 10,000 copies per month and the booklet will be self-supporting” (ibid). Apparently a popular success, the Diary’s continuation was reported at meetings on 22 December 1926, 21 December 1927 and 20 January 1929.

Such developments did not go unnoticed in the *Star*. There were frequent references to the close relationship between the local authority and the Players. For example, its review of *Cook*, in January 1925, began:

One advantage resulting from the fact that a municipal council co-operates with a dramatic company is that the comfort of the audiences is not neglected. Battersea Town Hall on Tuesday evening was a particularly comfortable place. The heating apparatus has apparently been reinforced, with very agreeable consequences. For the improvements on the stage Miss Ashwell’s Players are probably entitled to the credit... the platform looked much more theatre-like than it has been wont to be⁴. Not that the ‘scenery and effects’ were elaborate, but they had a snug and compact appearance, which contributed greatly to the illusion of reality.
(*Star* 16/1/25)

Every year, until 1928 when the company’s last season was booked, bids for dates had to be submitted by mid April, agreed by the Finance Committee in May and confirmed by the Council in late September. For some extra performances, such as the company’s matinee of *Twelfth Night* for young people on Saturday 29 January 1921, the Hall was made available free of charge (Minutes 26/1/21), or at a reduced price, as agreed for the New Year’s Day children’s matinee of Cicely Hamilton’s *The Beggar Prince* in 1924. Formal procedures were adhered to, however, and recorded in detail in the minutes. Battersea, unlike some boroughs, was sympathetic to the company’s requests to cancel dates which were too close to Christmas or Easter, or which had been booked in error (Minutes 23/1/24). Penalties were not imposed and the financial arrangement was helpful. To enable the company to establish its presence, Ashwell negotiated a minimum fee for the use of the Hall (presumably calculated on the actual costs to the Council

³These improvements included new curtains for the Hall at a cost of £162.95 (minuted 19/7/22); a pelmet for the stage (to create a false proscenium arch) and back stage curtains (minuted 18/7/23); “proscenium lighting to the stage in the Grand Hall... estimated cost £35” (minuted 1/10/24); and the “re-laying with oak, a portion of the floor of the stage, Grand Hall (from back of curtains to the front of the stage) at a cost of £54/16/-” (minuted 22/7/25).

⁴It should be noted that most of the venues visited by the Lena Ashwell Players were multi-purpose halls (and often indoor swimming baths covered for the winter months), with only basic facilities such as a makeshift stage for official dignitaries or musical bands for balls. There was often very few theatre lights or other staging facilities. The works undertaken in Battersea indicate that it was still early days for such entertainments to be programmed into these venues.

for opening the doors), and an additional amount at the end of the season if box office takings were sufficient. Ashwell attempted to meet the Council half way; at the end of the first season offering £1/1/- per night, while pointing out that the company had a deficit overall for its London performances (Minutes 21/4/21). This offer was accepted and the same arrangement recommended for the following season, “with a proviso that the management will, at the end of the season, if the finances allow, make such additional payment for the hire of the Hall as may be mutually agreed to be reasonably possible” (ibid). This was a very inexpensive rental.⁵ However, although details of the negotiations are not recorded, a year later the Finance Committee declared the nightly charge would be “three pounds three shillings... on the understanding that Miss Ashwell will, in addition, pay 5 percent of the takings if the financial results enable her to do so” (21/6/22). There is a suggestion that the fixed fee was necessary because the performances were costing the Council money and the minutes reaffirmed the statement, published in the *Era* on 4 October 1920, that no cost could fall upon the rates. At the same time, Council members were urged to “do their best to make them successful by making them known and inducing as many persons as possible to attend” (22/9/22).

The Council was supportive, however, and the rent did not increase again for the Players throughout the years to mid 1929, although by early 1927 local groups were charged four guineas, with non-local groups being charged more. In addition, for all performances involving music, the Performing Right Society charged an annual licence fee of £75, which the Council agreed to have “amortised out to hirers” (29/9/26), but there is no indication that Ashwell’s company contributed to this fee. The Council did not receive any percentage of the takings until November 1926; when £25 was paid “in settlement of the Council’s claim to 5 per cent of their takings ...for the season 1925-26” (Minutes 24/11/26). For the next season £20 was paid (26/10/27), but when the company manager, Harold Gibson, requested the same amount for 1927-28, the minutes recorded that “Last year the amount due was about £35, but the Council accepted the sum of £20. This year the amount due is about £41. We recommend that a sum of £25 be accepted”⁶ (28/11/28).

The last mention of the Players in Battersea Council records was the cancellation of provisionally booked dates for the 1929-30 season, because “losses last season were so great... they are compelled... to abandon the scheme of providing plays for the people at a price they can afford to pay” (Minutes 19/6/29). Less than a month later, at the Finance Committee meeting on 17 July, the Public Amenities Committee, considering the Players’ presence had been “a great asset to the Borough,” announced and obtained agreement to arrange, in collaboration with the British Drama League, the presentation of

⁵The Grand Hall hire charge for a Dance in aid of an orphanage in March 1923 was set at £7/10/- (Minutes, January 1923) and most other events in the Hall were charged more than Ashwell’s performances.

⁶Although the Company did well in Battersea, because it was less successful in other places, the management argued for consideration of their overall deficit, not individual area successes, which after all, subsidised the company to survive, not make a profit.

dramatic performances during the forthcoming winter season, using the Hall on the same terms (a basic rent plus a percentage of the takings) as the Players.

Throughout the decade, the weekly *South Western Star* was generally supportive, reporting on the company's performances and forthcoming dates. Prior to the Players' first performance on 19 October 1920, the *Star* published Ashwell's detailed statement about the scheme:

For the commercialisation of the drama there is no permanent remedy but the municipal theatre... The rate-payers will have nothing whatever to pay on account of these shows. At the end of the season the Mayor and Council of each borough will inspect our books, and if we have made a profit part of it is... to be divided among them, so that they share in any success we win... the mayors and councils... are willing to put their Town Halls at the disposal of the public on one evening each week if we provide the show. We all hope to make the enterprise self-supporting. If we don't, there's an end to the scheme. We have a nice fit-up, easily adaptable to any hall, transported... by an ex-service actor who has taken up road transport work. Indeed all our actors have been soldiers. I consider that the municipal theatre, or some such scheme as ours, leading up to it, is essential in order to get good new plays. Our aim is to give the public what it likes. My experience – I have been at this game all my life – is that it likes good stuff when it gets the chance of seeing it.

(15/10/20)

For the opening night the Hall was only half full but both the Mayor and Ashwell, in their addresses to the audience, were hopeful and encouraged those present to rally support to ensure continuation. Audiences built appreciably over the next two months, with keen interest for *Leah Kleschna* and *Our Boys*, for which “the attendance was the largest yet recorded” (*Star* 19/11/20). Shaw's *Fanny's First Play* in late January 1921, with Esme Church⁷ much praised as Margaret Knox, attracted a notable audience:

the assembly was not composed exclusively or even largely of Battersea residents. The ladies who between the acts sauntered along the corridors smoking cigarettes came from some more exalted region. So, too, the many severe visaged spinsters and the bob-haired adolescents – the latter eager to gain a knowledge of life. There was no lack of men, however, mostly the middle-aged, regretting the goodness and the dullness of their youth.

(*Star* 28/1/21)

When the company performed Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, the *Star* reviewer sounded almost regretful that

attendance was not equal [to *Fanny's First Play*]... and... not of the same Bohemian character. It was, however, fully appreciative. The leading members... established... as favourites with local playgoers. Their personality and acting are almost the sole things that attract and entertain, there being no elaborate scenery and stage effects. (18/2/21)

For *Diana of Dobson's*, which opened the second season in late September 1921, the audience was “an encouragingly large one. The cheaper seats, however, showed a number of blank spaces” (*Star* 30/9/21). Company manager Marion Fawcett advised the audience that the previous season had been “quite

⁷For details on the main company members of the Players, see Appendix Five.

Figure 39: Printed promotional material issued by the Lena Ashwell Players. (Theatre Museum, London)

Figure 40: Printed promotional material issued by the Lena Ashwell Players. (Theatre Museum, London)

successful” (ibid). While the Players were not seeking to make a great deal of money, they wanted to be self-supporting. She was proud

that the movement had been more pronouncedly successful in the Labour boroughs, particularly in Battersea, than elsewhere. Not that any monetary assistance had been given, but as we understood her something approaching to an atmosphere of communal appreciation of the drama and all that it implies was being created. (ibid)

Ashwell also spoke to the audience about “fighting a big fight for a little company” (ibid), declaring: “Every citizen has the right to good entertainment. We want everyone to have the same advantages as those who have the money to spend on expensive seats in the centre of the City” (ibid).

Acknowledgement within the profession was important for the Players, so reviews such as the *Era*’s for the premiere of McEvoy’s *The Likes of ‘Er* at Battersea Town Hall on 30 January 1923 (which was preceded by Shaw’s *The Man of Destiny*), would have been significant. The writer declared it went without saying that with Ashwell “producing the play the correct atmosphere was finely shown. The excellent work of her players... is fully appreciated at Battersea” (8/2/23).

The following year the new play premiered at Battersea was the Ashwell/Roger Pocock *The Celluloid Cat*, billed as a drama in four acts by Anonymous. Directed by Ashwell, it was performed at the Town Hall on 11 March 1924, and described by the *Era* as

A realistic picture of woman’s insensible jealousy and the hard life in Northern Canada of frontiersmen and settlers... [the director] must be congratulated on getting the atmosphere of the North-West across the footlights and also in her selection of the cast. Esme Church gave a clever performance as the ill-used wife Mary... Harold Gibson was strong and commanding. (19/3/24)

The *Star* was not consistent in its reporting of the Players. When the company did not advertise, as was the case in 1922 and the spring of 1923, there were only occasional references to the company’s presence in the borough. When advertisements were placed again from early October 1923, the *Star* usually included details of the company’s programme. It gave considerable space to the opening of the fourth season in October 1923. Ashwell, supported by the Mayor, sought to encourage greater commitment and cooperation from the local community (*Star* 5/10/23). Two weeks later, for *Milestones*, “The hall was crowded out, and there was not a single seat for late-comers” (*Star* 19/10/23). The *Star* reviewer appears to have had more interest in the composition of the audience at Battersea, than the plays – or else he had a theory that Shaw’s plays attracted a particularly strange audience. *Pygmalion* was presented in October 1923, when although the gallery may have contained locals,

elsewhere, Chelsea, or even Belgravia, predominated, evidenced mostly by women. Some... brought their knitting, which is a great help to those who desire to look abstracted at critical moments... the small talk was of the West End, West Endy. One heard scraps of

conversation about things ‘perfectly precious,’ ‘absolutely adorable’... ‘sweetly gracious’
...It made one long for the undisguised Saxon of Mr Shaw. (2/11/23)

When the long-awaited ‘word’ (“bloody”) was uttered by Eliza Doolittle,

The audience gave forth a mighty roar of laughter. They should have been shocked; they were delighted. Chelsea laughed loudest, but then Chelsea had the grace to pretend that it had not laughed. It composed its features to a fashionable rigidity. It resumed its gracious and adorable conversation. It went on with its knitting. (ibid)

Although the reviewer’s comments appear rather tongue in cheek,⁸ the Mayoral/ Friends of the Players’ reception⁹ after *The Country Wife* in mid January 1924, appears to mark a turning point for the *Star* and the community in relation to the Players. Considerable emphasis was placed, by the Mayor, Ashwell and Gibson, on Battersea’s leadership among the London boroughs in its support for the company. There was pride in the community’s response to Ashwell’s scheme and a determination to maintain the reputation as an area wholehearted in its embrace of drama for the people. Ashwell played on this pride, encouraging cooperation so that the Players would be “at Battersea every year until they were too old and decrepit to play any longer” (*South Western Star* 18/1/24). From this date the *Star* was much more active in its promotion of the Players.

Before the first performance of the autumn 1924 season, there was a Friends’ social gathering on 23 September, reported on the front page of the *Star*.¹⁰ This event was followed by an enthusiastic reception for *Macbeth* in October. “It was an arresting and dignified performance... The costumes... were effective; they probably were in the style worn by the Picts and Scots of the period” (*Star* 24/10/24). Flattering the audience during the interval, Gibson declared

Their presence justified Miss Ashwell’s contention that the people wanted the best plays and would support them if they were presented. It would be quite impossible to get such a house in the West End for *Macbeth* during a general election. Of course, West End assemblies had not been educated up to it. He announced that next week *A Grain of Mustard Seed* would

⁸“To drink coffee and eat sandwiches at half past 11 o’clock at night in the company of prominent actors and actresses, to be plied with chocolate creams and cigarettes by some of the actresses. There’s Bohemianism for you. In such Bohemianism did burgesses of Battersea revel on Tuesday night. A little demurely at first” (*Star* 18/1/24).

⁹For further details on the Friends of the Players organisation, see page 300.

¹⁰The report advised that Ashwell had been unable to attend because of the “severe illness” of her sister, Ethel. In fact, Ethel died in Bath on that day, but this was not announced in the press until later. The *Era* reported, “Much sympathy will be extended to Miss Lena Ashwell on the death of her sister, Miss Ethel Georgina Pocock, at the age of 56. Miss Pocock went to Bath to take the waters, but pneumonia supervened on a chill, and she passed away on Tuesday, the 23rd. The funeral took place last Friday at Bathwick Cemetery. The chief mourners were Miss Lena Ashwell, Mrs Keeper [Keefer] and Miss Pocock, two other sisters; Dr Simson, the husband of Miss Ashwell; Mr C. Curd, who attended the deceased; Miss Penny, Miss Soden and Nurse Knowles. The Rev. J.S. Soden officiated” (1/10/24). The opening of the autumn season each year was a busy time for Ashwell, who always made personal appearances to seek renewed support from the audience, so this must have been a very distressing time for her. Ashwell wrote later, “I wish it were possible ever to express all that Ethel meant to me – her patience, unselfishness, deep understanding of the artistic side of life, just that touch of beauty which changes the commonplace into something new and strange. When she died I longed to put into some memorial that most of any work I had done that was of value was due to her. It seemed impertinent, for she herself was a greater achievement than any work of art” (*Myself a Player*, p. 93).

deal with election ideals. It was not so applicable to this district as it might be to others, because the Battersea candidates were men of ideal. The... Players' programme for their autumn season was printed before there was any talk of a general election. Had it not been, it would have looked as if they had produced *A Grain of Mustard Seed* with special intent. If Parliamentary candidates made a point of seeing the play they might be encouraged to maintain the ideals which they profess during the election. Electors will gain some wonderfully illuminating information about ...party politics. (ibid)

Despite Battersea's strong position in relation to the Players, Ashwell and her colleagues must have despaired at times, given some of the reviews they received. For *Julius Caesar*, the *Star's* short review consisted mostly of the following:

Some of those present were fortunate in seeing groups of Roman patricians and plebeians making their way from the dressing rooms at one end of the building to the stage at the other. The performance itself was pageantry and impressive. During the storm the thunder was tremendous and of excellent quality; it alarmed some of the older ladies, who, if they had not paid for admission, might have gone home. Speaking and deportment were admirable except that Casca uttered his lines with an un-Romanlike simper. Great Caesar was perfectly imperial, and the cobbler was an extremely merry old soul, or sole, as he would have expressed it. The female parts were enacted with gracefulness as well as with power. Altogether it was a very enjoyable and instructive performance. (27/11/25)

However, when the Hall was not full for *As You Like It*, the *Star* declared that "Shakespeare is not as popular as modern comedy" (26/2/26). A large proportion of the audience were students who came "not so much to be entertained, as to be instructed" (ibid). Issue was taken with some of the players who "spoke their lines too carefully, as though they were reciting." Even Church, as Rosalind,

scarcely fulfilled the traditional conception of the part. Besides being 'uncommon tall', her natural decisiveness of manner and something of austerity which is inseparable from her, made her less fragiley feminine than Rosalind in proper person ought perhaps to be. She was dignified, rather than graceful, but her well developed sense of comedy had full play in the forest scenes. (ibid)

Between January 1926 and the last performance by the Players in Battersea on 1 April 1929, they received very few reviews or articles in the *Star*. There were weekly display advertisements and brief details from press releases advising the play, author, a brief synopsis and principal actors but the company was well known and there was little need for extra coverage to attract audiences.

However, the *Star* reported on the end of the season in April 1926, when, after a performance of *The Vagabond King*, Mayor Young "spoke appreciatively of the educational influence exercised by the Players" (16/4/26). Mr H. Dashwood, business manager for the Players, regretted Gibson and Ashwell's absence, but anticipated a warm welcome for the company's return in September. Ashwell attended the performance of *The Butterfly on the Wheel* in November 1927, accompanied by Mrs Philip Snowdon,¹¹

¹¹Philip Snowdon succeeded in having the Entertainment tax reduced in 1927 (*Era* 4/4/28).

who, after Ashwell's appeal for more support, said "the Players were above the arena of party politics and ought to be supported by all shades of opinions" (*Star* 25/11/27).

Battersea did appear as a model borough in relation to the provision of suitable entertainment for its residents. As the *Daily Telegraph* noted, the 1200 seater Town Hall was offering, as well as the Players, "the best the theatre, concert hall and cinema can provide... [with] a series of cultural entertainments... arranged by the Battersea Borough Council [and] the People's Concert Society" (10/9/26). The aim was to bring quality to the local area, including a cinema programme, selected by a committee of teachers, "with the object of raising the standard of public taste in film appreciation" (*ibid*), given on Thursdays with a 5.30pm screening for schoolchildren priced at 2 pence and an 8.15pm screening for adults with tickets at 4 and 6 pence. There was generally "a picture of literary or dramatic interest, two educational films, and one wholesome comedy. The projector and screen is the best obtainable... musical accompaniment is provided on the organ" (*ibid*). Musical programmes were given on Sunday evenings, organised by Frederick Woodhouse, musical advisor to the Council, and the Players retained their Tuesday evening slot. In addition, "a series of massed lessons in musical appreciation for elementary school children... had been arranged by the London County Council in cooperation with the B.B.C" (*ibid*). In some areas progress was apparently being made towards Ashwell's ideals.

At the final performance in Battersea, the large audience enjoyed the company's version of *Caste*, although it was recognised that society, particularly women, had moved on a great deal since the play had been written. During an interval Harold Gibson spoke of the company's financial problems and announced a fund raising raffle for a pair of Queen Victoria's silk stockings, which were "of exquisite fineness and the Royal arms were woven into them" (*Star* 5/4/29).

Commenting in whispers some ladies remarked that the stockings, though no doubt the best of their kind that could be made, would probably be open-work ones, and therefore quite unsuitable for present wear. No Battersea lady would appear decked out in finery from even a Royal wardrobe if such finery had ceased to be fashionable. (*ibid*)

However, Battersea was still proud of its role in supporting the Players and Ashwell expressed her thanks, adding that "if all the other boroughs were as helpful and as loyal as Battersea the Players would have no difficulty" (*ibid*).

THE CENTURY THEATRE

By 1922 the Players had established a routine of weekly visits to a number of boroughs and Ashwell sought to diversify and to create a greater awareness of her work. She recognised the need to provide seasonal and holiday entertainment in appropriate venues and, as the *Era* noted in December 1922, "Lena Ashwell's Once-a-Week Players seem to be pretty busy just now. On Saturday afternoon they will present *The Child in Flanders* [by Cicely Hamilton] at Chiswick Empire. Then their itinerary is Dulwich,

Figure 41: The Century Theatre interior. (*Illustrated London News*, 23 January 1926)

Hounslow, Winchmore Hill, Harrow and Watford” (14/12/22), where they were based for a week. This was followed by twice-daily performances at the Cathedral Hall, Westminster, on December 26, 27 and January 3, 1923, of the Hamilton play, which was preceded by Margaret Mackenzie’s play for child performers, *The Child Who Had Never Heard of Christmas*. These were given in aid of, and under the auspices of, the Catholic Stage Guild. The *Era* review of *A Child in Flanders* appeared the following week.

Its conception is very poetic, and the allegory will find an echo in the many who recall actual Christmas experiences in Flanders during 1914-18. It would be a great privilege to see the whole work staged, and produced, in a manner worthy of all its possibilities as a work of art. To individualise would not be desirable, but the characters, apart from figures seen in the vision, were all first rate, the spoken words being rather better than the rendering of very appropriate music. (28/12/22)

The following May, in its New Companies Registered section, the *Era* recorded the registration, on 11 April 1923, of the Lena Ashwell Players Ltd.

To carry on the business of theatrical managers... by Lena Ashwell, Esme Church and Marion Fawcett at 44 South Molton Street, W1. Capital: £3000 in 3000 shares of £1 each. Directors: Lena Ashwell, 36 Grosvenor Street, W., Cicely Hamilton, 44 Glebe Place, Chelsea, SW., Esme Church, 5 Belgrave Mews West, SW., Marion Fawcett, 201 Gloucester Terrace, W.I. (2/5/23)

Prior to this, the company was still registered under the Lena Ashwell Reconstruction Fund – the creation of the new company indicated Ashwell’s confidence as well as the support she had from other women in the theatre. On 3 October 1923 the *Era* reported the start of the Players’ fourth season with a repertoire including works of Shakespeare, Shaw, Henry Arthur Jones, Ibsen, Arnold Bennett and Edward Knoblock. By this time Ashwell had created two companies under the Players’ banner to make regular visits to Ealing, Winchmore Hill, Battersea, Ilford, Brockley, Lewisham, Edmonton, Deptford, Northwood, Greenwich, Sutton and Watford. The organisation’s rapid growth, and all that that entailed (including selection of repertoire, directors and actors, continuous rehearsal, scheduling and promotion), led Ashwell and her co-directors to seek an operational base, which she found in the intimate Bijou Theatre (“the scene of Miss Ashwell’s first appearance on the stage, as a member of an amateur company” *Times* 17/4/24)¹², in Notting Hill, London. Ashwell acquired a lease on this building, which had office space and rehearsal rooms, renamed it the Century Theatre and by April 1924 was planning three performances a week there, as well as continuing to visit the centres already on the company’s itinerary. Ashwell hoped this arrangement would provide “surplus funds to enable performances to be given in some of the poorer parts of London, where it is impossible to cover expenses” (ibid). However, it lacked adequate cooling facilities, so was not suitable for performances during the summer and the company did not perform there between July and September.

¹²The Bijou was also the venue for the premiere of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* on 10 May 1905 and had most recently (in January 1924), housed a successful season by the English Grand Guignol Society (*Era* 23/1/24).

REPERTOIRE

While initially Battersea provided the London venue for the first performances of new plays by the Players, by early 1925 the Century Theatre had become the company's showcase venue and centre of its operations. Ashwell was determined to make the most of any promotional opportunities, so when the Players gave the London premiere at the Century, on 8 January 1925, of St. John Ervine's *The Ship*, she ensured reviews were carried in most of the national press. This was because the noteworthy feature of the production was "the display of Miss Lena Ashwell (now Lady Simson, the wife of the famous gynaecologist) in the part of the shipbuilder's octogenarian mother" (*Daily Express* 9/1/25). Ashwell had not appeared on the London stage for nine years and the *Westminster Gazette*, while lamenting that the piece was not performed in the West End, thanked her for the opportunity to see "the strongest, and perhaps the best... the most human - of Mr Ervine's dramatic works... All through the play one is conscious of one's nearness to some of the big things of life, and much of that impression is due to the pervading influence of the character of Mrs Thurlow" (9/1/25). The *Stage*, while less enthusiastic about the play, recognised that the role of the grandmother, created for and played by Ashwell, "helps the play to live. She played it exquisitely, without the slightest exertion. That our young actresses would master the technique of acting with a maximum of effect and a minimum of effort, as Miss Ashwell has done, and so save themselves from suffering disappointment and thwarted ambition" (15/1/25).

Cicely Hamilton described the play as a tense drama of father/son conflict. "The play held all through - on its merits, with the minimum of scenery... Miss Ashwell returned... her audience wondered why she had stayed away so long!" (*Time & Tide* 23/1/25). The response to Ashwell's appearance prompted speculation that she would return to acting, but the *Daily News* led with the story that she had declared that while "it was a real pleasure to be on the stage again... to receive wild applause and tributes of flowers... this was to be the first and last time¹³ since the beginning of the war" (10/1/25). She indicated that her motivation was to promote her company as professionals ("They couldn't very well call me an amateur" (ibid)), posing the question "How could any but long-experienced actors and actresses possibly play continuous repertory as we do?" (ibid). Asked if she would return "for the sake of her many admirers", she replied "I have no illusions. I couldn't draw, and I don't believe there's anyone on the English stage today who can draw. The public is only drawn by a combination of circumstances" (ibid).

The next premiere by the Players followed swiftly on from *The Ship*. Michael Morton's three act comedy, *Five Minutes Fast*, was premiered at Sutton Public Hall on 28 January 1925 and repeated at the Century Theatre on 19 February. The *Stage* called it

¹³Ashwell did, however, return briefly to the stage in December 1928, when she appeared in Louis Parker's one act play, *Their Business in Great Waters*, with Leslie Howard and Tallulah Bankhead. It was for a special fund raising matinee at the Lyceum Theatre for the Lifeboat Service (*Stage* 13/12/28).

a capital comedy... which caused a deal of laughter at Miss Ashwell's interesting experimental theatre at Notting Hill... Miss Esme Church, who should certainly be playing in West End comedy, made a great success as the managing, masculine-minded 'Harry', who changes from something like dowdiness into a social butterfly... [an] agreeable, wittily written, and thoroughly interesting play. (26/2/25)

During Easter 1925, the Players presented John Masefield's *Good Friday* at the Century Theatre, which was reviewed by the *Stage*: "the play was splendidly produced, especially in the matter of the crowd scenes [using extras from the All Saints Dramatic Society¹⁴], by Miss Beatrice Wilson" (9/4/25). The programme note called on the audience to imagine a much grander setting than was possible at the theatre but there were thrilling moments when the crowd surged through the auditorium, and there was praise for the cast and for Kate Coates' "specially composed suitable and ably rendered music" (ibid). Later in the year John Masefield, who had declared, on his first encounter with the company, that he had "never seen any company...acting together with such comradeship and keenness, with such a sense of the beauty and greatness of their work... they are seeking to bring art back to its place by sheer spiritual endeavour" (*Kentish Mercury* 25/5/23), gave the Players a clock for the Century Theatre foyer, inscribed with a verse of dedication:

ON THEIR COMEDY. I tell the Time; but you within this place
Show to the passing Time its fleeting face.
ON THEIR TRAGEDY. Without, the passing city roars her tides;
I tell the Time, you show it what abides.
I tell the Time; and bring a Poet's prayer
that Time may bless such Players everywhere. (Era 12/9/25)

Daily Telegraph critic and dramatist W.A. Darlington wrote at length about Ashwell's work, as a preamble to announcing a public appeal to raise £1500 to upgrade the Century Theatre, which was obliged to conform to County Council regulations. Declaring that Ashwell "is not the kind of woman who sits still and trusts to voluntary contributions" (23/4/25), he advised that from 27 April the Century would be "for the moment abandoning its repertory character and falling into line with the ordinary commercial theatres. On that day Miss Ashwell is reviving for a run... *The Ship*, first produced... a few months back" (ibid). This rather belies Ashwell's comment about not having any drawing power – she obviously saw this revival as a way to make money in London while the other companies were undertaking summer season obligations. She played old Mrs Thurlow again, for at least a month throughout May. Darlington went on to note that there were many enterprises springing up around the country with the aim of offering non-commercial theatrical fare. Urging active support to "raise the standard of taste among the playgoing public" (ibid), he hoped that eventually these enterprises could be co-ordinated "into one movement, and then perhaps even the purely commercial theatre, obeying that law of supply and demand... will have to fall into line and cater for a thinking public also" (ibid). He considered Ashwell's company to be probably the best example of

¹⁴Ashwell often used members of local school, drama student or operatic groups as extras in her productions.

what can be done by skilful co-ordination of effort... To Miss Ashwell must be given the credit for having created a theatre public - and an educated and discriminating public at that – out of nothing... Ashwell, being no fatuous highbrow, but a practical woman of the theatre, has catered for every taste; she has made no attempt to foist arid and austere masterpieces on minds not yet educated to appreciate them; in short she has committed none of the glaring and exasperating errors of judgment so common among those who set out to help humanity by ignoring human nature. As a result, her organisation is a success. (ibid)

Later in the year, this belief was re-iterated by the *Woman's Leader*:

What serious and intelligent theatre-goers in these outlying districts, these theatrical deserts, owe to [the] Players is a thing unknown to most of the well-to-do inhabitants of London, W.I. and its immediate neighbourhood. But if our British municipalities ever attain to the degree of cultural enlightenment displayed by their German contemporaries or... if the popularization of good and varied drama is ever recognised as a public concern, much of the praise for that desirable consummation will be due to the difficult and laborious pioneer enterprise of ...Ashwell and her accomplished Players. (23/10/25)

On 5 September 1925, the *Era* announced the company's new autumn season. At the Century, from 28 September, they would give performances every night (except Sunday) and a Saturday matinee, as well as visiting twelve halls – an additional three since the last season. "This will be worked with three interchangeable companies each paying a once-a-weekly visit to twelve out-lying halls and remaining every third week at the Century Theatre. In this way a different play will be produced every week and Notting Hill will have its permanent repertory theatre." The repertoire included *The Great Adventure*, *Misalliance*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Young Idea*, *The Tempest* and J.T. Sheppard's translations of *Helen of Euripides* and *The Cyclops*. (These last two do not appear to have eventuated.) New plays included Allan Monkhouse's *The Education of Mr Surrage* and *John Drayton, Millionaire*, by H.M. Walbrook. The following week the *Era* announced the 'second company' would open at Sutton with Olive Walter and Wilfred Fletcher in A.A. Milne's *The Dover Road*, while the third company was opening at Winchmore Hill with Mercia Cameron and Philip Reeves in *The Laughing Lady* by Alfred Sutro (12/9/25). However, *The Great Adventure* replaced the originally scheduled *Misalliance* on 30 September 1925.¹⁵ This was the occasion when the company had a state visit from the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, the Sheriffs, and the Mayors of the Municipal Boroughs of London and Greater London which had experienced performances by the company.

As Miss Ashwell said in her speech of acknowledgement... actors were citizens as well as Bohemians, and such civic recognition as they were having that evening was very grateful to them. All the functionaries who swelled the crowded audience at the Century wore full regalia with chains of office and so forth. An excellent performance, given in curtains... in which Mr Norman V. Norman and Miss Esme Church appeared with success. (Stage 8/10/25)

¹⁵ *Misalliance* was brought into the repertoire in December, playing over the Christmas period at the Century.

On 25 October 1925 the Players gave the London premiere, thirteen years after its first performance in Liverpool, of *The Education of Mr Surrage* by Monkhouse, directed by Irene Henschel. This was followed by another 'new' play, *John Drayton, Millionaire*, by Walbrook, premiered by the Players, initially in Ilford¹⁶ and at the Century on 23 November 1925. The *Times* thought it "an amusing play and – a yet rarer virtue – work which is clearly the product of a thoughtful and original mind" (24/11/25). While her company performed many plays from the traditional repertoire of the time, Ashwell was determined to provide challenges for her actors and audience, selecting plays which stimulated her and represented diversity in style and content. The Players gave the British premiere of *His Own*, a short drama by American journalist and dramatist, Evelyn Greenleaf Sutherland (author of *Monsieur Beaucaire*), on 22 February 1926 at the Century. Presented as part of a double bill, the *Stage* considered it to be an "effectively intense tragedietta of negro life in the Southern States some fifteen years after ...the American Civil War" (25/2/26). The reviewer found that the four actors' attempts at "the negro mannerisms of speech" had limited success, making "some of the dialogue rather difficult to follow", but acknowledged that "forcible and strongly emotional performances... were given" (ibid).

The accompanying and contrasting play on the bill was Gertrude Jennings' comedy of wartime manners, originally premiered in 1922, *Money Doesn't Matter*. Two months later, on 12 April 1926 at the Century, the Players premiered another unusual one-act play by a woman, *The House With The Twisty Windows* by Mary Pakington. Presented with Charles McEvoy's *The Likes of 'Er* and directed by Irene Henschel, this tense little drama was set in Petrograd during the 'Red Terror' days of the Russian revolution, involving the sacrifice of a hostage, whose real identity is not revealed until too late. The *Stage* praised the play and the performers for the effective building of suspense throughout (15/4/26).

It is not known why Ashwell did not include any plays by Chekhov or from the emerging expressionist German or American drama of the time. She consistently encouraged women playwrights but there appears to have been little suitable material available to her and she lacked funds to commission works. There were only nineteen plays by women, plus a handful of co-authored or adapted works, given by the Players, out of the 250 plays the company presented during the decade. Cicely Hamilton and Gertrude Jennings were the women playwrights who prevailed. However, Ashwell's interest in the American drama included the work of Susan Glaspell, and the company gave some performances of *Bernice*, which at the time was not considered an accessible work, even to the female critic Christopher St John who wrote: "It is not what people do, but what they think which seems to Miss Glaspell important. Her characters strain to communicate the incommunicable, and in order to understand their thoughts and emotions we have to contribute an active sympathy" (*Time & Tide* 11/2/27).

¹⁶There had been an earlier, pre-war version of this play performed in Dover in 1906. See pages 329-330 of this thesis.

St. John did not engage with this play, in which the dead Bernice exerts an influence over her husband. However, from the performances given, the critic concluded that “the Lena Ashwell company seems to be stronger in actresses than actors” (ibid), which was a fair assessment of the company at this time, no doubt motivating Ashwell’s search for plays by and about women.

As the London season drew to a close in late April 1926, the *Stage* noted that the three companies in constant work since the previous September, were now split into two – the first of which included Esme Church, Olive Walter, Mercia Cameron, Philip Reeves, John Killner and Harold Gibson, had just opened at the Little Theatre, Leeds and would go on to York and Bath until August 7. The second company was scheduled to leave London on May 1, after playing *The Younger Generation* and *The Romantic Young Lady* at the Century, for an eight-week season at Rugby. This company included Blyth Pratt, Elizabeth Blake, Honor Bright, Geoffrey Bevan and Oliver Crombie (22/4/26).

When the Century re-opened on 27 September for the autumn season, Lennox Robinson’s *The Whiteheaded Boy* was revived, in a production directed by Esme Church. The company gave

a highly creditable account of the author’s clever comedy-satire on the social ambitions and family pride of the Irish small farmer class... a most enjoyable play, marred only by an out-of-date political allusion and one single use of the silly word ‘bloody’. These lines should be cut out of the last act; they come near to dating the piece. (Stage 30/9/26)

Some of the material Ashwell chose to work with evidently created staging problems, despite good intentions regarding the content. Considering Alfred Noyes’ blank verse *Robin Hood* to be “a fine and noble play” (Stage 30/12/26), she directed the premiere at the Century on 27 December 1926. The work, written in 1908, had not been performed previously. Godfrey Kenton played Robin and Esme Church was Shadow-of-a-leaf, “a semi-human figure, a fool, who is well content to be accounted a half-wit for the privilege of consorting freely with the forest sprites”(ibid). The *Sunday Times* thought it was not

ideally practicable for stage presentation, [but] one reflects that practicability was never the first consideration in poetic playwriting... [the] spirit knows no dimensions, and that which the poet has captured between the covers of his book, the producer and actors... have recaptured delightfully. (2/1/27)

Masefield’s *Tristan and Isolt*, directed by Beatrice Wilson, was the company’s next attempt at poetic drama. For the *Times* “the play [was] too wildly uneven to succeed as a piece for the theatre, but it [had] a merciless quality of its own” (22/2/27). The reviewer thought Esme Church unsuited to the role of Isolt as created by Masefield, whose imagination did not seem to have been captured by the lovers.

There is no passion, no fire, no magic in it. For this reason, though the action is swift and firm, the opening of the play is spiritless, and it is not until one begins to realise that Mr Masefield is deliberately antagonistic to a romantic view of the legend that a lively intellectual interest emerges as a compensation. Those scenes that are, as it were, an

exposure of the madness, the selfishness, above all the emptiness of these lovers' love are immeasurably the best. (ibid)

When Ashwell, collaborating with her brother, Roger Pocock, adapted two novels for the stage, suburban critics were more enthusiastic than their counterparts in the national press. The *Times* was not impressed with *Crime and Punishment*. "The dramatist's task is so obviously hopeless that there seems to be nothing to do but to wonder why it was ever attempted... Dostoevsky did not think in terms of the theatre and the theatre cannot imprison him" (8/2/27). The reviewer found it but a thin representation of the novel, with a few good moments and some sincere acting. The siblings' version of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* for the Players did not fare any better.

The test of any dramatic version of Stevenson's story is in its power to reflect the extraordinary evenness and consistency of that story's mood... The tale lays its readers under a spell, not by the speed - for it has no air of pressure or haste - but by the rhythm, the steadiness, the impressive persistency of its narrative's advance... gone from the present version. There has been a fatal attempt to bring Stevenson up to date, and to lighten his tale... by the introduction of facetious and irrelevant chatter... The melodrama, which more dexterous treatment might have concealed, appears in violent contrast with these patches of affected modernism; the dialogue of terror, which might have been theatrically effective if its convention had been steadily preserved, becomes ridiculously stiff... Nor is the acting of as much assistance as it might be in maintaining the seriousness appropriate to fear... the play remains the clap-trap that the story might so easily have become if a brilliantly suggestive mood had not unified and saved it. (*Times* 29/3/27)

Both plays, (available in manuscript form in the British Library), appear to be honest attempts to place the stories in a theatrical context but both novels are known to be notoriously difficult to adapt for the stage – most recent attempts have failed,¹⁷ even with access to better technical resources than Ashwell would have had. Despite the appeal of the plays through the familiarity of their stories, they were overly ambitious for Ashwell's resources.

1927 was a year when the Players appear to have attempted too many plays that were outside the popular mainstream. These included Ibsen's rarely performed *Lady Inger of Ostraat* (translated by William Archer), with Esme Church in the title role. The *Times* thought Ibsen did not have sufficient technical control over the imaginative scale of the work and that he had chosen a too complicated period of Norwegian history for the audience to understand readily.

The essence of the story is that Lady Inger allowed her personal and political life to be dominated by her love for an illegitimate son who had been taken from her in childhood and was held as a hostage... The ...Players, working with so small a stage as theirs, inevitably fail to give the piece so good a collective performance as it deserves, but two or three pieces of acting are of exceptional merit (Esme Church, Kynaston Reeves and Kathleen Wike), and,

¹⁷The Royal Shakespeare Company's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*, adapted by playwright David Edgar and performed in London in November 1991, did not fare well in the hands of the critics despite its clever technical 'magic'.

together with the interest of an Ibsen play so rarely given, more than repay a visit to Westbourne-grove. (1/11/27)

In late 1927 and during 1928, attempts being made to raise the status and financial position of the Players were reported in a positive light. The *Times* included Ashwell's press release (similarly presented in many local newspapers, for example the *Ilford Recorder* 6/1/28) following the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York to the Century Theatre for the performance of *A Message from Mars*. Ashwell released the contents of the letter sent by the Duke's Private Secretary. Apparently their Royal Highnesses decided to see the Company's work at first hand and were

amazed to find that it is possible to present plays of this quality with such excellent acting and charge the public so little. They are convinced that this work is of the greatest possible social and artistic value... and warmly commend it to all who are interested in social progress of any kind. It is [their] earnest wish... that this movement may be developed ...to make it possible, in every district, for people to enjoy the best entertainment which can be provided. (19/12/27)

As well as royalty, Ashwell, who was not without well-connected friends, often called on their support. In early 1926, for example, the *Times* (and other newspapers) published a letter of support for the Players from Lord Clarendon, declaring he was in no way connected to the company. As part of an appeal for funds which had begun in April 1925 he contended that the company deserved every possible support.

They present and admirably act, really good plays by first rate writers, past and present, thus giving to the members of the community resident in these [poorer] parts of London some opportunities for amusement and relaxation from the cares and worries of their daily life. A better form of social service can, I venture to suggest, hardly be found, and I do wish to commend to the great general public of this country the desirability - nay, even the necessity - of supporting to the utmost of its power the efforts that are being made by Miss Ashwell and her players to bring sunshine, fun and education into the lives of those who live outside the more prosperous and comfortable centres. (20/1/26)

He concluded with address details for donations, urging all his readers to help promote the appeal. Ashwell also called on popular colleagues, such as Marie Tempest, who participated in a successful special fund raising party at the Hyde Park home of Sir Ian and Lady Hamilton in November 1928 (*Kentish Mercury* 16/11/28).

SEEKING FINANCIAL SUPPORT—THE CARNEGIE TRUST

As well as involving influential friends and colleagues in fund raising activities, as she had done during the war, one of the aspects of Ashwell's work that warranted a more detailed study of her post-war role, was the ground breaking work she did in considering the funding needs of theatre work driven by the desire to exploit the educational value of dramatic literature, and to make it widely accessible, rather than by commercial motives. By the 1990s it was accepted that work of the nature she undertook could not survive without a mix of public subsidy, business sponsorship or private philanthropy and box office

income. In post First World War Britain, despite advanced examples of state support elsewhere in Europe (especially German municipal theatres), the arts were expected to manage on a commercial basis.

While Ashwell did not succeed in changing the legislation by the end of 1929, she helped to change attitudes that made eventual changes in legislation possible. While local government support for the arts has never been made a statutory requirement, most local authorities since the Second World War have made provision for the encouragement and funding of locally based arts activities.¹⁸ Ashwell gained most support from Labour run Councils in the 1920s. In the longer term, Labour Councils have been identified as being generally more sympathetic than Conservative led councils, in their support for the arts. From the outbreak of peace, Ashwell was determined that local communities, already given access (in return for rate payments) to swimming baths, libraries and other leisure facilities, should have access to theatre on a similar basis. Using her companies, the Drama League and her influence and position won during the war, she seized every opportunity to chip away at out-moded attitudes and responses in a class bound society which was taking its time to understand that the ordinary working man and woman could appreciate serious theatre as much as the middle class gentleman and lady.

She knew financial support from local government would not be achieved overnight but recognised that help in kind; be it reduced hall rentals, the presence of local councillors at performances or publicity sent with rate demand notices, was the first step. A major financial problem, however, was that a varied repertoire cost money – small cast plays are a comparatively recent response to financial constraints. Covering overheads and actors' wages, while charging generally affordable ticket prices, without subsidy, relies on full capacity, paying audiences. In Ashwell's case, shortfall meant calling on her husband's resources, which he gave of generously. However, she also sought help from one organisation available to her, the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, established in 1913 and incorporated by Royal Charter in 1917.

The Carnegie Trust, based in Scotland, had funds available¹⁹ for community service and the arts and helped such organisations as the British Drama League. For the Trust, with many post-war demands on its resources, the 1920s were a time of experimentation. It was obliged to confront issues with the tax authorities surrounding the definition of what constituted a charity eligible for its support and tax exemption.²⁰ Ashwell began seeking support to take 'healthy entertainment to the Boroughs of East London' from the Carnegie Trust in 1919, writing to trustees Sir William McCormick and Colonel J.M. Mitchell. On 28 July 1920 McCormick advised her that "the trust was presently out of funds"²¹ but

¹⁸For further information, see Redcliffe-Maud, *Support for the Arts in England & Wales*, London, Gulbenkian Foundation, 1976, p.102.

¹⁹The Trust still operated in 2000 with similar objectives.

²⁰William Robertson, *Welfare in Trust – A History of the Carnegie UK Trust 1913-1963*, Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, Dunfermline, 1964, p.101.

²¹Unless otherwise indicated, the following quotations (from correspondence) are from the files of the Carnegie Trust in the Scottish Public Records Office, Edinburgh. I am indebted to Henry Macnicol, Ashwell's nephew, for his assistance in obtaining notes from these files for this research.

suggested she write to Mitchell for future consideration. McCormick also wrote to Mitchell advising him that “she has done a lot of good work and doubtless will do more. She (and Dr Simson, one of the most beautiful and unselfish characters I have known) are good friends of mine” (28/7/20). On 31 July 1920 Ashwell wrote on her Lena Ashwell Demobilisation and Reconstruction Fund letterhead, explaining her war work, the current project in Bethnal Green and Hanwell and negotiations with mayors in the London boroughs. She was seeking £500 for a portable proscenium arch to put up in the various halls. Mitchell responded on 4 August with: “Having served in France for four years, I appreciate, with some knowledge, the splendid work you did for our troops, and I regard it as of the highest importance that it should be carried on among the lost sheep of the ex-soldier fold.” Ashwell’s reply declared, “If only the Trustees could have seen the difference that entertainment did make – and the way we were suddenly sent for when any outbreak of disorder broke out in the Camp! However, if we do not go on we can only curl ourselves up and die, with as brave a grin as possible” (8/8/20).

There were concerns among other Trustees, however. Janet Courtney wrote to Mitchell on 17 August: “I know in the profession, she [Ashwell] is regarded as having but a sketchy notion of finance; and careful people like the late George Alexander were very averse to trusting her on the matter of theatrical charities.”²² Mitchell then wrote to Ashwell requesting “an audited balance sheet and evidence of the support promised by the London Mayors” (17/8/20), which Ashwell sent on 8 October 1920. This did not arrive until 11 October, too late for the meeting and Mitchell was obliged to advise that “regretfully... the Trustees could not see their way to contribute towards the deficit” (22/10/20). Mitchell wrote to another trustee (Alexander): “Personally I am sorry, because she is the kind of person who gets things done, while others stand by and do nothing” (22/10/20). Ashwell persisted, reminding him on 22 November 1920 that she had received £500 in support from the Prime Minister for her Demobilisation Fund to help with the government’s Municipal Appeal, concluding that “we are still engaged in begging the Carnegie Trust to give some financial assistance.” In May 1921, after the Trustees rejected a further application, Mitchell wrote to McCormick advising that the committee disliked Ashwell’s financial methods, which they considered to be ‘unsound’. Ashwell advised the Trust that her artists were “forming themselves into a commonwealth having a share-out... and minimum salaries in order to keep going”²³ (21/5/21). Mitchell wrote to the London Mayors ‘in confidence’, asking for “the municipal point of view – were the plays of the right kind? Was the organisation sound and efficient?” (21/5/21). Ashwell commented that from her point of view, “the Mayors of six, certainly, and probably nine of the London boroughs, have asked us to continue the work ... The artists have consented to carry on the commonwealth system, and I have very little doubt that the scheme will pay on this basis” (21/5/21).

²²This is not really borne out by any evidence as Ashwell worked closely with many charities for many years, adhering to the regulations.

²³At the end of the war, Ashwell had set up the company with funds left over from the Concert Parties. Although financial details are not known, it is likely she initially paid a weekly wage to the actors but when resources were low, may have been obliged to work on the profit-sharing arrangement she describes.

There is one extant letter on file with support for Ashwell from the Mayor of Bethnal Green (9/8/21), but presumably there were other positive responses. On 15 July 1921, the minutes of the Trust record receipt of an application from Ashwell for a grant “towards the purchase of necessary equipment for the forthcoming series of dramatic performances in the poorer London boroughs.” A grant of £500 was agreed, “expressly a single contribution for capital outlay only, and an account of its expenditure should be required” (ibid). With this initial success, Ashwell continued her attempts for more help. Henry Simson wrote to Mitchell on 7 August 1921, in support of a request for money to provide a lorry to transport scenery across London. In November 1922 Ashwell wrote stressing the needs of Canning Town, where “poverty and unemployment are rife... the Players are losing ten pounds a week. Ticket prices are 5d., 8d. and 1s.3d. The new Government Entertainment Tax is a very heavy item.” A grant of £100, in the form of a guarantee against loss, was received for this work. She wrote again in December 1922:

We are no doubt faced with a very difficult winter, and entertainment will prove useful in allaying discontent... if our scheme is defeated through lack of funds it will be a most discouraging precedent for anyone who tries to establish some method through which to win the cooperation of the people, with healthy entertainment. If we are successful, our example will be taken up in parts of the country.

She enclosed letters of support, including one from a Catholic priest, Father Andrew,²⁴ who wrote that Ashwell had “brought a healthy team of entertainment where it was most needed. It is a real work of educational value.” Later, Ashwell sent Masfield’s comments and booklet of *Sonnets to the Players* as supplementary material in support of her many applications to the Trust.

Lis Whitelaw²⁵ implies that Cicely Hamilton was instrumental in obtaining grants for the Players from the Carnegie Trust - “apparently she had contacts among the trustees”- but she does not elaborate on this and there is no mention of Hamilton in the Trust’s records. Whitelaw does say Hamilton

was very much committed to the company’s work... this did not stop her deploring the fact that in 1926 they began to charge a fee to dramatists who submitted plays to them for consideration. While she recognised the company’s need to make money, her loyalty, as ever, lay with the writer and her need to have her work read before publication or performance without having to pay for the privilege. (ibid)

The Trust minutes of 14 December 1923 record a further grant to Ashwell. She had applied for assistance towards the cost of properties for the winter programme of plays in the poorer London boroughs, estimated at nearly £364. “The Committee felt that Miss Ashwell’s Players were doing most important work in these congested Metropolitan areas and unanimously agreed to recommend the grant.” However, a supplementary request for help in providing transport was not considered and the Trust was advised that

²⁴It is likely Father Andrew was the chaplain who was Lilian Baylis’s confidant at the Old Vic and the chaplain for the Theatre Girl’s Club, founded in 1915 by Mrs Edward Compton (Michael Sanderson, *From Irving to Olivier*, London, Athlone Press, 1984, p.200).

²⁵*The Life & Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton*, op.cit. p.214.

the expected loss in Canning Town had far exceeded the guarantee of £100 and performances in this district had been abandoned.

In 1926, “carrying on the principle embodied in the support given to the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells” (*Stage* 29/4/26), the Carnegie Trust announced it was giving its attention to the work of repertory companies in other parts of the country and following advice from an Advisory Committee set up at their request by the Drama League, had decided to consider a limited number of applications for short-term grants. “The conditions will be a high standard of performance, definite evidence that the theatre or company has a recognised standing in its district, and a reasonable hope of being independent at the end of the grant period” (*ibid*). This new policy may have helped Ashwell’s major breakthrough in 1927, by which time she had obviously changed the perception of the doubters at the Trust. The minutes for 13 May 1927 record that the Trust gave a grant of £1000 over two years for performances by the Players in Holloway, Hounslow and Streatham. This was based on Ashwell’s confidence that

with two more seasons the performances would become as successful financially as was now the case in (e.g.) Battersea, Greenwich and Watford. No grant had been made to Miss Ashwell since 1924, and it was common knowledge that her excellent work, extending gradually all over the poorer parts of London, needed from time to time the stimulus of outside help.

However, two years later, the minutes of the Music Sub-Committee meeting on 12 July 1929 record Ashwell’s last correspondence with the Trust, advising that the Council of the Players had resolved, on 11th June, considering the company’s financial situation, to sell the Century Theatre in order

to liquidate all outstanding accounts and to provide extra capital ...in the event of the Theatre not finding a purchaser, the movement should cease altogether; and that in order to pay off the debts, the Theatre should be let to amateurs. Miss Ashwell expressed the opinion that it would take some time to wipe off the debt, and that she did not think it would ever be possible to resume the work. The Committee regretted the action which had been found necessary, and hoped that a good price could be got for the Theatre, which would provide for payment of the debt, and a balance to carry on the travelling companies.

Stronger official support, however, was being given to other areas of the arts. In January 1924 the British Fine Arts Commission, appointed by the King, was created to give advice to the Government on the placing of statues and monuments in public places. It would advise on design selection and artistic matters “such as elevations of buildings, town planning and landscape gardening, and the internal decoration of public buildings” (*Era* 30/1/24). However, the journal lamented, no such provision was being made for the drama.

Yet the theatre, as exemplified in the playhouse, the music hall, and the cinema, is the one institution in which the artistic interests of the people are centred. The buildings devoted to Thespis and to My Lady Vaudeville are the most popular and more largely patronised than any other. The drama...is... the Cinderella of the arts, uncared for nationally and officially relegated to the lowest plane in the councils of the country. (ibid)

Ashwell often referred to the drama as the ‘Cinderella’ art form and the *Era* could have easily been quoting her. The other financial avenue open to Ashwell was fund raising, a skill she had acquired during the war. However, this was a time consuming business impossible for her to pursue given the schedule she set the Players. Without the unique circumstances of the war to attract the support of many individuals, she did not have the same opportunity for success from this source. Besides, it was by now a very different game, as the establishment of the National Opera Trust fund demonstrated in 1925. The aim was to “raise a permanent income producing fund to subsidise, develop and stimulate the production and performance of grand opera... throughout Great Britain, Ireland and the Dominions, and to advance public knowledge of and interest in opera” (*Times* 11/12/25). £500,000 was “the amount aimed at by the trustees as a capital sum [from private donations], or an equivalent income of £25,000 to be received in dividends or annual subscriptions” (*Era* 4/4/25). The twelve trustees, including Ashwell’s husband Sir Henry Simson, hoped once the fund was endowed, that the scheme would provide “the best... means of placing grand opera in this country permanently in a position in which it may compare more favourably than hitherto with subsidised opera in other countries” (*ibid*). At the Trust’s inaugural meeting on 9 December 1925, the speakers included Lord Clarendon, MP J.R. Clynes, the Duchess of Atholl and Ashwell, who said that in England

the theatre and music subsidized the State, but in other countries in Europe the State subsidized the higher forms of the theatre and of music, so that they might be permanently available for the masses at prices the people can afford. There was great talent in this country, but it was being really poisoned because of the want of opportunity of expression.
(*Times* 11/12/25)

When the *Stage* commented on the Opera Trust, which was followed a week later by the establishment of the Sadler’s Wells Trust (to restore the north London theatre as a second home for the Old Vic companies), it noted the involvement of influential members of the community as well as politicians from all parties. “One would like to think that here is the first step along the road to State aid for a National Theatre and rate aid for municipal theatres” (2/4/25). The editorial rejected the argument that involvement implied interference since the European experience of public subsidy had not demonstrated this outcome.

From this post-war period of ‘de-commercialisation’ of the arts, evolved the three-tier financial basis – box office, public subsidy and sponsorship, on which most of the arts now operate. This was basis on which Ashwell sought to develop and sustain her work. She also sought local, voluntary help to build audiences and to assist her company’s performances.

THE FRIENDS OF THE PLAYERS

From February 1923 Ashwell set about creating a network of volunteers to support the company’s activities; the Friends of the Players. Harold Gibson took on the main responsibility for promoting the establishment of branches, assisted by business manager Hilda Pocock, in most of the areas where the

company performed. He gave many speeches at after-performance receptions, social events and Christmas parties, thanking the members and encouraging them to seek more members and larger audiences. Ashwell rarely missed post-performance receptions, recognising the necessity of encouraging local commitment, and appearing never to tire of reciting poetry, greeting audiences and advocating the wider cause. Member numbers in different areas fluctuated considerably over the years, presumably reflecting the involvement of committed individuals and, to some extent, the impact of the Players' repertoire on local interest.

The annual subscription for membership of the Association is a minimum of 1/-; there is no maximum. The Benefits of Membership are, in addition to the privilege of taking part in a valuable social work: A free copy of each issue of 'The Lap' [The Lena Ashwell Players' Magazine].²⁶ Opportunities for meeting the Players socially and getting to know them; we are always glad to see provincial members when in London at the Century Theatre. The right to borrow plays from the Century Theatre Dramatic Library²⁷. The Obligation of Membership is to do all you can to make the best dramatic art available for everyone and to support every honest effort made in that direction. There are now nearly 2000 members of the Association scattered all over the country though the majority of members are to be found in places where the Lena Ashwell Players perform.²⁸

Local council and Rotary club representatives often played an active role on Friends' committees and provided meeting facilities and other backup. The Friends co-ordinated volunteer programme sellers, seat ushers and refreshments at their venues and were called upon during appeals for money, to such organisations as the Carnegie Trust, to write letters of support. Members had the opportunity to make repertoire suggestions which Ashwell tried to incorporate into the company's schedule. At the end of each season, they presented gifts to company members and, inevitably, became friends of the actors, taking interest in their careers and personal lives. The strength and success of the Friends' organisation as a facilitator of enjoyable events linked with the Company's performances, had much to do with the commitment and energy of such people (usually women) as Edmonton's Mrs L.R.Ithell. After successful involvement with the Players' Friends, she became a Councillor and chairman of the local Education Committee (*Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald* 3/10/24). While she could no longer work in an official capacity for the Friends, it is assumed she continued as an advocate for the Players within the Council.

MEMBERS OF THE LENA ASHWELL PLAYERS

While it is not possible, or necessary for the purposes of this study, to account for all the actors who were members of the Players from 1914 to 1929, it should be noted that in general Ashwell attracted many young actors who went on to wider careers in the theatre. By the mid 1920s she was a significant employer in the theatre, engaging up to fifty actors and technical personnel for each season. She relied

²⁶No copy of this publication has been found.

²⁷There are no details of this library but presumably scripts of the plays produced by the company were available.

²⁸Quoted from York Theatre Royal 1925 programme.

very much on a strong ensemble of women both on stage and behind the scenes and had a number of loyal, more experienced actors who embraced her ideals and were prepared to make a strong commitment to the artistic direction of the company. These individuals had the opportunity to play a variety of roles and to use and develop their management or directorial skills. It is clear that all company members had to be prepared to undertake stage management tasks during set-ups, performances and pack-ups. There is an appendix to this thesis with brief details of some key members of the company, led for the most part by actress **Esme Church** and **Harold Gibson**, who was the company manager as well as an actor and director. The best known name contributed the least to the Players, but as it was a biography of **Laurence Olivier** that first drew my attention to Ashwell, it is worth noting that, in the autumn of 1925, as a young and inexperienced actor, Olivier joined the Players, helped by an actor colleague, **Alan Webb**, who later wrote:

The pay was miserable and the conditions worse, but what was one to do? We took work where we could find it. As we were about to start the season, several of the players dropped out for better opportunities, and I got Larry in as a last-minute substitute. He didn't last, though. Much to my embarrassment he was sacked for fooling about ...during a performance of *Julius Caesar* (playing Flavius)... He was a cut-up, ever seeking attention and making trouble for himself... we were all cut-ups after a fashion. None of us took what we were doing very seriously, since we were all aiming for the West End and this was as far from the West End as we could be without being in South Africa or Australia. However, most of us tried to be diligent during the actual performances. Not Larry... He was hell-bent on causing trouble, and more often than not he succeeded. I loved the boy dearly, but I can say in all honesty that I was relieved when he was given the sack.²⁹

Olivier did not enjoy his time with the Players and he considered that Ashwell “liked to remain unseen and mystifying, just a vaguely feared figure in an upstairs office,”³⁰ a statement belied by her very public involvement in all aspects of the company's activities. Olivier writes that

you had to pay your own fares [to get to the London performances] ...out of £2/10/- per week, and I was back to near-starving conditions. We were always playing in boarded-over swimming-baths, plus the occasional town hall, dressing sometimes in the bath cubicles or, quite often, in the lavatories. I'm afraid it was I who re-christened the company 'The Lavatory Players'.
(ibid)

Clearly it was not an easy life for company members, but most remained with Ashwell for more than one season, acquiring skills and learning their trade under pressure and in the best tradition of 'on the job'.

PERFORMANCE VENUES 1919 TO 1929

EAST END OF LONDON: Ashwell made a number of attempts to establish a base in the East End, an area of high population density, poor living conditions and low income earners. She began the whole enterprise in **BETHNAL GREEN**, in the heart of the East End, with the company performing every night during the winter of 1919-20 at the local Baths (boarded over during the winter months) under the

²⁹ Alan Webb quoted in *Olivier* by Thomas Kiernan, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1981, p.34-35.

³⁰ Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of An Actor*, Coronet Books, London, 1984, p. 53.

auspices of the Oxford House Settlement authorities.³¹ It was here, on 23 February 1920, that the Players premiered Cicely Hamilton's *The Brave and the Fair*³². This was followed in the autumn and winter of 1920 - the known dates being Wednesdays between 13 October and December - with performances in the seemingly unsuitably large, 2000 seat variety theatre, the People's Palace, on the nearby Mile End Road, **STEPNEY**. The *East End News and London Shipping Chronicle* announced receipt of an official communication stating: "Stepney Borough Council are about to try the experiment of providing the nearest approach possible in that crowded, industrial, and residential area, of the much-discussed municipal theatre" (8/10/20). Ashwell was described as "that talented, popular and experienced actress-manageress" (ibid), and *Chronicle* readers were advised that ticket prices, including tax, would be 8d., 1/3 and 2/4, with season tickets for consecutive performances, available in advance from the Municipal Offices or members of the Borough Council. There was reassurance that "the law does not allow for any charge to fall on the rates" (ibid), however, the Mayor, Major Attlee was committed to such a non-commercial venture and the continuation of Ashwell's wartime work. Ashwell was quoted as believing "a theatre worthy of its name gives its audience something to talk about as well as something to laugh about" (ibid). The plan was not only to present plays, but also to provide inspiration and facilities to help local people form "dramatic or literary circles or amateur dramatic societies ...to encourage a spirit of healthy criticism, the spirit which demands and obtains good work from actor, manager and playwright" (ibid).

In 1921, Ashwell moved her Wednesday night East End visits to the **CANNING TOWN** Public Hall, further east and in the heart of the Thames River docklands area. No Council minutes are available and the *West Ham, East Ham and Stratford Express* includes only occasional accounts of performances, given during the winter months between 5 October 1921 and the spring of 1923. On 15 October 1921 the *Express* reported on an early appeal, by the Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, for support for the company's visits. In his letter to the paper he pointed out that the Council gave use of the Hall free and the enterprise was supported by the West Ham Christian Social Service Council. In early 1922 *The Taming of the Shrew*, *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Trilby* attracted large audiences³³ but on 14 February 1923 the Mayor of West Ham was curious as to why there was so little support, advising the audience at *Doormats* that financial concerns were considerable, despite the talent of the Players and the educative value of their work (*Express* 17/2/23). Losses were too great and Ashwell abandoned this venue when planning the 1923/24 autumn season.

³¹No further information was found on this venue except for Ashwell's references to these dates, and brief comments in the *Era*.

³²*The Brave and the Fair* was later performed by the Players at the Kingsway Theatre on 29 October 1920 in aid of the Earl Haig's Officers' Association Fund. The *Times* noted that it had been "left to a woman dramatist to trounce those charming members of her own sex who looked on the war as an excuse for innumerable flirtations and for engagements lightly entered into and lightly broken off... a bright little comedy" (30/10/20).

³³This phenomenon was reported in the *Express* on 7/1/22, 21/2/22 and 4/2/22.

Two years later she returned to the area, this time to the King's Hall at **HACKNEY** Baths, managed by the Borough Council Baths' Committee. While the *Hackney & Kingsland Gazette* was sympathetic to the company, carrying display advertisements and reproducing the company's press releases, the Council took a hard line, as reported in the minutes of meetings. Hackney (and neighbouring St Pancras Borough Council) had found that profits could be made in the provision of entertainments (eleven dances in 1920 achieved a profit of over £316, *Era* 26/1/21), and perhaps by 1925 members expected all such events to make money for the Council coffers. The hire fee for the King's Hall had to be paid prior to the date of letting, which created difficulties for Ashwell's company. The Players were allocated twenty-three Wednesdays for the 1925-26 season, commencing on 14 October, "subject to the applicants being prepared to relinquish for functions of an important character, upon reasonable notice being given to them, any of the dates booked" (Minutes 2/7/25). Without involvement in the Players' visits by local council members, local communities were slow to make a commitment, and Hackney was no exception. Following the Council meeting on 4 December, when the Players' application to reduce the hire fee in relation to piano costs was rejected, the decision was made to pull out of Hackney and the last performance was given there on 16 December 1925.

CITY/INNER NORTH LONDON: Despite a number of attempts, Ashwell was not successful with venues close to the centre of London. Residents of areas near the city, in Westminster and inner north London, had easier access to the West End and theatres such as Sadlers' Wells in Islington. Many of the residents of the areas she did try were not likely to easily adopt a theatre going habit, nor to consider themselves able to afford regular attendance even if the Players' repertoire had appealed as an appropriate form of entertainment. Ashwell was aware that the educative process and shift in attitudes would be gradual and costly, hence her promotion of the aims of the Drama League, but neither time nor money was on her side. Early on, the Players' schedule included the Northampton Institute in **CLERKENWELL**, for some Wednesdays in 1920-21; the Mary Ward Settlement, **TAVISTOCK PLACE, WCI**,³⁴ for some Mondays during 1921, 1922 and 1923; and **SHOREDITCH** Town Hall in the autumn of 1920. In addition, there was mention in the *Era* in November 1920 that the Players were giving performances at **NEWINGTON** Public Hall (across the Thames River) under the auspices of Southwark Borough Council (3/11/20), but no information was found on this venue. Later, from September 1926 until the closure of the company, the Northern Polytechnic Institute, **HOLLOWAY**, was a reasonably successful Wednesday evening venue. Of the above little information remains, except for minutes from Shoreditch Borough Council and local press references to the Holloway performances.

Shoreditch Town Hall, managed by the Law and Establishment Committee of the Borough Council, housed Ashwell's brief experimental series of Friday evening visits between 15 October and 17 December 1920. The Players' application for dates "throughout the winter season for the purpose of

³⁴This organisation was still operating as an education centre for women in 2001.

putting on Shakespeare plays” was considered and agreed on 21 September 1920. The nightly hire fee for dances was £10/4/9, but Ashwell was granted the venue free of charge on the proviso that “the Mayor be asked to express the opinion of this Committee that the minimum charge for admittance to the theatrical performances should be 6 pence per person” (Minutes 21/9/20). However, by early December the Players regretfully advised the Mayor that they had decided, “in view of the very poor attendances of people at the performances...they were unable to continue... after 17th December” (Minutes 7/12/20).

Before becoming established at the Northern Polytechnic Institute in Holloway in 1926, Ashwell tried a number of other north London venues, including Wednesday nights during the 1922-1923 season at the **HAMPSTEAD GARDEN SUBURB** Club and Saturdays at St Gabriel’s Hall, **CRICKLEWOOD**, during the following season. A thorough search of local newspapers for these areas reveals no mention of the company and insufficient local support was the likely reason that these did not continue.

HOLLOWAY, despite considerable competition for audiences in this area – with a large number of cinemas and the Alexandra Palace, the Islington Empire Theatre, the Collins and the Alhambra Music Halls and the Finsbury Palais de Dance providing entertainment for the residents – attracted sufficient audiences without much promotion. Ashwell did, however, endear herself to the audience, when, in the presence of the Mayor of Islington (at a performance of *Hindle Wakes* on 27 October 1926), she declared she “had a warm spot for Islington, as she had made her first appearance on the stage of the old Grand Theatre” (*Islington and Holloway Press*, 30/10/26). As a means of attracting attention and support for the Players’ work, and as a gesture made elsewhere to similar needy causes, (and despite the company’s own precarious financial position), the proceeds of a performance of *The Little Minister* were donated, by the company, to the Royal Northern Hospital (*Press* 20/11/26). The company visited Holloway regularly until April 1929.

EDMONTON Town Hall was a regular Wednesday night north London venue for the Players from 3 October 1923 until 10 April 1929. During this period some school matinee performances of Shakespeare’s plays were given in the large Edmonton Empire Theatre prior to evening performances at the Town Hall. The hall was managed by the Plans, Buildings, Town Hall, Baths, Stores, Housing and Town Planning Committee of Edmonton Urban District Council. Early on in the negotiations the Players sought a reduction in the hire charges, set at three guineas per night. Council regulations allowed a reduction if the bookings were consecutive, and it was agreed “that a charge of two pounds, twelve shillings and sixpence per night only be made, the use of the piano being... an additional charge” (Minutes 25/9/23). Council members were placed in a quandary when the Players invited them, as a way of introducing the company, to attend a performance, offering “two complimentary tickets to each member and officer” (Minutes 23/11/23). The discussion centred on whether or not tickets should be paid for. After considerable debate, the invitation was accepted for 2 January 1924, but eleven out of twenty

councillors did not vote, giving no indication whether lack of interest or reticence about accepting a ‘gift’ was the reason for their abstention.

Perhaps this was indicative of what was to be an ambivalent attitude in Edmonton to the Players throughout the years. The Players’ fortunes seem to have fluctuated here more than anywhere else – for example, the Council paid the necessary annual stage licence for the hall (Minutes 27/11/23) and made expensive improvements to the facilities (including the installation of footlights – Minutes 8/7/24), but would not assist with a seat booking plan or a Town Hall booking service (Minutes 5/9/24) and caused the cancellation of a performance rather than find an alternative venue for election vote counting (Minutes, March 1928). Similarly, audience numbers fluctuated greatly - in early 1924 there were 638 members of the Friends’ organisation in Edmonton (*Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald* 1/2/24) - a year later membership had dropped to 195. Local councillors, Ashwell and Gibson were compelled to make frequent appeals for support – on one occasion, after Councillor Kilbride had recommended the audience talk to school teachers about the company, Ashwell quoted the words she sought to disprove in relation to actors, which had been written in 1914: “‘as useless as an actor, billiard maker, or golf professional’ [however], she was hopeful regarding the future... if people could only be brought to know what high-class educational as well as entertaining plays were being presented, the hall would be filled” (ibid). Gibson and Ashwell did not hesitate to keep their audiences fully informed of the company’s financial position – Ashwell used the occasion of her performance in *The Ship* (at Edmonton on 7 January 1925) to remind patrons that “something more than pleasure and knowledge are required to justify the plays being continued. This is the box office returns” (*Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald* 9/1/25).

In 1926, although the *Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald* was reporting on good houses for most productions, the company had possibly over-stretched its resources. By the autumn, Ashwell had three companies on the road. She employed many young, inexperienced actors – financially there was no alternative. Touring the suburbs (with set-ups and ‘strikes’ before and after every performance) was not glamorous. Actors struggled to remember lines and cope with the demands of weekly repertory, which involved rehearsing during the day and performing every night for weeks on end. Wages were low and conditions unappealing. Ashwell’s ideals, while probably embraced by young actors in theory, would have been harder to appreciate in practice. In Edmonton (and elsewhere) there were hints that standards were dropping (*Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald* 8/1/26). Weekly theatre-going did not become a habit in Edmonton although Ashwell did mention it as “an instance of a working class district where the movement was going on splendidly” (*Tottenham & Edmonton Weekly Herald* 24/2/28). This is most likely to be an example of Ashwell’s attempt to boost support through encouragement rather than by sounding too negative.

Nearby **ENFIELD** did not prove a successful venue; the Assembly Rooms,³⁵ Windmill Hill, was included in the Players' itinerary for one year only, on Mondays between 10 March 1924 and 13 April 1925. Given Enfield's proximity to Edmonton,³⁶ it is likely the area could not sustain two performances of the same play in the same week.

WINCHMORE HILL, another area in North London, replaced Enfield for Monday evenings from autumn 1925 until April 1929. There were some early try-out dates at the venue, St Paul's Institute, in February 1924, presumably when the Assembly Rooms in nearby Enfield were not available. From a thorough search of local archives and newspapers, it appears Ashwell's *Myself a Player* list (p.283-4, see Appendix Four) of the venues and dates on the Players' schedule contains some inaccuracies involving these two venues. She indicates the company spent Mondays during the 1923-24 season at Winchmore Hill. At this time they were actually performing at the Assembly Rooms, Enfield - a pattern repeated for the 1924-25 season. From the 1925-26 season until the company's closure, they performed at Winchmore Hill. The local newspaper, the *Enfield Gazette and Observer*, was supportive of Ashwell and the Players – in its first known reference to Ashwell's work, it quoted the 18th century poet William Cowper's lines, "Absence of occupation is not rest. A mind quite vacant is a mind distressed" (22/2/24), declaring Ashwell brought these lines to mind. The *Observer* mostly quoted from the company's press releases, providing information such as

The ...Players are rendering a great service to education in playing each year the Shakespearean plays that are set for public examination... several Education Committees have arranged for school matinees of their forthcoming production of *Julius Caesar*. Miss Beatrice Wilson, who is responsible for the production, had intended to dress it in Elizabethan costume, but the school authorities seemed to think that it would be more useful to them if dressed in correct Roman costume, and so that has been done.³⁷ (6/11/25)

This statement was obviously a publicity angle and helpful in attracting audiences, but it also shows Ashwell's responsiveness to the curriculum and her commitment to providing theatre for educational purposes. Ashwell was also aware she had the opportunity to discover changes in, as well as to influence, public taste as her company regularly confronted different audiences with different plays. Harold Gibson noted the Winchmore Hill audience was an appreciative one for comedy, enabling the company to play "at the proper pace" (*Enfield Gazette & Observer* 15/10/26). However, from a financial point of view Winchmore Hill was not absolutely successful, although

five other centres had paid their way last season... On the year's working they had lost one thousand pounds, due partly to the fact that four new centres had been opened, and the first season in a fresh district was never profitable, and partly due to the unfortunate circumstance

³⁵Ashwell mistakenly called the Assembly Rooms the Athenaeum in her appendix in *Myself a Player*, p.283.

³⁶Advertisements in the *Tottenham and Edmonton Weekly Herald* for the Players advertised the same play for the Assembly Rooms on Monday nights as that given at Edmonton Town Hall on Wednesday nights.

³⁷For the Players, in practical terms, Roman costumes would have been much less expensive than Elizabethan dress.

that the day of the Players' opening for the summer at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Rugby, coincided with the beginning of the General Strike. (ibid).

He advised that John Masefield, "amongst some faithful friends who had come to the rescue, and were going to assist in liquidating the debt" (ibid), would give poetry readings and sell a limited number of autographed copies of his *Sonnets*. Two months later Masefield addressed an enthusiastic full house at St Paul's Institute. He spoke of the decline of the drama and the Players' role in weaning "the people back to the theatre from the cinema. It has taken some time to arrange a way in which to win the affections of the people and to provide a useful form of recreation less harmful to art than the cinema" (*Enfield Gazette & Observer* 17/12/26). Having already given two similar talks (at Greenwich and Sutton) the future poet laureate confidently declared his preference for writing plays, through which he could address a living audience. Before rendering his poems, including *King Cole* and *Gaffer*, he stated he wanted the theatre to occupy a more important place in life, to contribute to the happiness of the soul of man.

It is likely attendance at performances everywhere by the Players was affected by the influenza epidemic that blighted the early months of 1927. West End theatre manager, Sir Oswald Stoll, was compelled to issue a statement to all newspapers in an attempt to dispel fears and encourage audiences:

The reported slump in theatre attendances may be caused to a large extent by a prevalent notion, unwarranted by the facts, that theatres are haunts of infection during epidemics like the influenza... the truth is that the risk of infection in a modern theatre and especially in a modern palace of variety, as many music halls are called, is actually less than in almost any other public place, while the enjoyment provided by the performance is a psychological deterrent of the utmost value – bodily health being dependent to a large extent on the state of the mind. Risk is less because precautions are greater. Constant inspections by municipal officials... ensure the continued maintenance of all forms of cleanliness.

(*Enfield Gazette & Observer* 18/2/27)

The Players survived the General Strike and influenza epidemic to continue regular visits, without apparent incident and performing a varied repertoire, to Winchmore Hill until 8 April 1929, when *Caste* was given. As elsewhere, the local paper noted the performance as the 'end of season' but no mention was made of the imminent demise of the company. It is regrettable that such an important enterprise should slip out of public notice so quietly.

GREENWICH Borough Hall, in south-east London, was an extremely successful Friday night venue for the Players from January 1921 until early April 1929. The area provided sufficient audiences in the early years of the Players' visits to make it viable for Thursday evening performances in the nearby **DEPTFORD** Borough Hall, between October 1921 and March 1926, and Saturday nights at **CAMBERWELL** Old Kent Road Baths, between October 1921 and mid May 1923. Ashwell returned to Camberwell with Friday evening performances at the Surrey Masonic Hall between 1925 and 1927. In addition, the **ELTHAM** Parish Hall with *Arms and the Man* in April 1922 and the **BLACKHEATH** Concert Hall with *Diana of Dobson's* in October of the same year, were tried out unsuccessfully. She

experimented for a season of Wednesday nights, commencing in October 1923 at the nearby St Cyprian's Hall, **BROCKLEY**, transferring after a few weeks to the Ladywell Baths in neighbouring **LEWISHAM**. The Ladywell Baths dates incurred a loss of £220 and the season was cut short in late February 1924 and not repeated. The Greenwich seasons generally began earlier (in late September), and ran longer in the spring, to late April or early May, than those at the other venues.

Relevant minutes from Greenwich Council were not located by the local history library during the research for this study. The local *Kentish Mercury* is the main source of information for this area. It reported consistently on negotiations, audience and repertoire, and as a rule reviewed the Friday night Greenwich performance.³⁸ It appears, initially at least, given frequent *Mercury* references to the fact, that Ashwell's agreement was that for most performances the Mayor's local Relief Fund for the Unemployed would receive any box office income achieved after the company's expenses had been covered. For the Camberwell performances, the hall was managed by the Public Service Committee, Camberwell Borough Council, who charged £1/1/- each evening, with the option that if the entertainments were "financially successful, a fee up to two guineas" (*Era* 13/4/21), would apply. Performances in Greenwich very quickly attracted full houses and the Mayor, Alderman Lemmon, expressed the hope that Greenwich would eventually have a municipal theatre supported by the Borough Council (*Mercury* 4/2/21). Lemmon was a strong supporter of the Players, who in turn regularly gave of their services to support his Fund. Before one such event, Marion Fawcett urged the audience to "remember that beside every man out of employment there stood, in all probability, some woman and child, or children" (*Mercury* 15/4/21). Ashwell expressed her pleasure at the company being able to help the unemployed and declared: "we are, all of us, in an extraordinary way, dependent one upon another. We are all workers... the company [members] are all workers. Actors, above all sections of the community, are servants of the public - to give glimpses into other people's lives" (*Mercury* 22/4/21).

She paid tribute to her hard working company - Church responded with "We want to thank her! She set us an ideal, and that ideal we mean to follow, and pull it off" (*ibid*). However, this ideal was difficult to pursue, especially, when, after a performance of *A Child in Flanders* on 20 December, the company's Ford light lorry skidded and hit a light pole. The company stage carpenter, manager Marion Fawcett and actress Hildegard Walker were injured and Cicely Hamilton³⁹, who was severely hurt, required hospital treatment. She needed a stick to aid walking for sometime afterwards (*Mercury* 30/12/21). Performances continued, with other company members covering for the injured. Such incidents placed considerable pressure on the company, without the luxury of understudies or spare vehicles.

³⁸The *Mercury* took space to acknowledge the behind-the-scenes staff for the company at this time as well, mentioning frequently in reviews, the stage directors (including Julian d'Albie), stage managers Frederick Irving and H.E. Blatch, stage carpenter A.E. Sladen and the musicians Kate Coates and Joan Simson.

³⁹Ashwell and Hamilton had been friends and colleagues for many years; the playwright's association with the Players gave her the opportunity to have her work performed, as well as to act and direct in a company with many familiar faces – a situation not otherwise widely available to such an individual as Hamilton.

In general the *Mercury* considered the Players to be best at Shakespeare and light comedy. Social realism was not eagerly embraced. Githa Sowerby's tough play, *Rutherford and Son*, prompted the comment: "It is, we suppose, inevitable that the Players should give us an occasional dull play, but there is about [this]... a continual gloom which lasts until the very end, in itself a pointless affair" (2/2/23). It would appear, also, that new company members, initially at least, were not wholeheartedly welcomed either. Audiences were conservative and quickly found their favourite actors, given the company's weekly return to the area; their expectation was built around the thought that the familiar would be playing the unfamiliar. New company members had to work harder to be accepted and praised.

Nancy Price's production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* prompted the *Mercury* to observe that the company's performances of Shakespeare

are always so intrinsically satisfying, and so capably produced, that it is difficult to single out any particular effort as being more cleverly realised than others. *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* – all have been generously received – but *The Merry Wives of Windsor* probably touches high-water mark.⁴⁰ (Mercury 18/1/24)

When Beatrice Wilson directed *The Tempest* in 1925, the *Mercury* indicated that the production would be influenced by the idea of Colin Still⁴¹ "that Shakespeare, consciously or unconsciously, wrote the comedy as a mystery play. Mr Still endeavours to show, by textual evidence, that *The Tempest* is really the showing of a pilgrimage of mortals through Purgatory (the Island) to Paradise (Prospero's Cave)" (30/10/25). A. Corney Grain was Prospero and Godfrey Kenton, Ariel. In 1995 Kenton⁴² described how he was dressed and painted completely in silver, and for the Century Theatre performances spent most of the time in front of the stage, providing a link between the characters and the audience.

Another of Ashwell's pool of women directors, Irene Hentschel, directed a number of contemporary comedies, including Ronald Jeans' *The Kiss Cure* ("written with that light touch which is so often missing from modern 'comedies', and there is nothing but clean, wholesome fun all the way through" *Mercury* 19/12/24), and *The Education of Mr Surrage*, a new play by Allan Monkhouse. While it was not highlighted in press releases, this was a season in which the women of the company featured strongly, including Ashwell herself in the new year production, by Clive Woods, of *The Ship*.

Ashwell then directed *King John*, praised, despite the lack of scenery and small stage, for its suggestion of "the atmosphere of the times" in which "almost every member of a lengthy cast revealed the beauty and the wit of the Shakespearean lines" (*Mercury* 27/3/25). Before the season ended, further evidence of the

⁴⁰Ten months later, Ernest Milton's *Hamlet*, directed by Beatrice Wilson, was given the same accolade (*Mercury* 5/12/24).

⁴¹Colin Still was the author of *Shakespeare's Mystery Play*, London, Cecil Palmer, 1921. Ashwell refers to Still in her chapter on *The Tempest* in *Reflections from Shakespeare*, p.225.

⁴²Godfrey Kenton met with the author in 1995 and described his work with the Players.

Figure 42: Programme for *The Child In Flanders*, Lena Ashwell Players, December 1921. (Theatre Museum, London)

company's female strength was given by Esme Church, Olive Walter and Mercia Cameron in Masfield's *The Tragedy of Nan*.

Although committed to repertory company principles, Ashwell occasionally engaged actors from outside the company for specific roles. It may have been that these actors sought to help her cause by lending their name when they were available; she may also have been prepared to pay slightly more for an actor who could help at the box office. Such was the situation reported by the *Mercury* in October 1926 when Harcourt Williams⁴³ was engaged to appear in his own production of G.K. Chesterton's dramatic comedy, *Magic*, and "contributed forceful acting in the part of the mysterious 'stranger', conjuror and ex-journalist" (29/10/26).

The *Mercury* played an important role in promoting the Players – particularly through publishing their general press releases, including the one announcing the autumn 1924 season and stating that

During the past season 112,922 people witnessed the performances of the LAP in 17 London centres... and altogether 89 plays have been produced during the four years that the work has been carried on in Greater London... it has taken some time to perfect the elaborate organisation necessary for presenting a new play every week in so many different places, but with the help of the municipal and other official bodies, the Carnegie Trustees and 'The Friends of the Players' (a society which has a membership of 1400), the movement is now on the high road to success. In order to continue and develop it, a centre from which to work has been secured in the Century Theatre, Archer Street, Nottinghill Gate, but 1500 pounds is required to adapt it to conform with the requirements of the L.C.C. As the Players have no money to meet such capital expenditure, an appeal is being made for subscriptions from those who have enjoyed the benefits of the performances in the past. (3/10/24)

Appealing to the audience's sense of gratitude was a frequent ploy, but it sometimes made for a heavy air of respectability which can not have appealed to all who may have been potential audiences. For example, the Deptford audience, during an interval of *Macbeth*, was addressed by the Lord Bishop of Woolwich who said "that just as the excellent work that was done at the Old Vic was appreciated by the people, so they must show their appreciation for the really fine efforts Miss Ashwell's company were making" (*Mercury* 24/10/24).

Events such as the death of the Queen Mother during the 1925 autumn season, which saw the cancellation of performances, "in conformity with the general closing of places of amusement out of respect to the Royal Family on their loss" (*Mercury* 27/11/25), and regardless of Ashwell's sentiment in relation to the Royal Family, placed added pressure on the finances of the company. Any lost performance was lost income for the company and the actors. "Season tickets are, we understand, to be advanced a week, and

⁴³Harcourt Williams (1880-1957) was a leading player and director who was appointed Director of the Old Vic Theatre in 1929 where his productions were based on the theories of Granville Barker. His wife was the actress Jean Sterling Mackinlay, prominently associated with Children's Theatre in UK, who presented many of her matinees for young people at the Century Theatre.

those who have already purchased tickets for today may either use them for a later performance or have their money refunded” (ibid).

When the eighth Greenwich season closed with a performance of Berkeley’s *French Leave*, it was clear the company was in difficulty. Mayor Purkiss declared the educational aspect of the company’s work was the point of view “he had laboured very hard to put... before the Council” (*Mercury* 4/5/28). Ashwell spoke to the audience about the company’s heavy liabilities and current loss of over fifty pounds in Greenwich. “It might be thought that because they were a limited liability company, they made money. As a fact, we are, and we have been since the beginning, very heavily in debt.” (ibid) The Greenwich audience fluctuated in the autumn and winter of the 1928/29 season; the post-Christmas performance of Maugham’s *Caesar’s Wife*, when the young actress Joan Mowbray replaced an indisposed Nell Compton⁴⁴ (sister of Fay, a well-known actress), in the leading role of Violet, attracted an audience “a good deal smaller than usual” (*Mercury* 4/1/29). The much-anticipated Compton, perhaps seen as a replacement for Church, who had now left the company, disappointed when she did appear in *The Gay Lord Quex* at few weeks later. “The audience was decidedly thin, and... the acting was not, generally speaking, calculated to inspire those present” (*Mercury* 1/2/29).

The last Greenwich performance was on 5 April 1929, and the usual exchange of gifts took place. Gibson “regretted... Ashwell was not ...present, but she was at a big concert... at Hythe, to raise funds for the extension of the Players’ movement to the Provinces” (*Mercury* 12/4/29). Despite this statement, there was a definite air of finality about the event.

STREATHAM, in South London, was first visited with Galsworthy’s *The Pigeon* on Thursday 30 September 1926. Prior to this, the Public Baths in nearby **DULWICH** had been tried out on Tuesdays during the 1922-23 season. Presumably the Baths were managed by the local council, but no information was found. Unlike some poorer areas, the top ticket price at Streatham was 3/6, with 1/2 the cheapest. These were available at a local store or on the door. The venue, Streatham Hall, was used by a large number of local organisations. It has not been ascertained who managed the Hall, but at the end of the first season the company thanked the rector for his support (*News* 1/4/27), which may indicate that it was a parish hall, administered by the church. The main source of information for this area is the *Streatham News*. Initially, the Players had difficulty booking every Thursday, which created some uncertainty for their audience. From September 1927 until April 1929, the performance day was changed to Friday, while on Thursdays during this period the company travelled further south-east away from London to **BECKENHAM** for performances in the Grand Hall Baths there. Ashwell, determined to have a high

⁴⁴Nell Compton was the daughter of the actor-manager, Edward Compton and the actress Virginia Bateman and the sister of novelist Compton Mackenzie.

profile in Streatham, sought the involvement of Rotary, giving a luncheon address to its members on 23 September 1926. The *Streatham News* accorded her speech considerable space, with a three tiered heading: *Streatham and the Stage - Drama a Means of Humanising Conflicting Sections. Indifference That Kills*. She was quoted at length.

In other countries there is co-operation between the theatre, the arts, and the representatives of the people. There are national and municipal theatres, and in Germany there are facilities for young people to refer to a great library of the theatre... The theatre is one of the most important civic amenities... for eight years they [the Players] have been working to put the theatre before the people. One of her great difficulties is not antagonism, but indifference towards the theatre. Her players play every kind of play that is sound, and avoid all the plays that are purely of the modern manner - sex problems. These they avoid, unless they are especially finely worked out. They have been able to give 14 of Shakespeare's plays, 15 of Shaw's, 7 or 8 of Galsworthy's and so on... One of the great difficulties was that if one was trying to do a thing that was not for commercial gain, people suspected that it would not be good.⁴⁵ (24/9/26)

Ashwell called on Rotarians' support so that the company could "use the theatre as a means of humanity and understanding between the different sections of the community and people in different parts of the land" (ibid). As in other areas, she appealed to club members to support the players, act as stewards while they were at Streatham, to join the Friends and to form ladies' committees to help. Rotarian S. Stephen thanked Ashwell saying, "it was his opinion that it was a striking disgrace that the arts were not encouraged by the Government" (ibid). It appeared Streatham would play an active role.

On 19 October 1926 Ashwell addressed the Streatham Hill Congregational Literary Society. She faced a full church hall and was introduced by the Reverend Rainton, who expressed his relief that the church no longer looked upon theatre going as a sin. Ashwell spoke on the educational power of the drama and the need for national recognition of theatre, declaring her rejection of commercial gain - "The moment you put commercialism first in any work of art, you kill it" (*Streatham News* 22/10/26). She asked why people went abroad "to finish their education... Because they could hear the great operas, and see the great plays in the national theatres at a price within the reach of everybody" (ibid). Expressing her fears about the unhealthy impact of American film, she stressed the need to counteract this through access to the country's great literature:

There are two things that are the modern curse – self and self-pity. Nobody believes in the power of the theatre. Nobody believes it is worth while taking an interest in Shakespeare... I would like to see plays brought so easily and simply before you that you would become accustomed to them... and... to know a bad play from a good one. (ibid)

In conclusion she urged the Literary Society to assist in furthering the aims of the Players.

⁴⁵This has continued to be an argument used against arts subsidy - if it has to be supported by public money it can't be good enough to survive in the marketplace.

Streatham had a number of active local amateur groups, including the New Streatham Players, an Operatic Society, the Streatham Shakespeare Players and the Phoenix Musical and Dramatic Society. As was usual practice, the local paper gave lengthier and more detailed reviews of their productions than it gave to the Players. Although the Players' seasonal *The Toy maker of Nuremberg* attracted a large audience in early January 1927, overall audiences were not sufficient, despite critical acclaim. At the end of January Gibson spoke to the audience and the *Streatham News* proclaimed, "Losing Money. Lena Ashwell Co. & Streatham. Expect to Lose More... the drama is probably in the worst position it has been for years. The English speaking public have lost their appreciation of real drama" (4/2/27). Gibson observed that the early full houses at Streatham included many Rotarians, but audiences had not been uniformly good and the company had lost "£450 in Streatham, and shall probably lose another £400 before the end of the season. We may lose £400 next year, and after that perhaps we shall pay our way" (ibid). However, local enthusiasm encouraged them to go on and for such a venue, time was allowed for audiences to build.

On the same page as a review for the Streatham Players' production of Shakespeare's *Henry IV (Part One)*, the *Streatham News* announced that the Players, in an effort to dispel the sense that they were 'highbrow', were considering a reduction in seat prices for Streatham (11/3/27). It would appear that prices were not reduced at this time, given that display advertisements in the *News*⁴⁶ continue to list the prices as 3/6, 2/4 (reserved) and 1/2 (unreserved) as advertised for the first performance in September 1926. However, the number of tickets at the highest price may have been reduced, making it possible to have more seats at the middle or unreserved price. It is significant that the Players did not raise their prices over the ten years, despite rising costs in all other areas. Given Streatham's strong amateur activity, there may well have been some inverted snobbery about the professional status of the Players, which meant the highbrow label was attached to them, but not to the amateur groups when they performed Shakespeare or dramatic pieces. One can only guess at the frustration experienced by Gibson and Ashwell at such alleged 'excuses' for audiences staying away.

For the spring season between January and March 1929, reviews were brief, but positive and audiences generally numerous. The *Streatham News*' last review was on 15 March 1929, and there appears to have been no comment on the company's demise later in the year. Streatham lost money for most of the time the Players included it on their itinerary, and the commitment in the area was limited, partly perhaps because of competing amateur theatre and musical activities. It was not in the front line of venues for the Players but it is likely to have been a relatively well informed audience and Ashwell must have been disappointed the Players did not make a greater impact there.

⁴⁶For example, there was a display advertisement for *French Leave* on 13 January 1928.

Performances in the Town Hall, **FULHAM**, in London's south-west, were an early experiment for one season, on Monday evenings between 18 October 1920 and 4 April 1921. The Hall was managed by the Establishment Committee of the Council of the Metropolitan Borough of Fulham. It began well, if somewhat ponderously. The Committee gave "careful consideration for some time" to Ashwell's proposal for weekly performances and finally agreed to grant dates for the period October 1920 to March 1921 on the following conditions.

We feel that the Council should cooperate with Miss Ashwell by granting the use of the large Hall on one evening per week subject to a proper proportion of the accruing profits being given to the Council, should the undertaking prove a financial success, in payment for the hire of the hall and other expenses, and to a statement of expenses and receipts being presented at the expiration of the performances. The Council would also help by authorising a distribution of literature from the Libraries and by advertising the enterprise by means of posters in the Borough, as the success of the venture will entirely depend upon the support of the public. In the event of a financial loss the only question for the Council to consider would be that of foregoing any charge for the use of the hall. (Minutes 21/7/20)

In Fulham, Miss Gilliat, the Chairman of the Public Health Committee advised Ashwell at the first performance, of *Mrs Gorrings Necklace*, on 18 October 1920, that she had set aside the Lady Councillors' Retiring room "as a temporary nursery where children could be left and attended to by nurses while their mothers were enjoying the play" (*Fulham Chronicle* 22/10/20). However, despite consistently full houses⁴⁷, there was tension between political parties in the Council and the borough, and early on Ashwell must have sensed the Fulham project was doomed by this rather than any inadequacies on the part of the Players. The crèche was an unusual and significant initiative on behalf of women, but this was scorned as a Labour Party indulgence in the *Fulham Chronicle's* editorial on the same date.

It is agreed that the municipal play... on Monday was capital, but the real delight of the evening was seen and felt in the arrangements made for the dear little babies. Mothers going to plays and meetings at Fulham Town Hall may now deposit their sucklings in a splendid apartment specially set aside for their reception. Qualified nurses are engaged to take charge of them and each tiny visitor must have a little crib quite as flowery in its way as, for instance, a speech by Mr Councillor O'Brien. The Ratepayers, of course, will be delighted to learn that the ...nicely uniformed nurses ...will be handsomely remunerated for their services. Everybody agrees that the theatre and music hall managers who offer free accommodation for bikes are easily out done by our Labour Council's provision for every ducky deary cockaleory suchitfitsy father was a socialist popsywopsy.

The company's last performance was Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* on 4 April 1921, after which, the *Fulham Chronicle* reported, Ashwell had "advocated the direction of amusements by the municipal authority of the Borough. She and her friends had some hard work to do but there was real food

⁴⁷"The large hall was packed from end to end and from floor to gallery and many spectators had to sit on the radiators around the hall" (*Fulham Chronicle* 22/10/20). *Twelfth Night* "was a great treat to the senior scholars of the schools... present in large numbers. Unfortunately, a large number of people, who did not... book their seats, had to be turned away" (*Fulham Chronicle* 21/1/21).

in the theatre and it should be enjoyed further” (8/4/21). Perhaps Ashwell’s advocacy of Council involvement in local entertainment annoyed non-supportive Councillors, who, on 21 June 1921, voted 17 to 12 against continuation of the company’s visits. From the minutes there seems to have been very little debate and no further record that Ashwell questioned the decision or offered an alternative arrangement regarding hall rental, presumably deciding it was a lost cause.

The Players never again performed in Fulham. Perhaps those who voted against the company were aware of trouble brewing, as reported by the *Era* in September.

The Government Auditor is manifesting no sympathy with municipal drama. He has queried the Shakespearean performances arranged by the London County Council, on the ground that the rates ought not to be devoted to such a purpose. Reporting on the accounts of the Fulham Borough Council, the Auditor states that he took exception to costs incurred in lighting and heating the town hall for entertainments given by Miss Lena Ashwell and her party. No charge was made to cover expenses, but the Council was to receive a payment if any profit were made. In the result the Council was out of pocket, not only by the loss of hall-letting fees, but by actual costs of lighting and heating the hall. The Council had no legal authority to incur any expenditure for the purpose in question; but for this occasion he had allowed the expenditure to be put forward under the Local Authorities (Expenses) Act, and given sanction to charge it to the rate fund. (21/9/21)

This unhelpful approach no doubt made Ashwell despair of ever achieving a municipal theatre .

HOUNSLOW, in Middlesex, west of London and close to what is now Heathrow Airport, was visited on Thursdays between 1 October 1925 and 11 April 1929. The venue was the Holy Trinity Church Hall, presumably rented from the church authorities, but no details on the hire arrangements were found. Advertisements in the *Middlesex Chronicle*, the main source of information for this venue, listed the company’s higher range of seat prices, indicating a more affluent community, with tickets bookable through a local store. First notice of “this talented party of theatricals under the direction of the famous actress” performing in Hounslow, was given on 19 September 1925. Despite the early establishment of a Friends’ group and good reviews, audiences took time to build and at the beginning of the second season, Gibson was compelled to appeal for greater support, linking £500 of the £1600 deficit to Hounslow and advising that they could not continue if the situation was repeated in the current year. He was planning to issue free tickets for the following week with the aim of getting people to experience the Players and become regular attendees. He cited Battersea, “where they packed a house twice as large as this with a working-class population week after week” (*Middlesex Chronicle* 16/10/26).

Audience numbers did not improve. Neither *Trilby* in December nor Pinero’s *The Magistrate* in January 1927 attracted reasonable houses (*Middlesex Chronicle* 29/1/27). Inclement weather was a deterrent in Hounslow, commented on by the *Middlesex Chronicle* when occasion warranted.

Figure 43: Spring programme 1927, the Lena Ashwell Players at the Century Theatre and the Northern Polytechnic, Holloway. (Author's collection)

The Players were praised consistently for their adaptability, in the light of restricted space and limited technical facilities, for example in Hounslow when *The Ware Case*, involving a scene in the Central Criminal Court, was presented in early March 1927. “Many producers would have thought twice before attempting such a scene at the Trinity Hall. It was... made fairly realistic by the Players adapting themselves to the circumstances, and, as the entire work depends on this scene, it made the play a complete success (*Middlesex Chronicle* 5/3/27). The comic talents of the company were also generally praised, but reviewer inexperience often worked against the company’s professional status and image. Statements, such as “Miss Bacon knew her part from beginning to end” (*Middlesex Chronicle* 28/1/28), were left over from reviewing amateur productions, and the plea for larger audiences, including the inevitable observation that without more support, the company will not be able to continue at Hounslow, were self defeating when followed by: “It is not widely realised what a high standard these performances reach. They are carried out by trained actors and actresses, who are serving a kind of apprenticeship in the profession; and are distinctly far in advance of the average amateur dramatic society efforts” (ibid). This statement highlights another problem: it is likely many people would have assumed that any company not ‘transferring’ from a West End theatre with the appropriate flourish, was amateur, especially given their regular performances in the district and the attempt to develop a genuine local association. It was a situation Ashwell never resolved, although she did ‘push’ the Century Theatre as their professional base. The use of the word Players, frequently attached to the title of amateur performing groups, may also have influenced perceptions of the company’s status.

Local critics were also quick to make (often correct) assumptions about their constituents - “Drama [Klein’s *The Third Degree*] evidently does not appeal to the Hounslow playgoers”, declared the *Chronicle* (10/11/28). This is probably the simplest and most obvious reason for the deficit in Hounslow – it was a conservative area and the theatre was sought as entertainment first and foremost. Needless to say, for *Rookery Nook* the following week, the numbers rose again. There was further disappointment for the company in early 1929, when Barrie’s *A Kiss for Cinderella* failed to attract a reasonable audience.

EALING, in London’s West, is not far from **HANWELL** where the company gave its first performances in 1919. Very little information was found on the Hanwell performances. Ashwell, when listing the Players’ itinerary in *Myself a Player* indicates that they played a “small hall at Hanwell” (p.283) during the 1919-20 season. The *Era*, under the heading ‘Ashwell Repertory Company at Hanwell’, described a successful season at the Park Theatre there, with Church leading the company in *Diana of Dobson’s* (5/5/20). A search of local newspapers revealed no further notice of the company’s presence. There is more information on Ealing, which was included on the Players’ itinerary between October 1922 and March 1925. For the first season they played the Longfield Hall on Monday evenings, switching to Thursdays in 1924. The Hall was managed by the Baths’ Committee of Ealing Borough Council, with whom negotiations began early in 1922. The Council’s Hall hire conditions included a deposit fee of

£1/1/- against rental of £3/3/-, with additional charges for extra chairs required above the four hundred provided for in the initial agreement and for erecting additional platforms or the full sized stage with footlights (Minutes 29/4/21).⁴⁸ The Hall was the swimming pool (covered over for the winter months), and therefore not available between early April and the end of summer. There was already a regular winter programme in place which included two nights a week for whist drives, one night for badminton and fortnightly Wednesday evening dances, for which the Council made application for the appropriate Music and Dancing Licence legally required. The Players' relationship with Ealing was never an easy one, and as well as the lack of local newspaper coverage, it would appear there was insufficient Council support to make regular visits viable. The Council expected the company to apply for and pay for the necessary Dramatic Licence from the County Licensing Committee (Minutes 31/3/22). Although initially the Council undertook the work to bring the venue in line with the licence requirements (Minutes 14/7/22), they were reluctant to pursue this path when further requirements were indicated (Minutes June 1923). Agreement was reached, however, for the Players to attach a large notice board, for promotional purposes, to the railings at the entrance to the Baths (Minutes 28/9/23), but when the Players asked to move this from the side street to the main road at the front of the Town Hall, this was rejected (Minutes 25/4/24). Ealing was one of the few Councils that charged the Players for dates booked but not used, even when advance notice was given of their change of plans (Minutes 28/12/23). It appears that Ashwell wisely decided to pull out of Ealing before losing too much money.

OUTER LONDON, HOME COUNTIES

Ashwell did not confine her activities to London and identified areas in the Home Counties, close enough to London to avoid touring costs, where she could set up weekly visits. These included the Public Hall at **SUTTON, Surrey**, south of London, where initially the Players performed on Friday evenings between October 1922 and April 1924, and thereafter on Mondays, until April 1929. The Hall was managed by the General Purposes Committee of Sutton (Surrey) Urban District Council. Negotiations began prior to the Council's meeting 26 June 1922, at which it was agreed to hire the Hall to the Players at a charge of £4/4/- per evening. Even as a concession rate, this was a higher rental than other places, but it was a more affluent area, and ticket prices reflected this. A condition of the concession rate, that "the hirer will give way for a better let, on good notice,"⁴⁹ meant some uncertainty for the Players and occasional changes to their performance dates. The company was locked into a schedule which was difficult to change and a lost booking meant lost income, although this was not taken into account by Council officers. At the same meeting it was agreed to purchase a suitable second hand piano for the Hall, to be hired out at 10/6 per evening.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ealing Borough Council, Baths' Committee Minute Book No.3, 28 September 1917 to 10 July 1925.

⁴⁹Minutes and reports of meetings are available in the Sutton Library Local History department. The minutes referred to are from committee meetings. These minutes were later presented to Council.

⁵⁰This fee was reduced to 10/- following the Players' complaint about the quality of the piano (Minutes November 1924).

In general, Sutton was supportive of the Players – 100 extra chairs were placed in the Gallery to increase seating capacity; Ashwell was given the facility to “discontinue the series on giving four weeks notice if she ...cannot make the affair pay”(Minutes 10/9/23), and advertising boards outside the Hall were also approved. Sutton soon became a well established, if “most conservative locality” (*Advertiser* 30/9/26), for the Players, although it was some time before the *Advertiser* gave regular notices of productions. In the autumn of 1923 significant events included two well attended performances of *The Taming of the Shrew* on Friday evening 12 October, followed by a matinee the next day for young people. Promotion and ticket sales were helped by the principal of the Sutton School of Music, Art and Dancing, Miss Edith James, “ever on the look out for occasions to promote the artistic education of the younger generation in the district” (*Surrey County Herald* 19/10/23). This established a pattern for future Shakespearean productions in Sutton, where matinees were given for students on Saturdays, or when the company changed to Monday evening visits, to matinees in the Hall on the same day. On 14 December 1923, Ashwell addressed the Sutton Rotary Club, who cultivated a general interest in the drama, with guest speakers from the Players and other theatre personalities. The Sutton Women’s Local Government and Citizen Association invited theatre critic Percy Allen to speak on the Modern Drama on a number of occasions (*Advertiser* 4/2/26). The Players’ Friends group in Sutton was active and the *Advertiser* regularly reported capacity houses in the six hundred seater Hall. Shakespeare was popular with this audience, who also welcomed the challenge of new plays such as *The Celluloid Cat*, performed in late March 1924. The authorship of the play was still ‘anonymous’, but Sutton was not easily fooled. The *Advertiser* thought the play was “one of the best... original in its conception” (27/3/24), and

the work of two authors who have decided to remain anonymous until the public have had an opportunity of expressing an opinion on their work. All kinds of surmises have been made and the general opinion seems to be that the authors are well known to patrons of these plays and that they had a great deal to do with the presentation of their work. (ibid)

On occasion, the weather presented major problems for the company. There was never much time to get to the venue after rehearsals all day and fog and snow were considerable hazards in the winter. The *Advertiser* reported over an hour’s delay to the start of the performance of Jerome K. Jerome’s farce, *Cook*, on 12 January 1925, when company members, travelling by train, were delayed by heavy fog. The musicians (the pianist having arrived without music) were called into service “to eke out the time” and the Friends’ Chairman made a speech until the performance could finally begin (15/1/25).

On a number of occasions Ashwell and Gibson addressed the Sutton audience, as they did elsewhere, after performances or through publicly convened meetings, to encourage greater support. The finances of the company were clearly explained and those attending were advised that unless such an area could cover its expenses, Sutton would not remain on the itinerary (*Advertiser* 25/3/26). Ashwell advised, with characteristic frankness, that

a set of curtains ...cost them 30 pounds and they could not make their platforms look as nice as they could wish. Last year they lost 1200 pounds and this year their loss was about 1000 pounds. They generally made a little profit on their summer tour which went towards reducing the loss of the winter. The members of the company were all professionals... they rehearsed every day from eleven till five and then went to one of the towns on the list, reaching home late at night. They worked very hard and were not well paid. They tried to do all sorts of plays and to select the best of each kind... The Players tried to make people see that sin had its punishment, that if they were not brave or strong enough to overcome temptation there was that great law which made them realise that they must pay the price... The mission of the theatre was to make people see what life was at different angles... They were finishing their eighth season –and she hated being beaten. She wanted to give to the people something that was real and true; that would raise them instead of debasing them.

(Advertiser 31/3/27)

Her audience was told the company needed a guarantee of at least £25 a night in subscriptions from Sutton, given that the expenses were £30 (ibid). However, later that year, the deficit stood at £3000 and a good week was not able to redress the balance of a bad one. The company sought to treat their audience members as friends and familiars and there was never any attempt to hide problems – Ashwell wanted the community to take responsibility for the municipal theatre idea, considering that if they were kept informed, they could put pressure on their local councillors and play an active and informed role in furthering the arguments for support. She was not averse to using emotive language, declaring in November 1927 that she “had come to the bitter end ...because it was not fair to struggle on with all the labour and anxiety if people did not want them to succeed” (Advertiser 10/11/27). The Sutton Friends worked hard, hand delivering promotional material and ensuring relative success in Sutton until the company’s closure.

STAINES, further west out of London past Hounslow, was included in the itinerary for Saturday nights following the formation of the third company, the other two companies performing the same evening at Watford and the Century Theatre. Ashwell indicates in *Myself a Player* (p.283-4, see Appendix Four) that the Staines dates began in the autumn of 1925. Unfortunately no evidence was found of their visits prior to January 1927, but there is no reason to doubt Ashwell’s schedule for this venue. The Players performed at the Town Hall, managed by the Staines Urban District Council Town Hall Committee. No minutes were available although the outcome of some meetings was reported in the local paper, the *West Middlesex Times*, *Staines Advertiser*, *Egham Courier* and *Feltham Observer*, later shortened to the *West Middlesex Times*. This local paper was presumably an amalgamation of previous individual titles but no copies or reports on the Players were found before the *West Middlesex Times*’ display advertisement, on 8 January 1927, for the same evening’s performance of *The Toymaker of Nuremberg*. The *West Middlesex Times* included advertisements and brief news items on forthcoming plays taken from the Players’ press releases. Reviews imply a large, established and responsive audience who appreciated the Players’ presence in the district.

In keeping with the company's habit of working with the local community, the Players collaborated with the Staines Brotherhood to promote their work. The Brotherhood, with a membership of over 400, supported its own orchestra, ran a Talents Scheme and encouraged members to raise funds through trade, as well as helping the ill and disadvantaged through a Benevolent Committee, a Christmas Table Collection and a Homes' Investment Society with an affiliation to the Abbey Road Building Society (*West Middlesex Times* 14/10/27). Gibson was a guest speaker at its meeting on 16 October 1927, speaking of what he saw as a general discontent in society (*West Middlesex Times* 21/10/27). He implied that the ideals of the Players would help alleviate this attitude.

On 25 November 1927, the *Times* carried an advertisement for a special fund raising concert, on 30 November at the Town Hall, in aid of the Players and featuring singer Carrie Tubb and 'various artistes'. Tickets were priced at 5/-, 3/- and 2/-. Unfortunately there was no account of this event, which was no doubt repeated in other venues to the same purpose. By the autumn of 1928, Staines had a new local paper, the *Staines and Egham News*, which took over the role of announcing, through advertisements and quoting from press releases, the Players' visits. However, from the opening of the last season, with *Tons of Money*, on 29 September 1928, the *News* did not review any productions, so it has not been possible to ascertain audience response in the last six months of the company's visits to Staines, which concluded on 13 April 1929. No newspaper reports were found announcing any personal appearances by Ashwell at Staines, nor is there any indication that a Friends' organisation was established there.

WATFORD, north of London, now virtually on the outskirts of Greater London, provided a quietly successful venue for the Players from their first Saturday night performance there at St John's Hall on 7 October 1922 (with Haddon Chambers' *Passers By*), and between early October and late April every year until April 1929. For Christmas productions, such as *The Child in Flanders*, and for some productions of Shakespeare's plays, the company gave matinee and evening performances in different Watford venues – St Michael's Hall for the matinee, and St John's (with a much smaller stage) for the evening, between which they had to dismantle and re-build the set. Ashwell tried out the Victoria Hall in nearby **HARROW** on Thursdays during the 1922-23 season and the Central Hall, **NORTHWOOD**, on Thursdays during 1923-24, but these were abandoned and it is likely audiences from these areas then travelled to Watford. The local newspaper, the *West Herts and Watford Observer* published advance details of performances and brief reviews, many of which noted full and enthusiastic houses. The audience catchment area was considerable – even in the 1920s many residents of Watford and surrounding towns would have commuted to London for work. A professional company visiting on Saturday evenings would have saved many theatregoers from having to travel to London for entertainment, especially as the Players' repertoire included many recent and current West End successes. Shaw's *Widowers' Houses* played to

one of the largest audiences they (LAP) have yet had. At their disposal was one backcloth, a door, some curtains... a few sticks of furniture, but they demonstrated the fallacy sometimes held that a play's success is dependent to a great extent upon its setting. *Widowers' Houses*, played by seven actors... proved to be the finest performance seen in the town for a long time. The delightful humour, the passionate outbursts, the satire at times bordering on cynicism, were all brought out with the greatest effect. As Blanche Sartorius... Church was ...outstanding. (West Herts & Watford Observer 25/11/22)

When Shaw's *Fanny's First Play*, directed by Church, was performed a month later, there was standing room only (West Herts & Watford Observer 23/12/22). The popularity of Shaw's plays in Watford may have been in part due to his being a nearby resident at Ayot St Lawrence, and he attended performances, in the company of Ashwell, on several occasions. When the Players performed his comedy, *You Never Can Tell*, "a queue of about thirty yards in length waited a quarter of an hour without moving, vainly hoping to obtain entrance... the building was packed, and dozens of people were turned away" (West Herts & Watford Observer 20/10/23).

The Watford reviews give brief insights into aspects of the company's productions not often mentioned elsewhere – for example, when reviewing *The Marriage of Kitty* by Cosmo Gordon-Lennox, the *West Herts & Watford Observer* noted that "the makeup of the [presumably exotic] Peruvian widow, Madame de Semiano (Miss Helen Ferrars) was splendid, and her acting strong" (2/12/22). For Ashwell's production of Stephen Phillips' *Paolo and Francesca*, the costumes, representative of the late 18th Century, were designed by Ashwell's sister, Ethel Pocock, and that Kate Coates had arranged special music from the period (West Herts & Watford Observer 9/12/22).

On Thursday 10 December 1925, Gibson addressed the Watford Rotary Club on *Recreation for the People*. He declared that "the character of a nation made its prosperity; prosperity did not make character. When it came to character the way a man spent his leisure hours was important" (West Herts & Watford Observer 12/12/25). Gibson covered various leisure activities including outdoor sports, dancing and cinema; expressing concern that there were not many good films true to life in England. While cinema going was popular, it needed to be supplemented by the provision of drama in its three dimensional form in municipal theatres. He argued that well presented, affordable, drama was uplifting; the presentation of this being dependent on cooperation with local authorities and supported by such organisations as Rotary. He praised Rotary for its role in helping companies such as "the Bristol Repertory Theatre, where they saved the situation, at Liverpool, Hull and Birmingham, as well as the support to the Lena Ashwell Players at York and Bath" (ibid).

However, the demise of the company, which gave its last performance in Watford on 6 April 1929, brought no comment or lament in the local paper and consistent with most other venues, no apparent appeal for support or attempt to revive it. From this response it must be assumed that Ashwell made it clear she could not continue, even if the financial resources were found. Except for Ashwell's own

perception that it was a failed enterprise, as she states in *Myself a Player*, there remains a question mark over why there was no effort made by the Friends organisations or the Drama League to fight for the Players' continuation.

ILFORD Town Hall, Essex, managed by the Ilford Urban District Council, was an immediate and on going success for the Players. It was far enough out of the centre of London in an easterly direction to make regular performances popular with the local audiences and residents of nearby suburbs. The weekly *Ilford Recorder* responded positively to the company, which it identified as a "well-known and powerful dramatic company" (5/10/23). A large audience attended the first performance, of *You Never Can Tell*, on 2 October 1923, and the company made regular visits on Tuesday evenings between late September and late March/mid April each year until April 1929. Ticket prices, presumably because of the size and layout of the venue, covered the full range between 8d. and 3/6, and could be purchased in advance at Rockleys Music Saloon in the High Road. Monthly and season tickets were also available (*Recorder* 28/9/23).

To introduce the company to Ilford, the *Recorder* published Ashwell's article, *A People's Theatre*.

England is... slowest perhaps in getting rid of ideas which are deeply embedded in the race mind. We all inherit an idea that enjoyment and work are poles apart; that education – the unfolding of our latent powers – must be painful, and that recreation must automatically be useless. Our Puritan forbears saw to that. Other nations – France, Germany, Russia – long ago realised that in recreation there was a ...happy way of increasing one's powers and knowledge.
(19/10/23)

She described the People's Theatre Movement in Germany, where theatre buildings provided facilities for ordinary workers to have access to their own dramatic literature as well as Shakespeare, Shaw, Moliere and others. She asked why similar initiatives were not being taken in England "to procure recreation which... [is] really amusing and sometimes exciting? Why not use our own wonderful literature for the theatre? It is a matter of cooperation, like most other things" (ibid). She wanted the inhabitants of districts to be able to say, on a weekly basis, "tonight, I know that I shall find a play in my town hall.' Whist drives and dances give way one night to the exercise of the imagination" (ibid). She wanted workers to have the same advantages they had won in other countries, becoming so interested

that the People's Theatres will be as plentiful as public libraries. Our ideas are not entirely selfish, though of course, we all admit that we would sooner live by our own art than exist in other capacities. We believe that we can be useful to the community, more useful than the doctor of the body, because we bring health and happiness to the mind. We believe that all the arts of life are a necessity, because man needs beauty as much as beef. (ibid)

She concluded with "the plays are all selected from the finest works in our dramatic literature, the scenery is scanty, and the chairs are hard, but, after all, 'the play is the thing', isn't it?" (ibid).

Summing up the company's first four visits, the *Recorder* was astonished to observe "the all-round excellence of each member of the company, succeeding plays disclosing other sides of the actor's capacity and revealing the completing artist" (26/10/23). Ashwell addressed the audience after the fourth performance, of *Milestones* on 23 October, advising them that it was not possible (due to cost) to advertise publicly in the daily press, although the *Recorder* carried the occasional small advertisement for some performances, and announced the next play whenever it reviewed one. The paper did have a weekly *What's On* listings which included the Players' dates, play and author. She urged them "to make known what was being done in Ilford weekly, in providing a West End entertainment of the legitimate drama at picture house prices" (ibid).

On 14 December 1923, 'David Garrick' wrote to the *Recorder*, thanking the local Council for its role in facilitating the visits and suggesting school holiday matinees. Company member, Harvey Graham, responded, acknowledging "the increased leisure which modern social reform has given them [young people]" (*Recorder* 4/1/24). He advised that a reception was planned for 22 January, to establish a branch of the Friends in Ilford, and that a matinee of *The Beggar Prince* would be given on Tuesday January 8, to be followed by an evening performance of the same play.

Ilford was no suburban cultural backwater. In his article, *Aspects of Modern Drama*, V.T. Knowles described the success of the Ilford Workers' Educational Association Modern Drama course which was mostly attended by women (*Recorder* 21/12/23). The class discussed plays by Barrie, Galsworthy, Shaw and others, looking at the writer's technique and impact on the reader. This was the cooperation Ashwell sought and there can be no doubt the course participants attended and discussed the Players' performances. A few months later, without mentioning Ashwell's work, S.P.B Mais, editor of the *Daily Graphic* and novelist, lectured on the *Modern Drama* for the Goodmayes Congregational Church Literary Society. Echoing Ashwell in considering that commercialism had a paralysing impact on art, including writers and audiences, he concluded that "the cure lay solely with the public, who, by their refusal to be misled by the insincere recommendations of the dramatic critics, can make a really live drama" (*Recorder* 8/2/24). He thought that while the public

remains inarticulate and acquiescent, there can be no hope of improvement. By the encouragement of organisations like the Repertory Players, the Old Vic experiments, and an emphasis upon the quality of the author and the matter of the play, the work of regeneration and purification of the English stage will be accomplished. (ibid)

Ashwell, no doubt, was frustrated that her company was not mentioned. However, in the same edition, 'David Garrick', the *Recorder* theatre reviewer at this time, urged people to join the Friends, sure that such cooperation between the local community and the company could help the establishment of a municipal theatre. He praised highly the company's *Othello*⁵¹, directed by Ashwell, when "something of

⁵¹This production featured Duncan Yarrow as Othello and Philip Reeves as Iago.

the spirit of the Old Vic... pervaded the [large] audience” for an uncut version of the play lasting longer “than the two and a half hours beyond which the ordinary playgoer refuses to sit patiently... patience was not needed amidst the enthusiasm and wonder of [those] who saw this notable performance” (22/2/24).

Alongside an enthusiastic review of Shaw’s *Man and Superman*, ‘David Garrick’ reported on the Friends’ meeting, convened by Hilda Pocock, to elect officers and ask the Chairman of the Urban District Council to be president. Apparently Pocock was pleased with the response in Ilford and as long as audience numbers were sustained, the company would continue its visits (*Recorder* 7/3/24). At the end of the review of *Caste*, which was performed on 1 April 1924, another critic, ‘W.E.E.’, advised that the following week Ashwell’s production of *Diana of Dobson’s* would be performed at the nearby East Ham Town Hall, the Ilford Town Hall being unavailable. Fearing “the attendance may suffer” (*Recorder* 4/4/24), he urged special support from the Friends, especially as “this play is being given at the special request of Ilford members” (ibid). (No review of this performance was found.)

The *Recorder* published various articles around the debate on a municipal theatre in Ilford, no doubt fuelled to some extent by the presence of the Players. Bertram Bew, the Secretary of the amateur Mansfield House Players in nearby Canning Town wrote expressing what he felt was a general desire

on the part of suburban London for a theatre situated in a particular district at which plays of a sensible and intelligent type can be seen in comfort... If the population of Ilford is composed largely of the more intelligent class of men and women, which our experience leads us to believe, the means of bringing the drama under better conditions to the district are close at hand... The ideal of a Municipal Theatre seems to frighten... by its association with rates and public monies... [it] is only municipal so far as it aims at coordinating a municipality within its influence. (*Recorder* 16/5/24)

He went on to describe the work of his group and the facilities available, together with their plans to introduce a subscription season of high standard. He did not consider public money was needed to realise such a goal and advised he was happy to discuss this with anyone who wished to write to him. Ashwell was no doubt aware of this debate, quoted here to illustrate there were others as interested and committed as she was, but with varying points of view on such matters as the financing of such an enterprise.

Another letter, from ‘Civilian’, praised the Players and posed some leading questions on the Urban District Council’s degree of commitment

to promote healthy recreation during the winter months. During the summer we have our parks with facilities for cricket, tennis, bowls... in the winter, when we have fewer natural opportunities for recreation, the local authority does nothing... We have a Town Hall, but the Council looks upon it merely as a means of producing revenue instead of using it for the good of the community... An enterprising Council would, for approved productions, and on condition that seats were low priced, guarantee the promoters a certain revenue. If that be not possible, it could at least cut down the fee to permit a reasonable number of cheap seats, and I am sure a full house would result, and no loss be incurred. (*Recorder* 30/5/24)

These were Ashwell's arguments but it was only the beginning of working towards a change in attitude by local authorities, which occurred much later.

From April, 'Sheridan' was reviewing for the *Recorder* and in mid May noted that the fine weather was a deterrent to audiences as the company's season extended into the summer. The review of Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* concluded with an attempt to dispel the apparently prevalent idea that the plays were presented by a private club. "It is true they appeal... strongly to people who seek 'good stuff' for their entertainment, otherwise the movement is on a most catholic basis... their motto is 'The more the merrier'" (16/5/24). This suggests there was a need to encourage larger audiences and more support. However, the season this year was much longer than elsewhere, concluding on 3 June, by which time summer activities would have pre-occupied many members of the audience. In future years, the season concluded in Ilford by mid April.

During the next season there were enthusiastic reviews, particularly for *Macbeth*, directed by Beatrice Wilson, and for which some people could not obtain tickets (*Recorder* 17/10/24). 'Sheridan' considered the current support was an indication that a local theatre would be well patronised, especially as even the approaching general election and political meetings did not affect the audience numbers for *His Excellency the Governor* (*Recorder* 31/10/24). Wilson's production of *Hamlet* was warmly greeted, despite the punishing schedule for the company with a schools' matinee, under the auspices of the local Education Committee (the play was on the current school English Literature syllabus), followed by the evening performance on the same day (*Recorder* 5/12/24). In the new year, when Ashwell appeared in *The Ship*, the Town Hall "was crowded to its utmost capacity and nearly a hundred were unable to gain admission" (*Recorder* 9/1/25). Overall, 'Sheridan' was impressed with this new play and the production, which "provided much food for thought" (*ibid*).

In the advance notice for *King John* on 10 March 1925, the *Recorder* quoted playwright, Lennox Robinson, from an article in the *Observer*, in which he was critical of the otherwise acclaimed *Hamlet* of John Barrymore.⁵²

Perhaps I should not have chaffed so much against the prose of Mr Barrymore's *Hamlet* if a week before I had not been listening to a performance of *The Winter's Tale*, which was played first and foremost for its poetry. In a dismal suburb on a cramped stage, the Lena Ashwell Players presented this lovely thing. It shone like a jewel in its poor setting, catching its chief fire from Miss Esme Church's Hermione. The play swept through like a lovely poem, like a piece of music heard in the distance on a summer's night.

⁵²Barrymore's *Hamlet* was performed in New York for a record-breaking 101 performances in 1922. He repeated this success in London in 1925 with Constance Collier and Fay Compton. (P. Hartnoll, ed., *Oxford Companion to Theatre*, OUP 1983, p.60).

When the Players promoted *King John*, the press release highlighted their reputation for excellence in Shakespearean productions, and referred to the play as “one of the most beautiful of the historical plays” (ibid). It was a play set for public examination and all those studying it were urged to “take the opportunity of seeing it. King John is not the hero of the piece, there is no hero; the play is dependent for its power and charm upon the beauty of the lines and the rapidity of the dramatic action” (ibid). After the performance, the reviewer considered those attending had been “a privileged audience... [for] a most brilliant piece of work” (*Recorder* 13/2/25).

The Tragedy of Nan, performed at the end of the season in March 1925, was written at Greenwich in 1907 and based on a century-old historical event in Kent. Masfield wrote it when “he was feeling acutely the horror of the miscarriage of justice, and partly because he saw in the story an opportunity of writing of every side of woman’s character” (*Recorder* 27/3/25). The Players considered it to be “one of the most moving tragedies that has been written in modern times, and is full of that power of exultation which characterises the true expression of earnest thought for serious things” (ibid). It was a successful role for Esme Church, who first played it with the company during a season in Oxford in 1923.⁵³

The autumn season in 1925 at Ilford began well with “a flawless performance of A.A. Milne’s clever comedy, *The Dover Road*” (*Recorder* 9/10/25). It was an entirely different company from that which opened the season the previous week, “a fact that serves to illustrate the increasing extent of Miss Ashwell’s work for great drama... If the Players go on at their present rate of progress, Ilford will have to build a theatre of its own” (ibid). This was followed by *The Tempest*, “without spectacular effect all concerned succeeded in creating that atmosphere of wonder and mystery so characteristic of Shakespeare’s time” (*Recorder* 30/10/25). *Recorder* readers were told that *The Tempest* company was in rehearsal for Barrie’s *What Every Woman Knows*, the latter requiring Scottish accents, with much conscientious practice and repetition taking place during and after rehearsals. “[It] is so infectious that the producer of *The Tempest* [Beatrice Wilson] has been trembling for fear her Shakespearean company would catch it” (ibid).

John Drayton, Millionaire, by H.M. Walbrook, announced for 17 November, was billed as ‘a new play by a new playwright’ (*Recorder* 13/11/25). The *Recorder* appeared to be quoting a Players’ press release when it advised that the recent average run for most new plays in the West End was about a month, “largely due to the fact that so many of them have been of the pseudo-clever, rather naughty type which some playwrights and managers seem to think is what the play-going public wants” (ibid). Ashwell obviously hoped this production would get longer exposure than a month. From the Lord Chamberlain’s collection of plays in the British Library, the version presented by the Players was licensed in 1925, so the letter from John Parker (published in the *Recorder* 20/11/25) is interesting.

⁵³No record of a performance has been found, but Masfield lived near Oxford and it may have been a private event.

I am sure my friend H.M. Walbrook will be amused... [by your] heading... *John Drayton* was written by Walbrook in 1904 and was produced at the Theatre Royal, Dover, on 25 June 1906, so that it cannot truthfully be called a new play... Mr Walbrook has also written *The Touch of Truth*... Haymarket... 1911; [and] *The Jug of Wine* 1911... In any event, it is not fair to call Mr Walbrook a new playwright.

Between Christmas and New Year, *Lady Patricia*, by Rudolf Besier, was performed, but there were many empty seats, the *Recorder* exclaiming that “long queues and packed houses have become so familiar that the sight of several empty rows is something to wonder at” (1/1/26). It appears that Ashwell, to encourage support, made personal appearances in the early part of the year when it was coldest and least tempting to go out. She spoke to the audience during an interval of Galsworthy’s *The Silver Box* on 5 January 1926, declaring progress was “largely due to the great support we get in Ilford. We have here the greatest number of Friends of the Players. It is this little Association which is the backbone of our movement” (*Recorder* 8/1/26). She mentioned that there were now three companies on the road, visiting twelve boroughs in London each week as well as performing all week at the Century Theatre. The aim was to be self-supporting in all boroughs, “but until we can get twelve boroughs as intelligent as Ilford, we are not sure whether we shall be able to pay our way as we did last year or whether we shall have a little deficit in taking on these new centres” (ibid). She thanked her supporters, expressing hopes for a stronger future.

Given Ashwell’s background, music was always an important part of her productions and its effect was frequently commented upon. For example, the *Recorder* found that “the beautiful way in which Ariel’s delicate little songs were rendered, and the daintiness of the music... added so much charm and mystery to the play [*The Tempest*]” (30/10/25), and for *Peter’s Mother*, set during the period of the Boer War, “an interesting accompaniment to this bright piece was the playing of the old Boer War songs, such as *Bluebell*, *Goodbye Dolly Grey* and *Soldiers of the Queen*” (*Recorder* 26/2/26).

The 1926 autumn repertoire was a safe one, including *Trelawney of the Wells*, *Trilby*, Barrie’s very popular *The Little Minister* and the company’s first production of a G.K. Chesterton play, *Magic*. To help company finances, John Masefield gave a poetry reading, including the Sonnets he wrote for the Players, presented under the auspices of the Friends on 9 December 1926, with Ashwell in the ‘chair’ to introduce him. Announcing his visit and strong commitment to the Players, the *Recorder* quoted his foreword (19/11/26) to the publication of the Sonnets, in which he acknowledges Ashwell’s inspiration and determination. The *Recorder* editor added his comments to the planned visit, declaring that the Players had “come to look upon Ilford as their sheet anchor” (26/11/26), significantly arranging for Masefield to give his first public appearance in England, since his successful lecture tour in the United States, in Ilford. He hoped the residents would not be slow in returning the compliment and advised that given the educational and charitable nature of the event, entertainment tax had been waived by the government. There was no report found on this occasion in subsequent editions of the *Recorder*, but Masefield

repeated this exercise elsewhere in London at this time, not always accompanied by Ashwell, who was preparing Alfred Noyes' poetic piece, *Robin Hood*, which was performed in Ilford on 18 January 1927.

The production had a large cast, with only green hangings to suggest the glades of Sherwood Forest, "a very cramped forest at that" (*Recorder* 28/1/27), but was not without interest and was generally well received. The fact that this play was written in 1908 and not performed until 1926 implies its lack of impact as a likely commercial success. Ashwell's determination to explore the repertoire, giving audiences access to such pieces, is indicative of her policy and pursuit of the non-commercial. However, without subsidy and with a large cast, this type of play was the most likely to erode finances and by many would have been seen as foolhardy. Her preparedness to do the 'ground work' on the arguments for subsidy was admirable, as acknowledged by such public figures as Masfield.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this research has been the gaining of insight into the nature of playgoing in the 1920s. 'D.G.' wrote to the *Recorder* on 11 March 1927 with an altruistic *Lent Suggestion for Playgoers*. He noted that many of the audience were church members, who, "now that the season of Lent has begun, feel that they must forgo this pleasure [of theatregoing]", which could have unfortunate consequences for the Players at the box office.

A suggestion from Edmonton is worthy of adoption generally. Some of the Friends... take their usual ticket and give it to someone who would otherwise be unable to see a play. By so doing they support the players... [and] give pleasure to the people who occupy their seat and ensure the continuance of the company's presence in Ilford. (ibid)

Unfortunately there is no information on whether this suggestion was followed through. However, the *Recorder* had a substantial review of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, declaring that "the dramatic version... is decidedly not an entertainment for nervous people" (25/3/27). This was the third outcome of collaboration between Ashwell and her brother, none of which was published, nor became established in the repertoire, suggesting that they were prepared specifically for the company and not considered significant enough to merit publication.⁵⁴ Alongside many other plays published at this time by French's they stand up well, but may not have stood the test of time any more than many of the French's titles.

H.P.J. Marshall was the new theatre critic for the *Recorder*, announcing the autumn 1927 season and looking forward to plays selected with audience suggestions taken into account. He was heartened by the large audience for the first production, of Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound*, on 21 September, seeing this as greater encouragement and inspiration to the actors than any amount of writing and talking about the company ideals (30/9/27). At the end of his review for *Mrs Dot*, he noted that centres such as Camberwell, Holloway, Hounslow and Streatham, "were losing the Players money and asked, "If you

⁵⁴There is the possibility that the co-authors did not seek publication, but given their prolific output as authors (Ashwell, four books, Pocock, at least seven novels and autobiographical accounts), this seems unlikely.

have any friends in those districts, write and tell them of the ‘good stuff’ they are missing. They will thank you afterwards” (7/10/27).

The tune changed slightly with the review of *Mr Preedy and the Countess* – a very slight play salvaged only by the quality of the performances:

I believe that this year in choosing the programme the Players have been guided by majority suggestions from the audience... if the last three plays [light comedies] ...are due to this influence, perhaps it be better to leave the choosing to say, Miss Ashwell herself. If the public are to be educated to a higher dramatic taste... surely it is more fitting for the educators to choose the syllabus?
(21/10/27)

It has not been possible to ascertain how far ahead Ashwell planned the repertoire for each season. By mid September each year the company had announced the plays for the following three to four months, adding to the list in December with the January to April programme. On average, one new production was prepared each week. Her knowledge, and that of her other directors, of the repertoire in relation to its suitability for audiences and the company’s resources, was considerable. With a pool of some ten to fifteen directors, it is likely they put in bids for the plays they wanted and these were programmed to alternate drama, comedy, farce, classics and new plays, as well as to mark seasonal activities.

Ashwell always tried to cater for the differing expectations of her diverse audience, and for the international celebrations in 1927 marking the centenary of Ibsen’s birth, the Players presented a very early work, *Lady Inger of Ostraat*.⁵⁵ Marshall thought for those not familiar with the play, it was “terribly involved” (*Recorder* 28/10/27), particularly in relation to mistaken identities and the many asides, but it was given with dramatic power by the cast with Esme Church in the title role. As the winter approached, however, Ashwell always found the elements could work against her. Town halls and converted swimming baths were not known for their warmth in the depths of winter and programmes had to be planned to entice audiences from their firesides. Fog was a particular hazard in London at this time, making journeys difficult, and in some cases it permeated public buildings, reducing visibility indoors as well as outside.

In early 1928 Marshall had various niggles he felt compelled to air. These included the omission of the final stanza of the Prologue, and the Epilogue in its entirety, from the performance of Drinkwater’s drama, *Abraham Lincoln* (*Recorder* 27/1/28). Then there was the unfulfilled promise of “some wonderful scenery, in place of the usual curtains” (3/2/28) for the second act of Barrie’s *The Professor’s Love Story* and the question as to Friends’ activities. “One pays a subscription, receives a little Lap every now and then, but that is all. Surely that is not the sole raison d’être of the society?” (10/2/28). Overall, however,

⁵⁵The Players’ press release quoted the late critic William Archer’s preface to his translation of this play, presumably the version the company used, in which he stated, “In *Lady Inger* I see a figure of truly tragic grandeur” (*Middlesex Chronicle* 22/10/27).

he considered the plays announced for February and March 1928 to be “more interesting than those on the last programme”⁵⁶ (10/2/28).

On 30 March 1928, in the *Recorder*, John Parker revived the debate about establishing a ‘civic’ theatre in Ilford, given the town’s lack of intelligent theatre, except for the Players. The secretary of Ilford Art Society, Samuel Hancock, wrote in support of this, saying the Ilford branch of the Friends had worked hard to advertise and support the performances, but “the time is now ripe when this organisation should consider and decide on action to be taken, as propagating the idea of a municipal theatre was the main purpose for which they were founded” (*Recorder* 6/4/28). This was not a correct interpretation of the Friends’ role and a daunting proposal for a voluntary organisation. He called for other readers’ views on the subject but no further response was found in the *Recorder*. Meanwhile, the Friends organised a special fund raising poetry evening, introduced by Ashwell and given by Alfred Noyes, better known as a poet than playwright, save for his play, *Robin Hood*, presented the previous year.

Anticipating the Players’ return in September 1928, the *Recorder* noted that while the audience was full of familiar faces, the company was minus “a few of their favourites of old... Esme Church will probably be missed most of all... At the same time one rejoices in the success she has won at the Old Vic⁵⁷” (21/9/28). The opening production was the “now celebrated farce of *Tons Of Money*... although for some years farce has been rather out of fashion... the brilliant work of Tom Walls and Ralph Lynne⁵⁸ at the Aldwych Theatre has started a new vogue” (ibid). “The hall was packed” (*Recorder* 28/9/28), for this comedy and the cast received an enthusiastic welcome. When audiences were asked what plays they would like in the autumn season, “most people want to see the recent successes of the West End, especially comedies, but a great many asked for costume comedies” (*Recorder* 5/10/28). In response to this, the Players included *The Adventure of Lady Ursula*,⁵⁹ *Magda* (written 1895) and the evergreen *She Stoops to Conquer*, with which the Players had success in 1922, 1923 and 1928. Ben Travers’ *Rookery Nook*, another ‘Aldwych farce’, followed and there were the powerful post-war plays *The Pelican* by F.Tennyson Jesse and H.M Harwood and Maltby’s *What Might Happen*.

Esme Church’s departure from the Players was obviously to pursue wider opportunities, including a long and distinguished career with the Old Vic and many other companies. Aged thirty-five in 1928, and having joined Ashwell in 1916, she had been loyal and long serving. Although there were no public signs until the spring of 1929, as a director of the Players, she would have been aware of Ashwell’s intentions. By this time Ashwell had probably made the decision that, unless more money and support was

⁵⁶This programme had included *The Case of Rebellious Susan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* and *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*.

⁵⁷At this time in 1928 Church was playing the lead in Ibsen’s *The Vikings of Helgeland*.

⁵⁸Tom Walls and Ralph Lynne were the actors who made a great success of *Tons Of Money*, and who continued at the Aldwych Theatre with Robertson Hare and Mary Brough in a succession of so-called ‘Aldwych farces’ written by Ben Travers, which ended in 1933 (*Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, op.cit. p.16).

forthcoming by mid 1929, the company would close. It would not be true to say her departure influenced the decision to close the company but some audience members would have chosen to stay away when she was not appearing. Her role as leading lady was taken over by Nell Compton for the last six months of the Players' existence. It is clear that the first half of 1929 was the testing time for Ashwell: she set about creating The Civic Theatres Limited – a National Council with herself as President, established to put the Players on a stronger footing, and possibly eligible for certain funds and government concessions. This was announced in late February (*Recorder* 1/3/29). Ashwell wrote a letter, published 8 March 1929, giving details of the Council members and appealing for Ilford residents to rally support for the last few weeks of the season. Presumably it was too late for the Council to help matters sufficiently to stop the closure of the company six months later.

On 19 February 1929 Ashwell addressed the Ilford audience during the interval of Pinero's *The Schoolmistress*. She declared the year so far to have been very difficult for everyone, including as it did the King's illness, influenza epidemic⁶⁰ and the past two months of intensely cold weather. The company itself was experiencing problems with illness and actress Mabel Reece, standing in for someone else, had been obliged to read her part for this performance. Ashwell had come to Ilford

because... some unfortunate misunderstandings had arisen and she wanted to explain some of their difficulties. Firstly there was the choice of plays. Plays that people would support were not always the plays they might like themselves. They tried to make as good a collection of plays as possible... As a result of a few plays presented a certain number of people had withdrawn their support. Those plays were *Tons of Money*, which had a fine run in London; *Eliza Comes to Stay*, which did better business at the Century Theatre than any other play; *Lady Ursula's Adventure*, which was a very successful play a year ago, and... *The Last of Mrs Cheyney*... They were a big undertaking without any capital behind them. Any losses had to be met privately, and fell upon shoulders which could ill afford to bear them. The difficulty of finding plays was enormous... I understand we have lost a number of old friends because of these plays. We have been playing 10 years and we have brought you as many as 250 plays. Does it not seem hard on me that after presenting all these plays exception should be taken to so few?
(*Recorder* 22/2/29)

Ashwell did not explain why people had objected to the plays she listed. Were they considered to be too commercial? They certainly were not offensive and were considered to be good plays by reputable authors including H.V. Esmond, Frederick Lonsdale and Anthony Hope. She went on,

The other grievance was that a number of old friends among the Players no longer appeared. They could not guarantee salaries or conditions which would satisfy, for a long time, artistes who had a great deal of ambition. Leslie Banks, an old favourite, Walter Fitzgerald and Esme Church were all in London productions, while Olive Walter and Kynaston Reeves were on a successful tour in Canada... It was not for them to detain these players when they wished to go. It was for them to release them and wish them every success. (*Applause*) Their standard was upheld, however. If you withdraw your support, you will shoot the whole lot... and is it worth it?
(*ibid*)

⁵⁹This play was first performed in 1898 and required the female lead to disguise herself as her brother.

⁶⁰There was a real fear of infection from public places such as theatres.

This impassioned plea provides one of the few insights into why Ashwell considered the 1920s to be a failure from her point of view. She must have despaired at ever winning consistent support for her cause. The reaction of local audiences shows a very provincial, proprietorial view – which can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. It had become too claustrophobic and ungenerous for Ashwell’s spirit.

There was a further sense that things were too difficult and to some extent falling apart when D.G. wrote to the *Recorder*. He felt supporters were not being given sufficient information to relate their interest to the wider movement Ashwell aspired to. He thought the Friends needed “some informing link with the management, so... its members may be encouraged by the sight of a goal to strive for it... I trust that some inspiration may be handed out” (1/3/29). Ashwell must have felt like a voice in the wilderness – for more than ten years she had been advocating civic involvement in theatre, but local initiatives were not forthcoming. There is no evidence, for example, that Friends’ organisations, despite having local councillors on their committees, actively lobbied their local council or M.P.s for a theatre or financial support for Ashwell’s company. It was impossible for Ashwell and her directors, in trying to keep the company afloat financially and artistically, to do more than provide examples and eloquent advocacy. Ilford, for all its apparent support, was by now a negative force in the project.

However, the Players’ last Shakespearean production, *Romeo and Juliet*, given on 5 March 1929, was well received but “not quite so crowded as usual, the hall was peopled by a rather more discriminating audience than usual. Is it the privilege of only a few to be able to enjoy Shakespeare?” (*Recorder* 8/3/29). Audiences did grow over the last four weeks, as the weather improved and the epidemic receded. Reviews were positive and praise for the Players’ versatility and wide ranging repertoire featured again. The reviewer was not named, but the comments made were less personal and no longer adopted Marshall’s somewhat superior tone. Noel Coward’s comedy, *I’ll Leave it to You*, was presented on 2 April. During an interval, Mr Payne, the Friends’ local secretary, called for a large audience for the following week for the last play, *Caste*, so that a substantial petition could be drawn up to send to the Carnegie Trust, to plead for a grant, which at present had been discontinued (*Recorder* 5/4/29). Another case of too little, too late.

SUMMER TOURS

Throughout the years of the company’s existence, Ashwell tried out many venues, returning to places where the response was good or had potential to build. For the summer months away from London, there were experimental visits to a number of seaside or holiday resorts, including **LLANELLY**, a coastal town and port west of Cardiff and Swansea in Wales. The company performed at the Hippodrome for two weeks from 5 July 1920, but little is known of this visit other than from the advertisements in the *Llanelly Argus*. These announced: “Lena Ashwell presents the Celebrated War Players” (3 & 10/7/20), in what must have been a punishing schedule with twice nightly performances, in the music hall and light entertainment tradition, at 7pm and 9pm. Ticket prices ranged from 6d. in the gallery to 2/1 in the Grand

Circle. The repertoire was *The Thief* (Berstein), *Diana of Dobson's*, *Mrs Gorrings Necklace* and *Leah Kleschna*, which was given an enthusiastic but inexperienced review on the front page of the *Argus* on 10 July: "every member of the cast pays particular attention to articulation with the consequence that a most enjoyable play is presented." In 1923 there was a three week spring season from 5 March at the Opera House in **JERSEY, Channel Islands**. Apart from advertisements in the *Jersey Evening Post*, which indicate that the patron for the visit was His Excellency Major General Sir W. Douglas-Smith, Lt. Governor, and the repertoire was *Rutherford and Son*, *The Younger Generation*, *All of a Sudden Peggy*, *You Never Can Tell*, *Doormats* and *Diana of Dobson's*, nothing else is known of this visit as neither of the local papers made further reference to the company. Given the complication and cost of sea travel to get to the island, it is unlikely it would have been considered worthwhile to repeat the experiment.

Despite good local newspaper coverage, Sussex coastal resort towns **BRIGHTON** and nearby **EASTBOURNE** were only visited once, in 1924. It may have been that the available venues were not really suitable or that the competition from other summer holiday fare was too great. In Brighton the company spent three weeks from 5 May in the theatre on the West Pier, now derelict and cut off from the Promenade by the waters of the English Channel. In its heyday the West Pier would have been an appealing venue for entertainment, but Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* and *Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, *Hobson's Choice* by Harold Brighouse and the Pocock/Ashwell unknown, *The Celluloid Cat*, may have been inappropriate fare for the type of audience likely to wander along the promenade in the summer of 1924. The *Brighton and Hove Herald* reported in detail Ashwell's promotional address on the *Ideals of the Theatre* to the Brighton and Hove Rotary Club on Shakespeare's birthday on 23 April. While paying homage to Shakespeare, her intention was to explain her aims for providing access to the theatre for the people, to enhance their lives and understanding. She declared herself a Canadian, apparently to be able to make the point that "the great appeal of the Mother Country to the Dominions is not to the pocket, but to the heart. Shakespeare is the embodiment of that appeal" (26/4/24). Gibson accompanied her, re-iterating that the theatre "is a real help towards the demand of the people for a fuller life" (ibid), and praising the work of Rotary. The *Brighton and Hove Herald*, *Brighton Argus* and *Sussex Daily News* all reviewed and promoted enthusiastically the company's performances but there is little indication of audience numbers or why the visits to Brighton were not continued. Even *The Celluloid Cat* was warmly received. "The play is an excellent specimen of its kind – bright, pungently witty, and never for one moment dull" (*Sussex Daily News* 20/5/24).

The entertainments page of the *Eastbourne Chronicle* (31/5/24), contains a review of *The Celluloid Cat*, which opened the short season at The Pier Theatre on 26 May, as well as information on four cinemas in the town with constantly changing programmes. There was further competition from the Devonshire Park complex, which contained a cinema, theatre, exhibition area, concert hall and ballroom. As a summer holiday resort, Eastbourne attracted many people at this time of year, for whom the company's second

offering, *The Younger Generation*, would have been an appealing way to spend an evening. Indeed, from the extant financial records of the Eastbourne Pier Company, the bar and box office income for this play was much greater than for *The Celluloid Cat* (£280 as against £160). It appears Ashwell received two thirds of the box office income only, approximately £162 for the two weeks.⁶¹ The *Chronicle* enjoyed the choice of plays, praising the productions as the company travelled to their next engagement in Bath.

The Prince of Wales Theatre, **RUGBY**, was a regular summer venue for the company between 1923 and 1926. After a two-year absence, the company made a special return visit in the spring of 1929.

Announcing the company's first visit of twelve weeks, with a "repertoire season of West End plays", the *Rugby Advertiser* included a photograph of Ashwell and made much of her wartime work.

Good music, good drama, good fun and good thrills... [Ashwell] has aimed at providing them all. The first visit of the Players to Rugby is the direct consequence of the success of their repertory season last year in another of Mr Arthur Carlton's theatres at Bath ...Miss Ashwell ...intends to be present on Wednesday May 23 when Mr Carlton will be 'at home' in the Theatre. His guests on that occasion will make personal acquaintance with the members of the company which is making its temporary home in the town - and there can be little doubt that invitations will be sought for! (*Rugby Advertiser* 18/5/23)

The *Rugby Advertiser* subsequently reported Carlton's hope that Rugby would welcome and support a higher form of drama; revue having to date been a big success in the town. The repertoire of popular works and the style and content of the press releases in Rugby took this into account, with less emphasis on the educational and municipal theatre aspect of the company's work. However, Ashwell could not resist declaring her hand during the 'At Home' and was reported as seeking to make her company "absolutely necessary educationally... in the life of their nation" (*Rugby Advertiser* 25/5/23). Ticket prices varied from 9d. in the balcony to 3/6 in the circle and initially advertisements included the following statement:

The Entertainment Tax was a War levy on the Patrons of Theatres which perhaps did not bear heavily upon them when there was a great deal of money about, but the position has now altered - money is scarce - and the patrons feel the imposition of the tax severely. For a limited period Mr Carlton has decided that the theatre shall pay the tax and the Patrons be admitted tax-free. As this means a sum of between £50 and £100 per week, Mr Carlton believes that his patrons will help by increased attendance. (*Rugby Advertiser* 29/5/23)

The advertisement for *Diana of Dobson's* during the fourth week was revised to include Ashwell as sharing the tax burden with the theatre (*Rugby Advertiser* 8/6/23). The same edition reported Ashwell in Rugby conducting the rehearsals for *Diana of Dobson's*. This company of Players was not the 'A-team' – Church was in Bath for the concurrent season, and it was necessary for Ashwell to maintain a high profile for this first season.

⁶¹Management Committee minutes 1922-25 and Cashbook, Eastbourne Pier Company, County Records Office, Lewes, Sussex, England.

The following year the company presented a four-week season between 14 July and 9 August 1924. Crowded houses for *The Country Wife* were reported (*Rugby Advertiser* 1/8/24) and Rugby was firmly established as a successful venue for the company, although presumably the shorter season was considered more appropriate in the light of the company's other summer commitments. For the 1925 three-week season between 27 July and 15 August, the company re-opened the theatre after its closure for the summer vacation in June and July. This did not affect audience numbers, described as "exceptionally large" (*Rugby Advertiser* 31/7/25). Six plays were performed, with a change of repertoire mid-week. *The Earth, The Importance of Being Earnest, Her Husband's Wife, Dandy Dick, The Tragedy of Nan* and *The Truth about Blayds* were staged, encouraging the *Advertiser* to declare that local people were "fortunate" (7/8/25) in having the opportunity to see revivals, not previously seen in Rugby, of "masterpieces which appealed to a preceding generation" (ibid).

The 1926 five-week visit between 3 May and 12 June was earlier than the previous year and before the theatre's summer closure period. The season began at the same time as the General Strike, with no newspapers being published during the first week of May. However, in late April, the *Rugby Advertiser* managed an important announcement to promote the company's season.

The ...Players are now the largest providers of dramatic entertainment in London. Their productions during their London season have gained much notice from the leading dramatic critics ...the company will include several of the old members of the company who are well known in Rugby, and in addition Miss Violet Blyth Pratt... for some time the brightest star in one of the famous companies of the Far East, and Mr Oliver Crombie, one of the soundest actors of the day... as well known in the provinces as he is in London. (30/4/26)

When publication resumed after the end of the Strike, the *Rugby Advertiser* reported on the reception at the Grand Hotel, given by Sir Arthur and Lady Carlton, in early May, to welcome the Players back to Rugby. Ashwell, looking forward "to the time when every town and every city would have a place built especially for the production of the best cinema films, the best music and the best literature of the theatre" (14/5/26), appealed for support, "as nothing in the world makes people understand other people so well and completely as the theatre" (ibid).

The Players did not return to Rugby until mid April 1929, when they presented a three-week season of six plays.⁶² The *Rugby Advertiser* reported that on opening night the theatre was "packed to the doors" (16/4/29), the audience including members of the Rugby Theatregoers' Association and members of the Urban District Council. A letter from the Council Chairman urging audiences to take advantage of the Players' season was reproduced in the *Rugby Advertiser* (19/4/29). At this stage the company was still planning to continue, with Rugby on the list for an annual visit. The season included performances of *The Adventure of Lady Ursula, The Green Goddess*, and *Our Flat* and concluded in early May 1929.

⁶²There is no stated reason for this gap, except that given the Prince of Wales Theatre closed in the summer, dates may not have been possible to arrange to fit with the company's London schedule and visits to Bath.

SCARBOROUGH, a Yorkshire coastal town, was visited in 1922. At the Grand Opera House, between 1 May and 3 June, the company presented ten plays including *Mrs Dane's Defence*, *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Diana of Dobson's*. To coincide with the company's visit, both the *Scarborough Evening News* (29/4/22) and the *Scarborough Mercury* (5/5/22) published Ashwell's article, *The Purpose of Theatre: The Value of Well-Ordered Amusement*. The season was given good local press coverage, both the *Scarborough Evening News* and *Scarborough Post and Weekly Pictorial* carrying short reviews. However, no further information was found to indicate why the company did not return, although by the following year the summer seasons at Bath and Rugby were well established, placing considerable pressure on the company's human resources, especially as the summer was also the traditional time for company holidays.

LEEDS, in Yorkshire, had a fortnight's season at the Little Theatre between 19 April and 1 May 1926, immediately prior to a seven week season at nearby York. The opening production was *The Witch*, reviewed in the *Leeds Mercury*.

The performance quite thrilled the all-too-small audience... These finely trained players should be seen. Their repertory is extensive... they enter into their parts with a spirit of dramatic conviction that all must recognise and admire. (20/4/26)

The other productions, *The House with the Twisty Windows/The Likes of 'Er* and *The Romantic Age*, were praised by the *Mercury*, but the Leeds experiment was not repeated; presumably audiences from the area were able to travel, relatively easily, to York for the summer seasons there.

YORK. General Sir Charles Harrington and officers of the Northern Command, who hosted several Friday 'Military Command Night' performances each season, were the patrons of the Players' five summer seasons at the Theatre Royal. The owner/manager, Percy Hutchinson,⁶³ ran this historic theatre with considerable flair and energy. The programmes for the company's productions⁶⁴ contain information about the plays and players, as well as details of the music played during the evening; a mixture of light classical and popular tunes. For the week commencing 13 April 1925 (a season of the musical *Lilac Time*), there was a rather stern advance notice of the Players' season, expressing the hope that "the Citizens will accord their support in no uncertain manner to this effort to present to the Public works by the best known Authors in a manner befitting the Theatre and the City." Members of the audience were advised that there was strong support from the great and the good who were supporting the Players' fund

⁶³Percy Hutchinson began his career as an actor, then was stage-manager and general producer for Charles Wyndham at the Criterion Theatre, first meeting Ashwell for *Mrs Dane's Defence*. He managed a number of companies and theatres in partnership with his mother and was a pioneer of the 'flying matinee'. His proprietorship of the York Theatre Royal began before the First World War. He was the author of an autobiography, *Masquerade*, London, George G. Harrap, 1936.

⁶⁴Theatre Royal archives, York.

raising appeal.⁶⁵ Hutchinson included their names in a long letter to the *Yorkshire Evening Press*, promoting the season and declaring,

There are not many movements today which have such a nationally representative list of supporters. It includes not only eminent leaders of each of the three political parties, but equally eminent representatives of society, literature, the Press, the Church and the stage... This work is of supreme importance at the present time, when our younger people are learning to make good use of their increased leisure, and it contributes much to our social happiness by giving those whose lives are often narrowed by circumstances and environment an opportunity to enjoy that fuller life to which the literature and art of the stage are such effectual entrance. The ...Players mean, and I mean, to do everything ...in our power to contribute something to meet the social needs of the nation... when [this] is recognised by national institutions and ...leaders, the repertory movement is on the way to becoming national. The ...Players have already received recognition from the Board of Education and many educational institutions and organisations ... the real success of our work will always depend on the support of the people we are trying to serve... We have no fear of the business side if only our friends will back us up. If only they will do this they will help on the bigger things we all have at heart. (30/4/25)

Following an informal reception at the theatre, the Players opened in York on 20 April 1925, with *The Earth*; a last minute replacement (“owing to sudden illness”⁶⁶), for A.E. Thomas’s *Her Husband’s Wife*, which was eventually performed later in the season. The company presented seven plays in as many weeks, concluding on 6 June with Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*. In the programme for *Dandy Dick* for the week commencing 18 May, ‘H.G.’ (presumably Harold Gibson) wrote a short item about *The Players at Play*. Apparently when he asked how they spent their leisure hours, the response was

‘we don’t have any.’ ‘Suppose you did, how would you spend them’, I asked... there seemed to be a general desire led by Mercia Cameron to spend them watching other people act but when that is impossible I found that Esme Church and Wilfred Fletcher would spend them on the river and Eileen Leslie, Olive Walter and Weston Fields in the river. Harold Gibson would play cricket and tennis, Joan Handfield would dance, John Killner would play bridge. Frank Napier-Jones would play jazzy music on drums, kettles, shell cases, etc. Harold Payton would walk and Alan Webb would walk after a golf ball.

As was the pattern elsewhere, attendances during the first half of the week were usually less, prompting comments in reviews and letters to the *Yorkshire Evening Press*, exhorting people to take advantage of the company’s visit to see some good theatre. On the last day of the season, there was an extended article in the *Press* on the company’s visit and *The Value of their season at York*.

⁶⁵These included H.H. Princess Helena Victoria (Chairman of the Committee which was responsible for the war-time effort of the Players), Viscountess Nancy Astor, The Right Hon. Stanley Baldwin, Earl Beauchamp, Viscount Burnham, The Right Hon. J.R. Clynes, M.P., Sir Cyril Cobb, M.P., John Galsworthy, The Right Hon. David Lloyd George, Sir John Martin Harvey, Lord Islington, The Lord Bishop of London, John Masefield, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Fred Terry, Sybil Thorndike and The Right Hon. Charles Trevelyan.

⁶⁶*Yorkshire Evening Press* 20/4/25.

With the threat of a General Strike dominating the news, the company returned to York on 3 May 1926 for a season that ended on 19 June. In April, the Theatre Royal programmes announced Hutchinson's reasons for engaging the company. He felt

that the objects of a repertory scheme can best be advanced by the interpretation of plays by skilful professional artistes in a recognised and properly-appointed theatre. The Ashwell Players have nearly a hundred of the best plays ever written in their repertoire, and the directorship of such an accomplished lady as Miss Lena Ashwell is a guarantee of the excellence of the representations.

On 12 May the *Press* headline declared *Trade Union Leaders Call off General Strike*, and once again with the patronage of the military, the company stayed for seven weeks. There was the usual mix of comedy and drama, with Ian Hay's *Tilly of Bloomsbury* ("A Tonic for Strike Convalescence" *Press* 18/5/26), providing a comic contrast to Masfield's drama *The Witch*. On 3 June Galsworthy's *The Silver Box* was patronised by the Mayor and Mayoress and City Council members. The following year, during the company's third season, between 2 May and 18 June, 1927, the Lord Mayor advised, through the *Press*, that the company would donate the proceeds of a special matinee, on Saturday 11 June, to the York Citizens' Fund, which helped York charities. The play was Glaspell's *Bernice*, with the theatre facilities donated by Percy Hutchinson, and the Mayor was "very anxious... that full advantage should be taken of this very generous offer, and that a good attendance will be assured" (3/6/27). As elsewhere, the Company was making a commitment to the area in response to support given to them by the Mayor.

The 1928 ten week season began on 7 May with a 'Great Reception to Miss Ashwell by Well-Known Local Ladies,'⁶⁷ using the advertising slogan, "Make a habit of Lena Ashwell Players'. It will amply repay you to see the whole of this season's series"⁶⁸ and a performance of the comedy, *French Leave*. Percy Hutchinson was not in York to greet the company. According to the programme, he was "now making big time in Melbourne, Australia."⁶⁹ Ashwell spoke to the audience after the first performance, advising that she took into account that during the summer holiday months "comedy was to be preferred to tragedy [and that] to provide pleasure for the York public was an even greater pleasure to the members of her company, and she trusted the visit would again be attended with success" (*Press* 8/5/28).

At the end of the season the *Press* declared, "Ever since their first season here four years ago the ...Players have fully entered into the life of the city, and now... they belong to York almost as much as London" (16/6/28). The company's final season in York took place between 6 May and 14 July, 1929.

⁶⁷York Theatre Royal programme, 30 April 1928.

⁶⁸Ibid. It has not been possible to find any details of season tickets or advance booking as this statement implies must have been available.

⁶⁹Hutchinson spent some of his childhood in Australia, which he described as "a sunny, spacious land" (*Masquerade*, op.cit. p. 217) and in 1928 was touring there with his company, although he omits to say with what production.

Once again comedy dominated the repertoire chosen, the printed programmes taking an upbeat approach with no apparent mention of the company's impending closure.

BATH

The Lena Ashwell Players opened their first repertory season in Bath on 5 June 1922 with the play most associated with Ashwell as an actress, *Diana of Dobson's*, in a season of popular repertoire which included her other big stage success, *Mrs Dane's Defence*, as well as *His House in Order*, *The Rivals*, *The Romantic Young Lady*, *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Candida*. Bath became the mainstay of her company's summer touring activity, with substantial seasons between June and August every summer (and two spring seasons in February 1923 and 1927) until 1929, when the company gave its last performances there in early August. Bath had an already established audience for touring repertory theatre, including an active Playgoers' Society, and a beautiful, intimate Georgian theatre, the Royal, built in 1805. Ashwell wooed assiduously Bath audiences and organisations, such as the Rotary Club (on whom she depended for group bookings), making many personal appearances (though not as a performer) throughout the company's seven years of visits to the city. At the end of the opening night performance she appealed to a not very large, but appreciative audience, for support from Bath, reminding those present that in the past "many great histrionic artists appeared here in repertoire... the best entertainment for play lovers, as they saw the same people in different parts, instead of the same persons in the same characters" (*Bath & Wilts Chronicle* 6/6/22). She was applauded when mentioning that most of the Players had spent the war years in her concert parties entertaining the troops - a statement guaranteed to attract a supportive response to her peace time work. The daily newspaper, the *Bath & Wilts Chronicle*, gave comprehensive coverage of performances and social events involving the Players, somewhat smugly re-enforcing the attitude of superiority, in matters cultural, held by the city's inhabitants. Initially, however, as indicated in correspondence to the *Chronicle* in mid June 1922,⁷⁰ the audience was rather thin on the ground, despite daily advertisements⁷¹ and enthusiastic reviews. Fred Weatherly wanted to know

Why do so few people in Bath appreciate what their theatre offers them? ...the chance of seeing an exceptionally fine all-round repertory company, able to put on new plays at short notice and old plays for the mere asking... trained by an accomplished and distinguished actress? Do not Bath people know Miss Lena Ashwell, what a brilliant woman she is, what a career of success she has had, what she has done and is doing for the stage? (15/6/22)

Perhaps in an effort to create more awareness of her intentions and her company's presence in Bath, Ashwell gave three addresses and an 'At Home' in three days. Her by now familiar subject, *The Civic Theatre Movement*, was presented to the Bath Labour and Cooperative Representation Association on 12

⁷⁰Letters from Charles McEvoy and Harold Downs (Hon. Secretary, Playgoers' Society), 16/6/22 and M.C. Balfour, 20/6/22.

⁷¹Ashwell was not always able to afford advertisements, but it is likely these were placed by the Theatre Royal as part of the terms of the engagement.

June 1922, to the Rotary Club luncheon on June 13 and to the Bath Trades and Labour Council the following day. The *Era* reported on her Rotary Club speech.

The Theatre is dying because there was no adequate recognition of its importance. It needs a real move on the part of the people to protect themselves and the taste of the nation, and to cooperate with the artists to give of their finest instead of their worst. What they want is civic cooperation, to have in every town a civic theatre, which could invite the very finest work to be done in it on the same basis as education. (21/6/22)

The 'At Home', with refreshments, informal chat and musical entertainment on the stage of the Royal, was attended by the Mayor, many local dignitaries and businessmen. However, by 15 June the company was considering its options: during the interval of Shaw's *Candida*, Marion Fawcett announced they might have to cut short the season unless they could pay their way. "Without boasting she could say that theirs was the best stock company in England... in London they got such support that in order to get a seat people had to book two or three days ahead" (*Chronicle* 16/6/22). She thought the hot weather (although Theatre Royal advertisements all carried the line, 'The Coolest Place in Bath') and trade depression may have had something to do with the disappointing result in Bath, so it had been decided to reduce ticket prices to match their London prices.

The *Era* presented a positive approach, declaring the Players to be

building up... a brilliant reputation by their excellent all-round working repertoire. For the current week the powerful play *The Woman in the Case* is being staged... Tomorrow evening [Thursday] the Bath Operatic Society are attending... in a body as a compliment to Miss Lena Ashwell who recently addressed them on the drama. (21/6/22)

During the fourth week the *Chronicle* published a letter from local playwright, Charles McEvoy (author of *The Likes of 'Er*, a play which was added to the Players' repertoire in 1923). He reminded readers he had written three weeks earlier "in the somewhat humiliating capacity of one pleading for the recognition of ...Ashwell's company of players" (6/7/22). He was now pleased to report "Bath has given the said recognition, and the theatre is now full o' nights with singularly happy audiences - people having realised at last that here were plays worth the seeing" (ibid). Subsequently, the company confirmed its full season in Bath, announced by the *Era* as a four-week extension.

For the current week they are giving eight performances of *Twelfth Night*... the services of ...well-known Shakespearean actor, Mr Balliol Holloway, have been secured to play Malvolio, his brother, Mr George Holloway, to represent Feste, and Mr Roy Byford is putting in a special week with the Players to impersonate Sir Toby Belch. Miss Esme Church, who has become a firm favourite with local audiences, is Viola, and Miss Emilie Leslie, Olivia. (12/7/22)

On 11 July the Rotarians held a 'bespeak night', "when a large number... with their lady friends, paid a visit to... *Twelfth Night*" (*Chronicle* 12/7/22). Fawcett, on behalf of Ashwell, noted "it was through art that they were linked together in one great brotherhood. The object of the company was to put into

practice the Rotary Club motto of ‘Service not Self’” (ibid). For the eighth week Shaw was featured, with *Arms and the Man* for the first three days, followed by *You Never Can Tell*, for which

Clifford Marle⁷²... rejoins the Players to play *Bohun*, Q.C... that fine actress, Miss Esme Church, will impersonate Gloria Clandon. At tonight’s performance over 100 members of the Bath Y.M.C.A. Tennis Club ...propose to attend in flannel dress. This is quite a new idea as far as Bath is concerned, and is another feather in the cap of the Players. (*Era* 26/7/22)

There was no comment from the Players, but it is hoped all that white in the audience was not too distracting for them. When the visit ended, fourteen plays, with two matinees each week, and morning rehearsals nearly every day, had been presented. Some company members had dual roles, both on the stage and behind the scenes with stage management and design responsibilities. There was an elaborate farewell, with many speeches from the stage to a packed house. The company announced it would return for a special two-week season in February 1923 and again in the summer. The exchange of gifts was an important ritual – on this occasion the company gave the resident manager, Shelford Walsh, a personal cheque for his kindness, while Esme Church presented Walsh “with a large photograph of herself, recently taken by Mr Herbert Lambert, the well-known picture artist of Bath” (*Era* 23/8/22). Actor Dan F. Roe commented on the beauty of Bath and its inspirational surroundings - indeed, after many one night stands in dreary London suburbs during the winter, the long season at Bath could only have been uplifting for the actors. Tributes were also made to the company’s two musicians, who provided interludes and recital support as well as incidental music for the plays (*Chronicle* 14/8/22).

Ashwell’s speeches to local organisations and the company’s presence provoked some soul searching by the Bath Playgoers’ Society and some negative views on the municipal theatre. The Society, who after three seasons had 120 members, held its annual meeting on 19 June and passed a resolution expressing,

our pleasure that Bath has been given an opportunity to support Miss Lena Ashwell’s Repertory Players... our disappointment that such an interesting theatrical experiment in Bath should have been made during the early days of the most unpropitious part of the year instead of at the height of the theatrical season, our regret that Bath people have not adequately supported the experiment to give it the best chance possible under strongly adverse conditions, and our determination to do all within our power to create and foster interest in drama and the stage. (*Chronicle* 20/6/22)

By 14 August, however, when the Society announced its forthcoming season, the Lena Ashwell Players’ season was considered to have done much to create awareness of the Society and to enhance its role (*Chronicle* 15/8/22). For some, the municipal theatre was a moot point. Ernest Crawford, writing in the form of a ‘warning’ to Ashwell, considered

The theatre should be self-supporting... if there are not playgoers enough to keep it going, it is a particularly mean form of robbery to plunder non-playgoers to pay for the amusement of

⁷²Clifford Marle had played Svengali in *Trilby* for the company the week before.

the few, because the few believe the drama to be so uplifting and ‘good for the education of the soul’.
(*Chronicle* 19/6/22)

He referred to a pamphlet, *Our Theatres, and why Christian people cannot go to them*, pointing out the religious objections, as well as financial ones if Councils charged ratepayers. He warned against official control of theatre, concluding, “The State has already too much power over the theatre” (ibid).

The highlight of the 1923 short spring season in February was the regional premiere, on 12 February, of McEvoy’s Cockney drama, *The Likes of ‘Er*, attended “in force” (*Era* 15/2/23) by the Bath Playgoers’ Society. The *Chronicle* reported on the author’s presence and gave a favourable review, congratulating him “on the success with which he has depicted the inmost soul of the dwellers of this London underworld” (13/2/23). For *The Child In Flanders*, which included many carols, another local connection was used. In what became a regular practice, the vocal music resources of the Bath Operatic Society supplemented the cast (as singers and actors) and no doubt stimulated local interest.

Cicely Hamilton and Shakespeare featured prominently in the ensuing eleven week summer season between 21 May and 4 August 1923. Hamilton, a director of the company, appeared as actress in most of the productions, and was the author of two of the plays -*The Brave and the Fair* and *The Beggar Prince*. In July there was a week of *The Merchant of Venice*⁷³ and *As You Like It*, both directed by Ashwell and Paget Bowman. For the former, and presumably from a press release, the *Chronicle* advised,

Their reading of the play has not tended to idealize Shylock and show him as the victim of Christian persecution and intolerance; on the contrary, they hold to the old theatrical tradition that Shylock is the villain of the piece, not because he is a Jew, but because he is a bad Jew, a man who regrets the loss of his money far more than the loss of his daughter.
(7/7/23)

In addition to the performances at the Royal, the company gave a special matinee on 26 July of *As You Like It* “in the beautiful natural amphitheatre known as Shakespeare’s Dell, adjacent to the Botanic Gardens, Royal Victoria Park” (*Chronicle* 21/7/23). This was in aid of the Mayoress’s Fresh Air Fund,⁷⁴ which provided country holidays for poor city children. The other features of this season of thirteen plays included a curtain raiser, *Stolen Fruit*, by company member Cyril Twyford, which preceded performances of Stanley Houghton’s *The Younger Generation*; and Sheridan’s *The Rivals*. Given the latter’s setting (18th century Bath), the *Chronicle* praised the Player’s production and noted

No one was better qualified to write such a comedy than Sheridan, concerning whose romantic associations with Bath, books, papers and articles have afforded succeeding generation with voluminous information, more or less accurate. But it is on comparatively

⁷³ The first performance of *The Merchant of Venice* on 9 July was attended by members of the local branch of the British Empire Shakespeare Society.

⁷⁴ The Mayoress was Sarah Grand, a radical novelist of the 1880s and 1890s, the originator of the appellation ‘New Woman’, and a prominent suffrage worker, known to Ashwell since her involvement began with the Actresses’ Franchise League in 1908.

rare occasions that *The Rivals* has been played in the Bath Theatre – at least in modern times. (29/5/23)

Although there were still concerns and comments about less than full houses,⁷⁵ overall the season was a success,⁷⁶ with the concluding week's programme consisting "of plays selected by a plebiscite of members of the audience" (*Chronicle* 31/7/23). The plays chosen were *The Younger Generation*, *The Brave and the Fair*, *The Beggar Prince* and Sardou's *Diplomacy*. This audience involvement was used often by the Players. Their extensive repertoire made it possible to respond to audience preferences, sometimes resulting in last minute alterations to previously announced plays. This placed considerable pressure on the actors (reviews often mention the need for prompting on missed lines - for example in the *Chronicle* 12/6/23), and most particularly, it seems, on Esme Church, the leading lady. From the reviews for the 1923 Bath season she appeared in substantial roles in virtually all the plays in the season and was called upon to play an active role in promoting the company and its objectives. As Ashwell had done the previous year, Church was invited to address the Bath Rotarians on 12 June on *The Repertory Movement*. As reported in the *Chronicle* the following day, she advocated reform of the theatre through playwrights and actors moving away from the elaborate productions formerly fashionable but now too expensive. She thought actors should seek employment with repertory companies, supported by audiences who were thereby given the opportunity to see the same actors play many roles.

The 1924 summer season, which opened on 9 June, was five weeks in length, and followed five weeks in Brighton and Eastbourne. Ashwell addressed the Rotary Club luncheon on 10 June on the subject of *Public Taste and the Theatre*. Her theme was that theatre in England was considered a luxury, and taxed "in the same way as whiskey and tobacco. Museums and things that were dead and gone went untaxed, yet dramatic art was not exempted" (*Chronicle* 11/6/24). This she attributed to the puritan outlook of the English, which crushed and subdued the emotional life. Change could come about when audiences encouraged actors to give of their best, rather than accepting bland emotions as conveyed in films.

Local Bath organisations vied for the most interesting involvement with the Players and for a successful 'Tennis Night' in June 1924 at the Royal, some 140 members of Bath Clubs, many dressed in tennis whites (despite inclement weather), filled the lower circle (*Chronicle* 13/6/24). Gibson addressed an appreciative audience, declaring that if everyone could "play tennis in such congenial society as your own, and then, after, took the opportunity of witnessing such play as ours (*laughter*), we believe that the nation would be physically, mentally, morally and spiritually better" (ibid).

⁷⁵There was a letter to the *Chronicle* published on 2 June from 'S.G.A.' regretting that it seemed audiences were having to be built all over again, despite the sense that the 1922 visit had established the company's credentials.

⁷⁶In the years following, the company reduced the number of weeks, never again doing eleven weeks for a season in Bath.

The *Chronicle* did its best to keep the company before the Bath public – each Saturday during the season the Stage Gossip section of the paper featured background information and personal observations on a member of the company. Audiences still proved elusive, however, with the reviewer of *Mr Pim Passes By* considering a production by Ashwell to be

a far more interesting project than that of the average touring company we are so familiar with. Under the circumstances it was nothing short of a calamity that the Theatre... was so sparsely patronised on Monday evening... Considering how fortunate Bath is to have first-class dramatic fare throughout the summer months when many bigger cities, Bristol is an example, have only vaudeville to entertain them, the Theatre Royal should be packed at every performance... No rough edges mar their performances. One is perfectly safe in 'looking in' at any time and finding a clever and thoughtful presentation of the very best plays. (*Chronicle* 24/6/24)

The 1924 season concluded with *Diana of Dobson's* on 12 July. Ashwell thanked the audience and invited them to join the recently formed local Friends' organisation. She paid tribute to Esme Church who had worked with her the longest, "seven years of hard labour of love," adding that "the company had presented ninety plays in four years, and during the last six months, 1,300,000 people had witnessed their performances in Greater London" (*Chronicle* 14/7/24). In this report on the last night of the season, the *Chronicle*, acknowledging the contribution of composer/pianist Kate Coates and violinist Joan Simson, noted that Simson, a cousin of Ashwell's husband, had worked with her during the war and was now returning to her home in Edinburgh (*ibid*).

The 1925 season opened on 8 June (and closed seven weeks later), with performances of one of Ashwell's early successes, Fagan's *The Earth*,⁷⁷ which was attended by local dignitaries including the Mayoral party and representatives of the Bath Poetry, Playgoers and Operatic Societies. Church and Gibson spoke to Rotary and Venture Clubs, whose members booked party groups, as did the tennis clubs. To coincide with Race Week in the city, Pinero's "funniest and best racing play ever written,"⁷⁸ *Dandy Dick*, was presented, and during the last week of the season (commencing 20 July), Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* provided entertainment for the British Medical Association Conference attendees. This was a programming device Ashwell used elsewhere to good effect.

The season attracted the usual enthusiastic reviews and Stage Gossip items on individual company members in the *Chronicle*, including playwright Charles McEvoy's appreciation.

I have never seen a more perfect performance than that of *The Earth*... last night. From the moment the curtain rose one knew that one was witnessing dramatic art in its highest form... if ever naturalism was achieved in acting, it was achieved then. I consider Miss Esme Church as great as any living English actress. (*Chronicle* 10/6/25)

⁷⁷*The Earth* had not been performed locally since 1913 (*Era* 13/6/25).

⁷⁸Advertisement copy, *Chronicle* 9/7/25.

There was also a detailed account of Church's talk on 9 June, when she was quoted as saying, "Truth and beauty were 'the gifts of the theatre', and an actor or a play was only of real use to the community at large in so far as he added to the truth or beauty in the world" (*Chronicle* 10/6/25). She saw a current need for "a true and beautiful outlook", not just in the theatre. She cited *Macbeth* as a successful play, not for its sensational elements but because of "the beauty of the English that was in it." The play contained "great truth"; its message being that "people got out of life what they put into it...[a] tremendous warning that our acts are for good or ill... a shining example of what a play could do by being true"(ibid).

As Ashwell's representative, and a prominent member of the theatrical profession, Church was reflecting on an important issue for the theatre in the mid 1920s, where for many, post-war frivolity was at odds with a striving for a better world. It is inevitable she would pursue similar themes to Ashwell, and given her audience of Rotary Club members, that she should see her hopes for the future of the theatre in terms of providing a service to the community. At the end of the Bath season Church undertook a lecture tour in Switzerland, under the auspices of Lunn's Hotels, describing and promoting the repertory movement initiated by the Players (*Chronicle* 7/8/25).

Gibson speaking on *The Place of the Drama in National Life*, given to the Venture Club on 19 June, sounded even more like Ashwell, lamenting the low standing of the drama in English national life and urging a wider acceptance of its value and benefits. Clearly the Lena Ashwell Players saw the company as a pioneer, with an important role as advocate, example and accessible friend in the battle for the souls of the nation through the medium of drama. In retrospect, 1925 marked the high water mark of the company's fortunes – with a London base at the Century, a strong company of actors and an established repertoire and reputation, success seemed very possible and likely.

Highlights of the six week 1926 season in Bath included a revival, from 18 June, of *The Likes of 'Er*, which, after the Players' premiere in January 1923, had been given 230 performances at St Martin's Theatre, London, from August 1923. During the first week Ashwell adjudicated an elocution competition run by the Bath Branch of the British Empire Shakespeare Society, hearing sixty-three entrants from whom finalists were selected for the ensuing London festival. John Masefield was guest of honour at the end of the month, when he travelled from Oxford for *The Witch*, a play he had adapted for Lillah McCarthy, from the Norwegian of H. Weirs-Jenssen, originally presented at the Court Theatre.⁷⁹ The subject matter of the play was very different to Masefield's other works for the stage. The *Chronicle* (2/7/26) reported he was "delighted with the... Players' rendering of the play", with Mercia Cameron as the witch. In appreciation, he handed over the copyright of his *Sonnets* to the Players and the Mayor of

⁷⁹McCarthy had considerable success with the role of Anna Pedersdotter (the witch), exciting "intense emotions and strong feelings. There were sometimes hisses... but whether they were protests or manifestations of loathing of the evil of this demonic woman I neither know nor care" (Lillah McCarthy, *Myself and Friends*, London, Thornton Butterworth, 1933, p.128-9).

Bath, Alderman Chivers, “had the sonnets printed in booklet form” (*Chronicle* 9/8/26) at his own expense. These were “sold in two editions, price 1s and 2s6d respectively, to help the Lena Ashwell repertory movement” (ibid).

On 5 August the Players donated their services at a special Theatre Royal matinee in aid of the Mayoress’s Fresh Air Fund. The three short plays: *Fame and the Poet* (Dunsany), *The Death of Tintagiles* (Maeterlinck) and Chekov’s *The Proposal* were repeated on 9 August in London as part of the performance event for the City of London Vacation Course in Education at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, after which the company members took a holiday before rehearsals for the autumn season began in early September.

In 1927 the company played for thirteen weeks at the Bath Theatre Royal, with a six week season in February/March and seven weeks between June and August. On 17 February Masefield donated the box office takings from his poetry reading matinee at the theatre for the Players’ work “in the poorer parts of London” (*Chronicle* 18/2/27). During the presentation he read two of his unpublished poems - “*Fulfillment*, a story of great dramatic force, full of beautiful imagery... and *South and East*, an allegorical work, chaste of language and lofty in thought” (ibid). Masefield considered himself a storyteller, taking “stories of the race, to which everybody had contributed for hundreds of years” (ibid), fulfilling his function as a poet if he added some beauty and relevance to such stories. He referred to the early strength of the theatre in attracting the population, regretting that this was no longer the case. He supported the Players because they were bringing “refinement and beauty into the lives of those in our cities and suburbs in the teeth of every discouragement” (ibid).

This discouragement, mostly in the form of apathy, was beginning to take its toll on Ashwell, but she continued a punishing schedule which included the Bath premiere of *Crime and Punishment* on 21 February, and the simultaneous premieres in Sutton and Bath on 14 March of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Both productions were praised by the *Chronicle*. However, on the second last night (March 18), according to committed playgoer Fred Weatherley, while the pit, containing the cheaper seats, was full, there were only fifteen people in the dress circle. He wrote to the *Chronicle* (as he had done in June 1922) exhorting the people of Bath to take the last opportunity that evening to see the company at work.

You pay 8s.6d. for a seat to hear Clara Butt⁸⁰ ... You pack a crowded hall (free seats) to hear Gipsy Smith. With an almost religious ardour you pack the Theatre to hear Gilbert and Sullivan - again, no wonder! Your excellent amateur companies are almost equally successful... But the skilled, well-trained actor... the professional player whose livelihood depends upon ‘the boards’ must play to empty benches... I am not merely a ‘playgoer’ by name, but I go to the play and love going. (19/3/27)

⁸⁰Clara Butt (1873-1936), was a popular singer, famous for her rendition of Elgar’s *Land of Hope and Glory* during the Great War.

Throughout the company's existence, Ashwell was not lacking in supporters such as Weatherley but the 'it's good for you' approach was not always the most helpful one. Weatherley continued his campaign with a letter in the *Chronicle* on the first day of the Players' summer season on 20 June 1927.

Ashwell's name in the theatrical world is an absolute guarantee of a wise selection of plays and thoroughly efficient companies... If you want to be stirred... to laughter or to tears (and both are good for your digestion), if you want to see a true picture of life... the theatre will give you what you want and what you want is what you need.

Throughout July and early August the company presented standard repertoire by Henry Arthur Jones, Pinero, Galsworthy, Maugham and du Maurier, with an unusual choice for the Mayoress's annual Fresh Air Fund matinee on 21 July. Featuring Church as Margaret, they gave one performance only of *Bernice*, by American playwright Susan Glaspell, and first performed in 1915. The *Chronicle* urged that as "it is not a play that would be likely to be put on for a run by any management... everyone should take this opportunity of seeing [it]" (20/7/27). Glaspell was attracting attention in both England and America; this play is particularly fascinating for her skill in creating the presence and personality of the dead Bernice through her husband, father, friend (Margaret) and maid as they come to terms with her death. The *Chronicle* reported a "crowded house" for a play that "puts the actors on their mettle. There is no action, and it is in the general sense of the word, plotless. Yet played with such finish as the Ashwell Company displayed, it is a masterpiece" (22/7/27).

Bernice was in the company's repertoire and presumably simple to stage, with a single set and basic costumes, and therefore not difficult to present as a novelty for a fund raiser. The company travelled with an extensive repertoire and presumably with multi-purpose costumes and props, as evidenced by the sudden change in programme, from *The Land of Promise* (Maugham) to *The Whiteheaded Boy* (not included in the announced repertoire), on the afternoon of 22 July, when lead actor Kynaston Reeves was called away to his dying father (*Chronicle* 23/7/27). Participation in local events such as the Mayoress's fund was a feature of the company's commitment to the area, and during this season actor John Kilner directed a local production of *The Tempest* for the August Summer School of Dramatic Production.

Despite an enthusiastic welcome by the *Chronicle* for the four-week 1928 season -

The return... is like a re-union of old friends, even though we may see different faces among the company, we know that the Lena Ashwell tradition of consummate artistry is there linked with an infinite capacity to play well every type of piece (*Chronicle* 17/7/28),

Gibson announced at the end of the first performance "that previous seasons at Bath, particularly last season, had been distinct financial failures... it would be impossible for them to come again if this season were not a success" (ibid). In the first week, the company gave eight performances (six evenings with matinees on Wednesday and Saturday) of Barrie's *The Professor's Love Story*, one of the most popular works in their repertoire and which had been a sellout at their season in York immediately prior to their

arrival in Bath. Over the remaining three weeks they did six plays, with four performances of each, including Sardou's *Diplomacy* and Berkeley's war comedy, *French Leave*.

When the company returned to Bath for their final four-week summer season, between 15 July and 10 August 1929, the decision had been made to close down, with Bath, where they had staged more than seventy-five plays, the final venue. There was surprisingly little reference made to this fact by the *Chronicle* – the letter writers and reviewers numbed into acceptance of the inevitable outcome of sustained losses over time. The repertoire included Pinero's farce, *The Schoolmistress*, for which, "the author has given the... Players special permission to bring it up to date... the result is a most refreshing and amusing play" (*Chronicle* 12/7/29). Other plays included Archer's *The Green Goddess*; another, less successful but unusual post-war work by Pinero, *The Enchanted Cottage*; Tom Robertson's classic, *Caste*, and for the final performances, Noel Coward's 1920 comedy, *I'll Leave It To You*. The *Chronicle*'s final comments on the company were in the Day by Day gossip section by 'Sul'.

The ghosts of Bath make a glorious company, and it seems that their number is to be increased. After Saturday, the ...Players will be seen no more. The curtain will ring down on a company... who have endeared themselves to Bath audiences, for they are not, after that day, to delight another audience with their versatility and talent. One hopes... to see these distinguished actors and actresses again... but [it will] not [be] in the 'happy family' of the Lena Ashwell Players. (8/8/29)

On the last night, *Auld Lang Syne* was sung, "the audience linking hands with the Players. And the curtain was rung down on a company which has suffered considerable loss, but which will always be remembered in the annals of the stage" (*Chronicle* 12/8/29). On the Sunday morning before leaving for London, members of the company farewelled the Theatre Royal manager, Shelford Walsh. Gibson was "booted and spurred... mounted on a dark chestnut, looking as if he were waiting for the 'gone-away' from a mythical whipper-in hollering round the stage door" (ibid).

Although it is likely Ashwell's letter, announcing the closure of the Players in early August 1929, was sent to the national press and all local newspapers where the company had performed, the *Iford Recorder* appears to have been the only newspaper to publish it in full. It was the summer, a time when many theatre critics would have taken holidays, but the impression remains that little was done to mark the company's demise and there was apparently no effort to rally support to continue the work. Ashwell wrote:

It is a very great disappointment that after ten years' work in the great London Boroughs the Lena Ashwell Players are compelled to suspend their activities until such times as the accumulated losses incurred on each season can be wiped out. The loss now amounts to over £5,000, which we shall gradually pay off by letting the Century Theatre, and hiring out our wardrobe and properties to all amateur companies. Beginning in 1919, during the winter of each year we have performed 26 plays, making a total in all of 260 of works by the most representative dramatic authors. Each season we have brought these plays to audiences numbering over 184,000 people. The prices, which were based on the cinema charges, and

which were the utmost that the people could afford to pay, ranging from 6d. to 2s.4d., prevented the enterprise from ever being on a commercial basis – the expenses of advertisement, printing, rehearsal rooms, motor transport for the ‘fit-up’, authors’ fees, musicians’ and actors’ salaries, leaving no margin for bad weather, epidemics of influenza, or other difficulties, which must always face any theatrical venture. The entertainment tax alone represents £50 a week, or approximately £1300 on a 26 week season. In all other countries in Europe there is... recognition of the needs of the great public in regard to recreation, and such enterprises as ours are subsidised so that they are able to continue ministering to the needs of many people who love the theatre. In all parts of Europe both the theatre and music are supported by the state. In our great land the arts are not considered necessities, but luxuries; and, therefore, we alone in Europe insist that all recreation must be purely commercial or cease to exist. To the many who have helped us I send my grateful thanks and the sincere wish that we shall be so greatly missed that public opinion may be aroused, and that in the future there may be some form of cooperation between the State and the arts, especially the art of the theatre. (2/8/29)

In November 1929 in *The Stage*, Ashwell recalled a conversation with a man who did not wish his daughter to go on the stage. Ashwell agreed, recognizing the girl’s lack of talent and beauty, but he was more concerned about the evil influences he assumed would damage his daughter and Ashwell, to stop them talking at cross purposes,

hit him hard, and he left me forever, when I expressed regret that the Theatre had become so respectable that it was the refuge for the incompetent, all those that shirked drudgery and hard work but wanted a life of ease, and that I wished for the good old days of vagabondage and outlawry, when only those who had the artist temperament dared to undertake the squalor and hardship of the life – the days when Moliere was refused burial in consecrated ground because he was an actor. (p.73)

While presumably she did not think this of most members of her company, it reflects her disillusion, as do many other comments in this book.

Ashwell’s account of her company during the 1920s is one of the shortest chapters in *Myself a Player* and she gives very little detail of the extensive touring undertaken, describing the ten years as a “gruelling experience of failure and defeat” (p.237). She has nothing but praise for the efforts of her company, whose wartime experience made them infinitely adaptable to the venues they visited:

It was no embarrassment to them that halls and baths should be unsuitable, platforms of different sizes, curtains often not quite hiding an organ or a rostrum quite unusual in a forest or a bedroom. Why should Town Halls be constructed to inhibit everything except a public meeting, when it would be so easy to include a proper platform and attractive lighting? (p.239)

Throughout the decade, Ashwell worked tirelessly to establish a theatre-going habit for communities in a large number of London boroughs and further afield. While the Players’ repertoire of some 250 plays contained mostly well known works from established playwrights, Ashwell also included less familiar plays, plays by women and by non-British authors. She created a team of women directors and a repertory company that provided many opportunities for imaginative work. She appears to have been most

successful in areas dominated by a middle-class population, living far enough from the centre of London to be pleased not to have to travel too far for access to good theatre. She was thwarted by uncomfortable facilities for both audiences and actors, by competing entertainments, the lack of a theatre-going habit and limited resources and finance. She was unable to pay actors a great deal, therefore mostly attracting to her company the young and inexperienced, who used their time with the company to learn their craft and then move on. She set a punishing, perhaps overly ambitious, schedule – maintaining a London theatre base and three companies constantly on the road. While there was some support from local communities and local authorities, much of the work of promoting the company was her responsibility, coupled with the artistic directorship. It is tempting to conclude Ashwell was both before her time and attempting to do the financially impossible. Dependence on good will and box office without subsidy and performing a non-commercial repertoire, in the face of fierce competition from the cinema, is a tall order at any time. On a ground breaking mission to establish municipal theatres and repertory companies throughout the country, Ashwell set herself a challenge that needed the coincidence of like-minded people and similar theatre companies around the country; state acknowledgement of responsibility to contribute to social well-being for all members of the community, and a financial climate to make it possible. These did not come until much later. It is understandable that she was disillusioned with the outcome.

She leaves it to poet John Masefield, in a substantial quotation, to express deeper feelings associated with the company she led for nearly ten years. He wrote a series of sonnets, including the following, to the Players and declared; “I was enchanted with their work, especially by the beauty of their speech, which had such right qualities of swiftness and rhythm” (*Myself a Player*, p.246):

“Weary and sickened of the daily show
That moves without a banner or a creed,
I met this troop a few short years ago
And felt their courage to be art indeed.

They were like youth, flying the lonely flag
In the gay darkness where the courage shines.
While the world’s hunt went by, they were the stag
Delicate in the dew, kingly with tines.

They were the artists, who, by spirit at strain,
Brought, to men’s hearts, out of the conflict played,
Spirits that cannot perish, but remain
Bright in the heart with life that cannot fade.

Theirs was the living art whose splendours tower
When the dead art goes down, in the live hour.”

John Masefield, on the Lena Ashwell Players⁸¹

⁸¹One of Masefield’s *Sonnets of Good Cheer*, for the Lena Ashwell Players. Quoted by Ashwell in *Myself a Player*, London, Michael Joseph, 1936, p.236.

Figure 44: The Century Theatre (source unknown), Mander & Mitchenson collection, Beckenham, England.

POSTSCRIPT: 1930-1957 'Actress, Patriot, Pioneer'

MANAGING THE CENTURY THEATRE

J.C Trewin, has written that

The theatre during the nineteen-twenties seemed always to be working at full and anxious stretch... altogether the decade was a chaos of contradictions, doubts, and conflicting enthusiasms... [However] during the thirties, a relatively jaded, zestless decade, the theatre – surprised, no doubt, to find that its reckoning-day had not come – sat back and wondered what it could do next.¹

The above statement was written in the late 1940s and must be seen as a retrospective overview.

However, it does seem an appropriate and applicable comment on Ashwell's working environment. At the end of the 1920s she was obliged to abandon, largely for financial reasons, work she had undertaken 'at full and anxious stretch' for a decade and which was impossible for her to continue into the 1930s. She was sixty, still the leaseholder of the Century Theatre and with an accumulated deficit of some £5000. After the final performances by the Players in early August 1929, company members sought other work in the theatrical profession. According to the minutes of the London County Council, Ashwell retained the lease on the Century Theatre until the end of 1934² and possibly into 1935. From 1924 to 1933 she made annual application to the Theatres and Music Halls Committee for stage play licenses. These minutes also record alterations and improvements she made to the Century during the 1920s.³ The theatre accommodated approximately 370 people, so box office income could never be very large. The building was extensive – besides the hall used as the theatre, there was a similar sized large hall beneath it, suitable for dances. Ashwell's licence, however, did not permit her to use this hall for public events – it might have been possible to make money if she had been able to present dances there. Overall, however, the building had facilities attractive to hirers – there were dressing rooms, rehearsal space in the lower hall, a kitchen and buffet area, workshops and storage areas, as well as two offices. To pay off her debt, Ashwell rented the Century to amateur theatre and other arts and community groups from mid 1929 to the end of 1934 (details on such hirers and what they presented were not researched for this thesis). Extant publicity leaflets indicate that during 1935 the Rudolf Steiner Association became the proprietors and Vera Compton-Burnett the licensee of what became known as the Twentieth Century Theatre. The Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain and the Rudolf Steiner Association presented performances of eurhythmy, recitals, lectures and workshops at the theatre for a number of years, after which it was sold for commercial, non-theatre use. By 1995 it had for some time been in use as an antiques' warehouse with a shop front on Westbourne Grove, Bayswater.

¹J.C. Trewin, *The Theatre Since 1900*, London, Andrew Dakers, 1951, pp 139-141 and p.209.

²The minutes for 21 November 1933 indicate that Ashwell was granted a license until the end of 1934. The minutes of 10 July 1934 imply that while licenses would continue to be granted, individual theatres would not be listed in the minutes, so it is not possible to tell from these exactly when Ashwell relinquished the lease.

³This work included the installation of a ceiling ventilation fan, hot water system and a false proscenium on the stage.

It was a difficult time for Ashwell. In *Myself A Player*, she concludes her chapter on ‘The Roundabouts’ with the following:

Frustration is bad for the health, and so when I sat down in the office to face the winding up and burial of so many hopes I found I was knocked out. After a short struggle I succumbed to an infuriated stomach, and the next two years had to be spent in bed. (p.250)

As well as enduring constant ill health and continuing to manage the Century, Ashwell suffered a great loss with the death of her husband in September 1932. Henry Simson had provided her with the financial and emotional security to pursue her ambitions and his death at sixty left her bereft and obliged to sell property (they owned two country houses and a London mews), to maintain her household. In the face of continuing illness and with a real sense of having failed to convince the “great Empire leading in world affairs, a powerful people,” that the theatre was “a power that might lead toward a vision without which we must perish” (ibid p.277), Ashwell, while still committed to her belief in the theatre as an instrument for human good, sought a strengthening of her personal faith.

I did not succeed in anything that I planned to do. This sounds very desperate and tragic, but really is quite the reverse. Trouble is the only lever God can use to wake us from the deep sleep of accepted values; hardship and pain keep us awake and striving; we fight our way through an ever-increasing awareness towards the vision of Beauty. There are many definitions of beauty, but it seems to me that there is only one path to it, the active co-operation of the mind with the Creative Life itself, the effort to obtain an actual, practical experience of the Plan of the Supreme Architect, the only Artist. (ibid p.278)

Ashwell continued her commitment to the teachings of James Porter Mills and when his book, *Knowledge is the Door*, was published under the auspices of The Fellowship of the Way in 1937, readers were advised that the Fellowship, “founded by Dr Porter Mills, is carried on by Miss Lena Ashwell.”⁴ What this entailed is unclear, but presumably Ashwell organised lectures and meetings for members and promoted the books and ideas of Mills through the secretariat based in Grosvenor Place, London. Ashwell described Mills as

a pioneer in that he brought a knowledge of the methods of the East into relation with the power of the revelation given to the world by the life of Jesus Christ... Prayer was not only the appeal to a transcendent being to remove our difficulties and temptations; but through meditation, or dwelling on the words of life, the mind could be transformed into an instrument of contact with that invisible reality, the realm of the Spirit... This is a new age with new concepts, and the emphasis is placed on the mind and its power to change our civilisation. (*Myself a Player* pp.278-279)

Other than copies of his books and pamphlets in the British Library, no further information has come to light on James Porter Mills, nor is it clear when Ashwell relinquished her responsibility in relation to the

⁴*Knowledge is the Door*: A Forerunner, London, J & E Bumpus Ltd, 1937. (This was first published in 1914.)

Fellowship. She never abandoned the quest for self knowledge – there are extant letters⁵ she wrote to Claude Bragdon, the American architect, author and lecturer, which express an interest in the occult and in Bragdon's writings which included *Old Lamps for New – The Ancient Wisdom in the Modern World*⁶. Throughout his life, Bragdon spoke

for the artistic conscience, resisting at every turn the debasing of beauty and formal values in the name of material progress, and positing as achievable goals the discoveries of the spiritual life. From two decades as a practising architect, he had turned to stage design⁷ and self-expression, merging the functionalism of Louis Sullivan and the theosophy of Annie Besant into a personal credo. (*Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 106)

In her letters Ashwell addressed Bragdon as a confidant and spiritual adviser – she posed many questions about his writings as well as expressing heartfelt concerns about the state of the world. Her response to the outbreak of the Second World War shows a woman deeply troubled by its impact on the young.

There is no exuberance as in 1914, no romance. Just facing the fight to the death against the forces of evil... We are so near too to all the heartache of Poland & the torture of the Jews & the cruelty, the abnormal cruelty which confronts civilization. There are days when it is hard to breathe even though so many horrors & so much misery have blunted the capacity for feeling.⁸

From this, it is possible to understand her wholehearted embrace of the Moral Re-Armament movement, which after the War sought to prevent a recurrence of such horrors.

BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE

Ashwell maintained her commitment to the League, continuing active involvement with the organisation until its work was suspended for the duration of the Second World War. The October 1929 issue of *Drama* expressed regret at the disbanding of the Lena Ashwell Players, hoping it would be only temporary; “The whole enterprise has been a piece of work of which Miss Ashwell may be justly proud, and which has done much to keep alive the idea of municipal drama in this country” (p.8).

Ashwell chaired the eleventh annual meeting of the League at its offices on 30 June 1930, when it was announced that the League's Council had decided to undertake widespread National Theatre propaganda during the coming winter.

Mr Holford Knight said that though we had the good fortune to possess in the present Prime Minister⁹ a man who has shown his sincere sympathy with the National Theatre idea, the prospects... were not bound up with the fortunes of any particular party. A scheme had been drawn up with the assistance of the ablest men of the Theatre, and it would, he felt

⁵These letters were written between 28 February 1939 and 3 September 1946 (shortly before his death) and imply a more extensive correspondence. Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester.

⁶This book was published in New York by Alfred A. Knopf, 1925.

⁷Bragdon wrote of his experiences in the theatre in *Merely Players*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1929.

⁸Letter to Claude Bragdon from Ashwell, 7 January 1940. Rush Rhees Collection, University of Rochester.

⁹This was James Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister of the Labour Government between 1929 and 1931.

convinced, shortly reach fruition. The movement had received a great impetus owing to the suggestion that part of the proceeds [profits] of the BBC should be devoted to this purpose... Mr Benson stated that he thought that before thinking of a National Theatre, support should be given to provincial little theatres and touring companies which were rapidly going out of business owing to the competition of the 'Talkies' ...Knight explained that the scheme provided a National Theatre Touring Company for the benefit of the Provinces. Miss Ashwell in summing up stated that that National Theatre had been at the forefront of the British Drama League programme since its inception in 1919, and she urged every member to do as much as possible to popularise the idea... She also urged those against the National Theatre to voice their protest so that more life might be put into the movement.

(Minutes of the XIth Annual meeting, *Drama*, October MCMXXX p.11-12)

At the conclusion of the meeting, describing herself "as an old member of the theatrical profession", Ashwell expressed her admiration for the work and national importance of the League, praising particularly Geoffrey Whitworth, "to whose indefatigable energy and infinite trouble the success of the League was due" (*ibid*).

At its annual conference in Exeter in late October 1930, Harley Granville Barker addressed the League on the National Theatre scheme submitted to the Government.

It envisaged a site in Central London, a theatre containing two auditoria, a larger one for spectacular and popular plays, a smaller one for those meant for minority audiences, who would help to 'nurse' certain plays into popularity; a permanent company; and a complete organisation under one roof... it was evident that a credit of about one million pounds would be needed.

(*Times* 3/11/30)

Granville Barker considered the project a large scale one that could not be built from small beginnings, rather requiring full commitment from Treasury. The possibility of having some of the BBC profits re-invested into the arts would require advocacy on the part of those committed to a National Theatre, "to work on building public support for this proposal" (*ibid*). Public subscription alone would not raise sufficient funds to make the above possible. Much of the League's energy for the next two decades went into the National Theatre scheme. A site was purchased in 1938, replaced in 1951 by another – at the south bank of the Thames River, where, eventually, in 1976 the first two theatre spaces opened.

Ashwell did not have a high public profile during the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s, but she did write an autobiography, published and duly acknowledged in 1936, and she continued active involvement, when her health permitted, in professional activities she had pursued throughout her career. For example, during the Drama League's 1936 Exhibition of Modern Scenic Design, which took place in association with the National Theatre Appeal Committee at the Thackeray Rooms in the department store Derry and Toms in Kensington High Street, London, she gave a Tea-time Address, on 23 April, appropriately entitled 'Shakespeare's Birthday'. Other speakers in this afternoon series of lectures included Elsie

Fogerty, Sir Philip Ben Greet, Geoffrey Whitworth and the principal of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Kenneth Barnes¹⁰.

She also retained a lively interest in and awareness of the changing styles in theatre writing and performance. Noel Coward particularly impressed her, prompting the following comments in *Myself A*

Player:

Among the increasing number of dramatists... there is one who works from inside [the theatre], the most successful... the richest, Noel Coward. Almost anything which he turns out attracts the public. He is the voice of the age. And as in the age itself there is cause for hope and faith, and deep cause for tears. Sometimes, when praise is pouring down upon his head there is regret that one who could do much should do so trivial and stupid a thing... then one is swept off one's feet with pure joy at seeing true theatre come back again. He has something which seemed... to be lost, the something that is theatre, the springs of drama bubbling up from life itself without effort. (p.266-7)

She does not comment on *Hay Fever* or *The Young Idea*, which were performed by the Lena Ashwell Players, but continues, perhaps telling as much about herself as Coward,

To me *Bitter Sweet* was something quite unforgettable, full of thought, critical, with sweet sympathy, and theatre, theatre, theatre, the lift out of the intellectual absorption of the observer into the mysterious places where love matters, and can't be picked to pieces because it is the greatest treasure which man has. Then *Cavalcade* which, with all the memories of the bitter, the cynical and the cruel, had still fragrance – the essence of loyalty and love. In the future, no doubt, the very learned will attribute this play to Mr Winston Churchill since Noel Coward was too young to have witnessed the scenes called up for us who had lived through them. The imagination is something of which the modern man has little knowledge. (p. 267)

Obviously influenced and informed by stage designer/architect, Claude Bragdon, she took an interest in technical changes taking place in the theatre at this time.

I keep working out the prosceniumless theatre & feel it is a real escape from the film & television (the new encroacher). They cannot do what a ring can do showing all sides of the picture, but it will take a long time & new methods of acting. The present theatre suffers from its aloofness & the modern effort at realism makes for separateness. It was a revelation to see George Robey (do you know the music hall star?) playing Falstaff. His asides to the audience & their response as if they were invisible friends, aiders & abettors of his secret thoughts.¹¹

Rather like Peggy Ashcroft in the generation following her, Ashwell assumed the mantle of an 'elder statesman' in the theatre, providing advice and support when called upon. Such was her involvement with the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA), established soon after the outbreak of World War II. *Myself A Player* was written too early to include details of Ashwell's contribution, primarily by example, to this organisation which provided, with official support (unlike Ashwell's experience in the First World War), wartime entertainment for the troops. She was a member of the international advisory

¹⁰Quoted from the Illustrated Catalogue published by the British Drama League, 1936. Theatre Museum, London.

committee for ENSA, which was led by Basil Dean¹², and she convened and chaired the Lectures Section as well as organising some of the Concert parties that went to the Front, but ill health prevented her more active involvement.

Her niece on the Simson family side, Fiona Edwards, who stayed with Ashwell and Hilda Pocock in both London and at their house, 'Ponders', in Chieveley, Buckinghamshire, during the war, remembers that at this time Ashwell was in poor health, after undergoing a major operation in 1943 and recuperating at Chieveley.¹³ Despite this, when the Drama League convened its first Conference for seven years, held in Birmingham in the autumn of 1946, a recovered Ashwell was present and no doubt pleased that

Conspicuous amongst the delegates were the large number of Drama Organisers – a professional body of experts, increasing daily in number, appointed and paid for by Municipal and County Councils and the Carnegie Trust. The afternoon session opened with an air of apprehension. Unity Theatre, that brilliant left-wing theatre group, had tabled a motion which looked suspiciously like a vote of censure... but all they wanted was 'less complacency'. During this debate I could not help noticing the faces of the people on the platform. Six years of war had not altered them much – in fact they all looked rather well. The old faces were all there. Mr Geoffrey Whitworth, calm and unruffled... Miss Frances Briggs, modest, retiring and indefatigable. Miss Lena Ashwell, stalwart of the stage, founder member of the League, brimming with good humour and energy. (She had just proposed in a neatly turned and witty speech the need for more Municipal theatres.)

(*Drama*, Autumn 1946, p.18)

The League's membership and activities grew steadily throughout the 1930s and despite the wartime suspension, the Winter 1946 edition of *Drama* advised that "On October 31st, 1945, the League's membership stood at 5,805. It is now 6,767. As against the 4,247 affiliated organisations on the register last year, the total has now risen to 4,711" (p.30). By the spring of 1948 membership was 7,253, with affiliated societies numbering 5,292. However, the original founders were getting older and times were changing. On 7 April 1948 Geoffrey Whitworth retired as Director of the League. At a gathering at the British Academy, London, Ashwell

in a moving speech spoke of the way in which, at precisely the right moment, Mr Whitworth had brought together many movements for the good of the theatre, which would otherwise have languished in isolation. She also referred to the modesty and self-effacement, unusual in leaders of national movements, which he had always shown throughout his career. 'This man has done the State great service,' she concluded. 'And at last they know it.'

(*Drama*, Summer 1948, p.25)

¹¹Letter from Ashwell to Claude Bragdon, 28 February 1939. Rush Rhees Collection, Rochester University.

¹²Dean's book, *The Theatre at War* (London, Harrap, 1956), gives a detailed account of ENSA but only briefly acknowledges Ashwell's contribution.

¹³This statement is from a conversation between Fiona Edwards and Henry Macnicol in Jamaica, March 1995, recorded and reported to the author.

Whitworth died three years later¹⁴ and in October 1952 Ashwell unveiled a plaque¹⁵ to his memory, commemorating his work as a founder of the League. Ten days prior to this ceremony, Ashwell's role was acknowledged when Athene Seyler unveiled a bust of Ashwell¹⁶, created by Peter Lamda, at the League's headquarters in Fitzroy Square, London. Seyler paid tribute to Ashwell's contribution to the theatre, Ashwell responded with the information that Geoffrey Whitworth had set up a subscription "to purchase the bust for presentation to the future National Theatre" (*Times* 22/9/52). This appears to have been Ashwell's last official appearance on behalf of the League, which later became the British Theatre Association, continuing to serve the professional and amateur theatre. It was never able to attract sustained public funding and went into liquidation in the autumn of 1990. One of its main assets, the huge library, was split up with playscripts going to south Wales, under the auspices of the Drama Association of Wales, while the bulk of the archive and reference library was given to the Theatre Museum. After seventy years, its demise left a large gap in the training and advice services available to amateur drama groups in England, as well as reducing the accessibility of playscripts and other resources for such groups.¹⁷

Ashwell maintained a commitment to, and involvement in, the activities of the Poetry Society during the war. She took part in the Society's Friday afternoon weekly Poetry Matinees at its Portman Square, London, base. The *Picture Post* photographed Ashwell reading Love Poems and described the matinees as "an essential wartime service" (13/4/40). Given Ashwell's love of poetry and the spoken word, together with her religious pursuits, it is understandable that she was drawn to the work of Christopher Fry.¹⁸ Although the letters she wrote to him between 1952 and 1954¹⁹ give no indication of the origin of their friendship, they reveal her continuing passion for purposeful theatre. Her letters indicate she was particularly interested in *The First Born*, *A Sleep of Prisoners* (from which she quoted in a speech²⁰) and *The Dark is Light Enough*²¹, which Fry wanted to dedicate to her. She followed the progress of this play, presumably reading a number of drafts, but suffered a slight stroke around the time of the opening performances and was not able to see the production. Ashwell wrote to Fry on 27 January, 1954, from her London address, 5 Belgrave Mews West, delighted that he should want to dedicate *The Dark is Light Enough* to her –

¹⁴Geoffrey Whitworth's son, Robin, was elected deputy chairman of the League in 1952.

¹⁵This plaque was placed at the Town Hall, Crayford, Kent, where nearby (at the Rodney Hut) in 1918 Whitworth had given a lecture on the theatre and decided to establish the League.

¹⁶This bust subsequently went to the National Theatre. A copy was displayed at the Westminster Theatre library until 1999 and is now in the possession of Ashwell's niece, Daphne Waterston, the Administration Secretary for MRA.

¹⁷Robert Hutchinson and Andrew Feist, *Amateur Arts in the U.K.*, Policy Studies Institute, London, 1991, p.55-6.

¹⁸Fry, an English playwright, born in 1907, has written a number of plays, including some on religious themes, in blank verse. *The Lady's Not For Burning* (1948), "seemed to herald a renaissance of poetic drama on the English Stage" (*Oxford Companion to Theatre*, op. cit. p.308).

¹⁹These letters are in the Theatre Museum collection, London.

²⁰Ashwell described the occasion to Fry in a letter dated 21 January (no year – but either 1952 or 1953).

²¹This play premiered at the Aldwych Theatre on 30 April 1954 with Edith Evans as the Countess Rosmarin.

it is a really great play and may make the world here see the hopeless futility of war (and many other things besides), so someone really important now might help to open their eyes to what a sad world they are building. I belong to the past and have only one virtue – my profound belief in the transforming power of the spoken word in the theatre, on the change of heart and mind a play creates... this moment, on our bad little planet is the moment of the power of ideas. The miracle of what our little minds might grow into. So, most wonderful friend – dedicate the play to the future and not to one who tried a little, failed much! Lena.

Fry prevailed, however, and the published text of *The Dark is Light Enough* contains the simple dedication: “To Lena Ashwell with affection and admiration. Christopher Fry. Edith Evans.”²² On 6 April 1954, she wrote wondering how the play was progressing and anxious for it to be presented. She felt that

at this moment in civilization the theatre should be alive and real – these dreadfully stupid old plays, *A Woman of No Importance*, *The Way of the World*, are given at tremendous expense – over produced, over dressed, over expensive – seem a very poor tribute to the hope of a new world ... I am... praying that your play will come to show that the theatre has real life and brings a new hope and not these dead rays of the past.

Ironically, just two years later, John Osborne’s ‘kitchen-sink’ realism in *Look Back in Anger* rapidly began to displace Fry’s poetic drama as the new drama, though hardly a new drama that would have pleased the ailing Ashwell.

The letters Fry kept from his friendship with Ashwell and her sister Hilda Pocock also reveal Ashwell’s fragile state of health and her dependence on friendship at this time. The letters dated between 1 June and 28 December 1954 were dictated by Lena and written by Hilda, who takes the opportunity to give progress reports on Lena’s fluctuating condition. Ashwell retained her curiosity about her friend’s writings and welcomed visitors such as Edith Evans to keep her up to date. Fry obviously wrote regarding his work, but his letters to Ashwell have not been found.

MORAL RE-ARMAMENT

Two of Ashwell’s letters to Christopher Fry (dated 23rd September 1952 and 6 April 1954), make reference to Moral Re-Armament (MRA) and from the late 1940s this movement was to be the focus of her energy and commitment until her death. Moral Re-Armament (also known as the Oxford Group) was “a nondenominational revivalistic movement founded by U.S. churchman Frank N.D. Buchman (1878-1961).”²³ Launched in 1922, it sought to deepen the spiritual life of individuals while encouraging them to continue as members of their own churches.

Buchman hoped that the world would avoid war if individuals experienced a moral and spiritual awakening. In its peak years after World War II, MRA sent ‘task forces’ to all corners of the free world to carry out its program, in part through plays emphasizing cooperation, honesty, and mutual respect between opposing groups... Its theology was simple and conservative. It featured surrender to Jesus Christ and sharing with others whose

²²Christopher Fry, *The Light is Dark Enough*, Oxford University Press, London, 1954.

²³*New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Volume 8, Fifteenth Edition, Chicago, 1998, p.307.

lives have been changed in pursuit of four moral absolutes: purity, unselfishness, honesty, and love. (ibid)

Ashwell came in contact with the movement through her involvement with the Westminster Theatre (sited between Buckingham Palace and Victoria Station, London) and through the commitment of her nephew, Henry Macnicol. She helped raise funds to assist Anmer Hall when he converted the former Charlotte Chapel (built in 1766) from its 1920s adaptation as the St James' Picture Theatre into a live theatre, which Hall named the Westminster in 1932. During the 1930s the theatre saw many productions of avant garde drama, including plays by James Bridie and Pirandello. The Group Theatre presented works by Auden, Isherwood, Spencer and MacNeice, followed in 1938 by the J.B. Priestley/Ronald Jeans initiated London Mask Theatre. Ashwell attended many performances at the Westminster, including Priestley's *Music at Night*, which she described as "arresting, but [it] didn't quite come off."²⁴

"In 1946 the Theatre was acquired by the Westminster Memorial Trust as a living memorial to the men and women of Moral Re-Armament who had given their lives in the fight against Hitler."²⁵ Ashwell attended the dedication ceremony, meeting MRA playwright and chaplain, Alan Thornhill²⁶ and other MRA members such as Bunny Austin (the former tennis champion) and his wife, Phyllis. In 1948, when Ashwell was 79, Austin invited her to the MRA headquarters in Caux, Switzerland, where she began working as an advisor and producer with the group's actors and writers. Austin wrote of Ashwell at that time – "Lena was in her late seventies, but she had the vitality of a woman half her age... It was hard to keep up with her."²⁷

From all accounts, Ashwell thrived on this new theatrical venture. In his eulogy at her memorial service Alan Thornhill declared:

She had a marvellous way to see in actors, many rough and ready and many very new, some quality of unselfconsciousness and naturalness which touches with real conviction and sincerity that could be turned into artistry and power. She had the eye to see in these plays their real purpose to do again what the first plays in our theatre of the Middle Ages tried to do – to bring faith to simple men and women who at that time did not know how to read or write. And perhaps it is true that in this age, when so many people are spiritually or morally illiterate, we need miracle and mystery plays of today that aim to give men some of the ABCs of faith and of a cure for the ills that afflict us personally and in our nations.²⁸

²⁴Letter from Ashwell to Claude Bragdon dated 7 January 1940, Rush Rhees Collection, University of Rochester.

²⁵Quoted from programme note describing the Westminster Theatre in the programme for *Sentenced to Life*, by Malcolm Muggeridge and Alan Thornhill, Westminster Theatre, May 1978 (author's collection).

²⁶The Reverend Alan Thornhill's first MRA play, *The Forgotten Factor* (which included Ashwell's nephew Henry in the cast for the Westminster production in 1948), was premiered in 1943 in Washington. Thornhill continued as a writer and churchman, travelling from Denmark to London in March 1957 to conduct Ashwell's memorial service.

²⁷Bunny Austin, *A Mixed Double*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1969, p.180.

²⁸From a transcript, dated 20 March 1957, in MRA archives, courtesy of Aline Faunce, Wirral, Merseyside, England.

Ashwell subsequently met Frank Buchman and for the next few years travelled regularly to Caux, speaking at conferences and advising on productions of MRA plays such as the musical revue *The Good Road*²⁹ and Thornhill's *The Forgotten Factor*. When *The Good Road* was performed at His Majesty's Theatre, London, in November 1948, it was under the auspices of MRA's National Committee of Invitation, of which Ashwell was a member. This committee comprised seventy-three titled and important supporters of MRA, including author Daphne Du Maurier, the Countess of Antrim and Sir Robert and Lady Young. Ashwell returned to the stage playing the role of Lady Arlington in another Thornhill play, *Annie The Valiant*, which was premiered during the MRA World Assembly at the Theatre, Mountain House, Caux, Switzerland, on 14 July 1950. In early January 1951, during one of Buchman's extensive American tours, Ashwell performed the role with the company during a short season at the Lisner Auditorium in Washington. The play tells "the life story of Annie Jaeger, one of the pioneers of Moral Re-Armament in the world of labour."³⁰ While in America, Ashwell co-directed, with Howard Reynolds, a production of Cecil Broadhurst's musical play, *Jotham Valley*, with MRA members at New York's Coronet Theatre. Her suggestion that they perform a special matinee to inform actors and actresses of the work of the Moral Re-Armament movement was taken up, and provided Ashwell with the opportunity to address the audience "on her vision for the theatre and its part in inspiring a better world."³¹ This production was performed subsequently at the Beverley Hills High School Auditorium and the Carthay Circle Theatre, Hollywood, during July and August 1951. While in America Ashwell had a fall, breaking a bone in her leg. When she returned to London she was less able to travel, from then on concentrating her energies, with the assistance of her sister, on the promotion of MRA ideals in London.

On 25 March 1953 Ashwell and Hilda Pocock convened a meeting for women at the Cowdray Hall, London. They sought to inform leaders of groups such as the National Council of Women, the Anglo-American Teachers' Exchange, the Royal College of Nursing, the Colonial Office and Embassies, the Salvation Army and Co-operative organisations of the world advance of Moral Re-Armament. After a moment's silence in memory of Queen Mary, who had died the previous day, Ashwell and Pocock acknowledged there was prejudice against the movement but called on the 270 people present to use the opportunity to understand the organisation's motives. Ashwell reminded them that she had fought as a suffragette against the perception that "only ugly women want the vote!"³² She considered the uniting of nations through MRA to be as worthwhile a fight as that of the suffragettes. Besides informing women's groups of MRA's work and representatives (Ashwell and Pocock) in England, this meeting apparently

²⁹This was written by the cast who performed it in a preview in Caux on 11 September 1947 and subsequently in New York, Boston, Montreal, Washington, Los Angeles, San Francisco, then in Switzerland, Holland, Germany and England, opening in London at His Majesty's Theatre on 10 November 1948. MRA Archives.

³⁰Quoted from a MRA Press release dated 15 August 1950. MRA Archives. A script of this play was not found, but there may be a manuscript copy in the MRA Archives in the Library of Congress, Washington.

³¹From MRA archives and correspondence between the author and Henry Macnicol.

³²From a transcript of Ashwell's speech for this occasion. MRA archives.

Figure 45: Promotional material for *Jotham Valley*, co-directed by Lena Ashwell in 1951. (Moral Re-Armament Archives)

resulted in a radio broadcast on Woman's Hour on 1 June 1953, the eve of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, in which a housewife spoke of the ways in which the ordinary woman at home and at work could back the Queen in her task. Individuals also responded by arranging lunches in Birmingham and Eastbourne, as well as a meeting in Edinburgh.³³

Ashwell addressed a further MRA public meeting at the Royal Festival Hall, London, on 10 May 1953. At this, her last public appearance in England, she gave a short address, declaring

As old as I am, I am aiming to be here in another 20 years you know. It is a great thing to be 80 and know you have found something worth living for. With all my heart, I recommend you all to look at the deep freeze in your own minds, and open and melt it, so you see the great value, the great mission and great movement of Moral Re-Armament. (ibid)

Six weeks later, Ashwell and Pocock wrote what they called 'A Letter to the Women of Britain'. Dated 22 June 1953 and signed by the sisters, it appears to have been sent as a Press Release from the Moral Re-Armament office in Berkeley Square, London. As passionate as Ashwell's war-time pleas for support, the letter calls on the female half of the population to see "how very deeply materialism of the Right and of the Left is destroying the life of this country." Ashwell and Pocock declared they were hopeful that MRA was making a difference, but exhorted women to "Make it your business to know what is going on in the world and learn the answer. Pass on that answer to other women of all classes." Ashwell was seeking to involve local communities, as she had done when raising funds for the Concert parties and with the Friends of the Players. She and Pocock sought to encourage women to unite with their neighbours in establishing groups to promote the cause. They offered to provide answers to any questions, giving their home address as the point of contact. Ashwell's last public gesture for MRA was at Caux on 27 July 1953, when she addressed a Conference of supporters. "I have found the great value of the effort for personal change and mind you, it is very difficult and very hard, and very painful and the awful thing is that it is always going on. It never stops....it doesn't matter how old you are. You are still free to be changed."³⁴

However, by now her health was extremely fragile – tributes following her death indicate that the last few years of her life were spent very quietly. She suffered a number of strokes which rendered her speechless and bedridden, but she retained her enthusiasm for the ideals of MRA to the end. Hilda Pocock proved a devoted nurse to her sister. Bunny Austin has written: "These two old ladies were like sturdy oaks with their roots deep in the great traditions of Britain."³⁵

³³From the Letter to the Women of Britain from Lena Ashwell and Hilda Pocock, 22 June 1953. MRA Archives.

³⁴From a transcript in MRA archives.

³⁵*A Mixed Double*, op. cit. p.180.

CONCLUSION

Lena Ashwell died at home in London on 13 March 1957, aged 87. The *Times* obituary described her as “an actress whose emotional force and sincerity were perhaps unique in the English theatre during the comparatively short time during which she played leading parts... everything that she did rang true” (15/3/57). Her influence “in the theatre of her generation was always salutary” (ibid) – a view expressed by those who paid tribute in print³⁶ and those who spoke at her memorial service at Christ Church, Down Street, London W1 on 20 March 1957.³⁷ Edith Evans, Athene Seyler and the Reverend Alan Thornhill recalled her life-long youthful voice and passion for the theatre. Frank Buchman was unable to attend, but sent a message saying “Lena has taken her last call. The curtain goes up for her on the new world for which she longed and fought” (ibid).

Perhaps Violet Markham’s tribute, published in the *Times* three weeks after Ashwell’s death, best sums up Ashwell’s role in a changing world and the response, from her friends and colleagues, to her death.

Lena Ashwell was not only a distinguished actress but a woman of wide sympathies and culture who touched other and varied sides of life. As her life went on her power of spiritual insight grew ever greater. Her interests were deeply concerned with the borderland where the practical evidence of the five senses merges into a new experience of the life of the spirit. In a material world she hoisted and kept flying a banner inscribed with her faith in the spiritual basis of the Universe. Though this aspect of her life was not known to the general public, a wide circle of friends knew her as a guide and teacher to those who sought to follow the Way under her direction. She knew by experience the power latent in silence and meditation and their healing quality in the difficulties and perplexities of life. Sometimes I heard her speak with the inspiration of a prophet to the small group gathered around her. She was not concerned with creeds and forms but the bringing home to her class what she held to be the potent spark of the divine in the human heart and the infinite possibilities latent in it. It was a grief to her friends that sickness and ill-health should have laid a heavy hand on her closing years and not least to the sister who nursed her with such devoted care. The order of release, now it has come, has set free a fine and tender spirit. (*Times* 3/4/57)

Five years later, and two years before her death at the age of ninety-three, Hilda Pocock presented the Westminster Theatre with a sculptured head of Ashwell, which was unveiled by Edith Evans on 23 May 1962 and placed in the Dress Circle Foyer and subsequently, in the library. Sometime later, relatives provided funds to equip one of the theatre’s then new dressing rooms. Until recent building works at this site in 1999, there was a plaque on the door dedicating Dressing Room 2 to the memory of Ashwell – “actress, patriot, pioneer.”

Ashwell is best remembered as an actress who specialised in unconventional women and representatives of the ‘new woman’ in the Edwardian theatre. Her roles in *Mrs Dane’s Defence* (1900) and *Diana of Dobson’s* (1908) are referred to in accounts of the theatre of the period, partly because the plays were

³⁶Athene Seyler and Phyllis Whitworth paid tribute in *Drama*, Summer, 1957, No. 45, pp.35-36.

³⁷Transcripts of these tributes were provided from the MRA archives by Ms Aline Faunce, Wirral, Merseyside, England.

considered to be important examples of realism in a changing social environment and because the authors, Henry Arthur Jones and Cicely Hamilton, were also significant for their body of work and the points of view they expressed through their plays. Ashwell has received less recognition for her encouragement of new writing in the theatre, particularly at the Kingsway Theatre, but also during the 1920s, and for her support and encouragement of women playwrights. In the short periods of her forays into theatrical management before the First World War, she presented at least fifteen new full length and one-act plays. As a theatre and company manager she encouraged women to develop their skills as directors and back stage technical operators. Her innovations as a manager included the creation of repertory companies, support of young musicians and a genuine relationship with her audience and wider community. From as early as 1899 with her appearance in *Grierson's Way*, she was prepared to use the theatre to address the human condition, presenting and performing in such plays as *Leah Kleschna*, *The Shulamite*, *Irene Wycherley* and *The Earth*. Through the pursuit of a purposeful theatre, both an actress and manager, she began to find and use her voice as an effective means to challenge the status quo both on and off stage. Her role in the female suffrage fight has been given some acknowledgement, but accounts have failed to notice that Ashwell was one of the few members of the Actresses' Franchise League who progressed quickly through the movement to emerge as an articulate spokeswoman on women's issues beyond the winning of the vote. She continued the role of advocate for equality and shared responsibility until her death in 1957.

Ashwell's wartime achievements alone should have guaranteed her recognition. Her swift and immediate reaction to the outbreak of war in 1914 provided hope and comfort to thousands of soldiers and hundreds of performers. Since the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, governments have seen the need to provide comfort and morale boosters for the troops in the form of entertainment, but even accounts of the creation of ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association) imply that the idea was a new one in 1939.³⁸ Similar neglect can be found in accounts of public subsidy for the arts. Despite Ashwell's groundbreaking work with local councils during the 1920s and her consistent advocacy for government support as was being given elsewhere in Europe, historical accounts of the origins of the Arts Council of Great Britain (the principal state supported funding body for the arts) consider 1930, with the creation of the Pilgrim Trust, to be the starting point.³⁹ No mention is made of Ashwell's initiatives which provided practical examples of appropriate working relationships between the arts and the community, which are still part of the modus operandi of many regionally based arts organisations and local government authorities. These initiatives, together with her energetic involvement in the British Drama League,

³⁸For example, John Graven Hughes writes: "Although previous battles might well have been won without the help of troop concerts, what had been for centuries a minor inconvenience fought by hardened professionals became by the end of 1940 a universal death struggle... there developed among servicemen and war workers, in fact the whole population whose familiar world had crumbled, a longing to rediscover if only for an hour or two a magic enclave where war faded into insignificance" (*The Greasepaint War*, London, New English Library, 1976, p.56). He makes no mention of Ashwell's work in the First World War.

³⁹Eric W. White, *The Arts Council of Great Britain*, London, Davis-Poynter, 1975, Chapters 1 and 2.

helped shape arts provision (much now sadly eroded by financial constraints) not only throughout Britain, but also, by example, especially post Second World War, in Commonwealth countries as far afield as Australia.

Ashwell's memory has not fared well at the National Theatre – the bust stored in the Chairman's office there declares she was an 'Actress and Pioneer of a National Theatre', but she is not even mentioned as such in any recent accounts of the theatre buildings and company situated on London's Southbank.⁴⁰ It was many years after its completion in 1976 before the National Theatre began touring its productions to theatres elsewhere in Great Britain and Europe. More than fifty years before this, while others merely talked about it, Ashwell was on the road with her company, advocating a National Theatre as part of the provision of municipal theatres and providing communities with access to a wide repertoire of plays, including Shakespeare. Given her contribution, it is not easy to understand her neglect by social or theatre historians, even if the original protagonists were embarrassed by her activity in the face of their inertia.

Similarly, with the arts in education. Access to the arts in all forms is now an accepted part of formal education, but at the time when Ashwell was a strong voice in promoting both the credibility and benefit of such access, there were many who resisted – either because they considered the theatre lacked respectability or it was outside of their interest or experience. Ashwell's awareness of the beneficial impact of good music and drama on the soldier heightened her determination to share this experience in the wider community and she never missed an opportunity to promote this objective.

As with many changes to society that began after 1919, Ashwell was influential in changing attitudes and providing positive examples. This influence was also detected through her commitment to improve the conditions of work and status of actors. Throughout her career as an actress and manager she played an active role in professional organisations established to help their members in the pursuit of careers that have never provided much security or stability. Inspired by Henry Irving, she was not afraid to criticise what she saw as working against the credibility of the profession and she sought lively debate to ensure questions were asked and problems were addressed.

Even in retirement, enforced to a large extent by ill-health, Ashwell advocated the presentation of dramatic literature as a way of stimulating positive attitudes and countering superficial and materialistic responses to a rapidly changing world. Throughout all her endeavours, she inspired the support of like-minded colleagues and was sustained by a close-knit family, a fulfilling marriage and strong religious beliefs.

⁴⁰Given Laurence Olivier's appointment as the first Director of the National Theatre, while it is unforgivable of him to have ignored Ashwell's contribution, it is nevertheless understandable – perhaps he did not want to be reminded of the inauspicious start to his career with her company.

Figure 46: Lena Ashwell aged 80. (Photo courtesy Henry Macnicol)

It is hoped this thesis has provided substantial evidence that Ashwell made a major contribution to the theatre and society not only of her time, but that this contribution resonates even today through existing organisations and attitudes as well as in aspirations for future endeavour in the arts in society.

Hers was a formidable spirit, and as John Masefield acknowledged, when dedicating his *Sonnets of Good Cheer* to the Lena Ashwell Players:

Generally, the inspiration of all little communities that are worth their salt and are doing memorable work, comes from one person... Inspiration is a vague word for several qualities; such as faith, that the work is worth doing; hope, that the world may some day know this; and courage, to keep the thing going, in the midst of adversity. It is always by such qualities of soul that the individual inspires the little band to go down into the trouble to alter the thought of the world.⁴¹

⁴¹John Masefield, Preface to *Sonnets of Good Cheer*, London, 1925.

POSTSCRIPT: 1930-1957 'Actress, Patriot, Pioneer'

MANAGING THE CENTURY THEATRE

J.C Trewin, has written that

The theatre during the nineteen-twenties seemed always to be working at full and anxious stretch... altogether the decade was a chaos of contradictions, doubts, and conflicting enthusiasms... [However] during the thirties, a relatively jaded, zestless decade, the theatre – surprised, no doubt, to find that its reckoning-day had not come – sat back and wondered what it could do next.¹

The above statement was written in the late 1940s and must be seen as a retrospective overview.

However, it does seem an appropriate and applicable comment on Ashwell's working environment. At the end of the 1920s she was obliged to abandon, largely for financial reasons, work she had undertaken 'at full and anxious stretch' for a decade and which was impossible for her to continue into the 1930s. She was sixty, still the leaseholder of the Century Theatre and with an accumulated deficit of some £5000. After the final performances by the Players in early August 1929, company members sought other work in the theatrical profession. According to the minutes of the London County Council, Ashwell retained the lease on the Century Theatre until the end of 1934² and possibly into 1935. From 1924 to 1933 she made annual application to the Theatres and Music Halls Committee for stage play licenses. These minutes also record alterations and improvements she made to the Century during the 1920s.³ The theatre accommodated approximately 370 people, so box office income could never be very large. The building was extensive – besides the hall used as the theatre, there was a similar sized large hall beneath it, suitable for dances. Ashwell's licence, however, did not permit her to use this hall for public events – it might have been possible to make money if she had been able to present dances there. Overall, however, the building had facilities attractive to hirers – there were dressing rooms, rehearsal space in the lower hall, a kitchen and buffet area, workshops and storage areas, as well as two offices. To pay off her debt, Ashwell rented the Century to amateur theatre and other arts and community groups from mid 1929 to the end of 1934 (details on such hirers and what they presented were not researched for this thesis). Extant publicity leaflets indicate that during 1935 the Rudolf Steiner Association became the proprietors and Vera Compton-Burnett the licensee of what became known as the Twentieth Century Theatre. The Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain and the Rudolf Steiner Association presented performances of eurhythmy, recitals, lectures and workshops at the theatre for a number of years, after which it was sold for commercial, non-theatre use. By 1995 it had for some time been in use as an antiques' warehouse with a shop front on Westbourne Grove, Bayswater.

¹J.C. Trewin, *The Theatre Since 1900*, London, Andrew Dakers, 1951, pp 139-141 and p.209.

²The minutes for 21 November 1933 indicate that Ashwell was granted a license until the end of 1934. The minutes of 10 July 1934 imply that while licenses would continue to be granted, individual theatres would not be listed in the minutes, so it is not possible to tell from these exactly when Ashwell relinquished the lease.

³This work included the installation of a ceiling ventilation fan, hot water system and a false proscenium on the stage.

It was a difficult time for Ashwell. In *Myself A Player*, she concludes her chapter on ‘The Roundabouts’ with the following:

Frustration is bad for the health, and so when I sat down in the office to face the winding up and burial of so many hopes I found I was knocked out. After a short struggle I succumbed to an infuriated stomach, and the next two years had to be spent in bed. (p.250)

As well as enduring constant ill health and continuing to manage the Century, Ashwell suffered a great loss with the death of her husband in September 1932. Henry Simson had provided her with the financial and emotional security to pursue her ambitions and his death at sixty left her bereft and obliged to sell property (they owned two country houses and a London mews), to maintain her household. In the face of continuing illness and with a real sense of having failed to convince the “great Empire leading in world affairs, a powerful people,” that the theatre was “a power that might lead toward a vision without which we must perish” (ibid p.277), Ashwell, while still committed to her belief in the theatre as an instrument for human good, sought a strengthening of her personal faith.

I did not succeed in anything that I planned to do. This sounds very desperate and tragic, but really is quite the reverse. Trouble is the only lever God can use to wake us from the deep sleep of accepted values; hardship and pain keep us awake and striving; we fight our way through an ever-increasing awareness towards the vision of Beauty. There are many definitions of beauty, but it seems to me that there is only one path to it, the active co-operation of the mind with the Creative Life itself, the effort to obtain an actual, practical experience of the Plan of the Supreme Architect, the only Artist. (ibid p.278)

Ashwell continued her commitment to the teachings of James Porter Mills and when his book, *Knowledge is the Door*, was published under the auspices of The Fellowship of the Way in 1937, readers were advised that the Fellowship, “founded by Dr Porter Mills, is carried on by Miss Lena Ashwell.”⁴ What this entailed is unclear, but presumably Ashwell organised lectures and meetings for members and promoted the books and ideas of Mills through the secretariat based in Grosvenor Place, London. Ashwell described Mills as

a pioneer in that he brought a knowledge of the methods of the East into relation with the power of the revelation given to the world by the life of Jesus Christ... Prayer was not only the appeal to a transcendent being to remove our difficulties and temptations; but through meditation, or dwelling on the words of life, the mind could be transformed into an instrument of contact with that invisible reality, the realm of the Spirit... This is a new age with new concepts, and the emphasis is placed on the mind and its power to change our civilisation. (*Myself a Player* pp.278-279)

Other than copies of his books and pamphlets in the British Library, no further information has come to light on James Porter Mills, nor is it clear when Ashwell relinquished her responsibility in relation to the

⁴*Knowledge is the Door*: A Forerunner, London, J & E Bumpus Ltd, 1937. (This was first published in 1914.)

Fellowship. She never abandoned the quest for self knowledge – there are extant letters⁵ she wrote to Claude Bragdon, the American architect, author and lecturer, which express an interest in the occult and in Bragdon's writings which included *Old Lamps for New – The Ancient Wisdom in the Modern World*⁶. Throughout his life, Bragdon spoke

for the artistic conscience, resisting at every turn the debasing of beauty and formal values in the name of material progress, and positing as achievable goals the discoveries of the spiritual life. From two decades as a practising architect, he had turned to stage design⁷ and self-expression, merging the functionalism of Louis Sullivan and the theosophy of Annie Besant into a personal credo. (*Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 106)

In her letters Ashwell addressed Bragdon as a confidant and spiritual adviser – she posed many questions about his writings as well as expressing heartfelt concerns about the state of the world. Her response to the outbreak of the Second World War shows a woman deeply troubled by its impact on the young.

There is no exuberance as in 1914, no romance. Just facing the fight to the death against the forces of evil... We are so near too to all the heartache of Poland & the torture of the Jews & the cruelty, the abnormal cruelty which confronts civilization. There are days when it is hard to breathe even though so many horrors & so much misery have blunted the capacity for feeling.⁸

From this, it is possible to understand her wholehearted embrace of the Moral Re-Armament movement, which after the War sought to prevent a recurrence of such horrors.

BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE

Ashwell maintained her commitment to the League, continuing active involvement with the organisation until its work was suspended for the duration of the Second World War. The October 1929 issue of *Drama* expressed regret at the disbanding of the Lena Ashwell Players, hoping it would be only temporary; “The whole enterprise has been a piece of work of which Miss Ashwell may be justly proud, and which has done much to keep alive the idea of municipal drama in this country” (p.8).

Ashwell chaired the eleventh annual meeting of the League at its offices on 30 June 1930, when it was announced that the League's Council had decided to undertake widespread National Theatre propaganda during the coming winter.

Mr Holford Knight said that though we had the good fortune to possess in the present Prime Minister⁹ a man who has shown his sincere sympathy with the National Theatre idea, the prospects... were not bound up with the fortunes of any particular party. A scheme had been drawn up with the assistance of the ablest men of the Theatre, and it would, he felt

⁵These letters were written between 28 February 1939 and 3 September 1946 (shortly before his death) and imply a more extensive correspondence. Rush Rhees collection, University of Rochester.

⁶This book was published in New York by Alfred A. Knopf, 1925.

⁷Bragdon wrote of his experiences in the theatre in *Merely Players*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1929.

⁸Letter to Claude Bragdon from Ashwell, 7 January 1940. Rush Rhees Collection, University of Rochester.

⁹This was James Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister of the Labour Government between 1929 and 1931.

convinced, shortly reach fruition. The movement had received a great impetus owing to the suggestion that part of the proceeds [profits] of the BBC should be devoted to this purpose... Mr Benson stated that he thought that before thinking of a National Theatre, support should be given to provincial little theatres and touring companies which were rapidly going out of business owing to the competition of the 'Talkies' ...Knight explained that the scheme provided a National Theatre Touring Company for the benefit of the Provinces. Miss Ashwell in summing up stated that that National Theatre had been at the forefront of the British Drama League programme since its inception in 1919, and she urged every member to do as much as possible to popularise the idea... She also urged those against the National Theatre to voice their protest so that more life might be put into the movement.

(Minutes of the XIth Annual meeting, *Drama*, October MCMXXX p.11-12)

At the conclusion of the meeting, describing herself "as an old member of the theatrical profession", Ashwell expressed her admiration for the work and national importance of the League, praising particularly Geoffrey Whitworth, "to whose indefatigable energy and infinite trouble the success of the League was due" (*ibid*).

At its annual conference in Exeter in late October 1930, Harley Granville Barker addressed the League on the National Theatre scheme submitted to the Government.

It envisaged a site in Central London, a theatre containing two auditoria, a larger one for spectacular and popular plays, a smaller one for those meant for minority audiences, who would help to 'nurse' certain plays into popularity; a permanent company; and a complete organisation under one roof... it was evident that a credit of about one million pounds would be needed.

(*Times* 3/11/30)

Granville Barker considered the project a large scale one that could not be built from small beginnings, rather requiring full commitment from Treasury. The possibility of having some of the BBC profits re-invested into the arts would require advocacy on the part of those committed to a National Theatre, "to work on building public support for this proposal" (*ibid*). Public subscription alone would not raise sufficient funds to make the above possible. Much of the League's energy for the next two decades went into the National Theatre scheme. A site was purchased in 1938, replaced in 1951 by another – at the south bank of the Thames River, where, eventually, in 1976 the first two theatre spaces opened.

Ashwell did not have a high public profile during the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s, but she did write an autobiography, published and duly acknowledged in 1936, and she continued active involvement, when her health permitted, in professional activities she had pursued throughout her career. For example, during the Drama League's 1936 Exhibition of Modern Scenic Design, which took place in association with the National Theatre Appeal Committee at the Thackeray Rooms in the department store Derry and Toms in Kensington High Street, London, she gave a Tea-time Address, on 23 April, appropriately entitled 'Shakespeare's Birthday'. Other speakers in this afternoon series of lectures included Elsie

Fogerty, Sir Philip Ben Greet, Geoffrey Whitworth and the principal of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Kenneth Barnes¹⁰.

She also retained a lively interest in and awareness of the changing styles in theatre writing and performance. Noel Coward particularly impressed her, prompting the following comments in *Myself A Player*:

Among the increasing number of dramatists... there is one who works from inside [the theatre], the most successful... the richest, Noel Coward. Almost anything which he turns out attracts the public. He is the voice of the age. And as in the age itself there is cause for hope and faith, and deep cause for tears. Sometimes, when praise is pouring down upon his head there is regret that one who could do much should do so trivial and stupid a thing... then one is swept off one's feet with pure joy at seeing true theatre come back again. He has something which seemed... to be lost, the something that is theatre, the springs of drama bubbling up from life itself without effort. (p.266-7)

She does not comment on *Hay Fever* or *The Young Idea*, which were performed by the Lena Ashwell Players, but continues, perhaps telling as much about herself as Coward,

To me *Bitter Sweet* was something quite unforgettable, full of thought, critical, with sweet sympathy, and theatre, theatre, theatre, the lift out of the intellectual absorption of the observer into the mysterious places where love matters, and can't be picked to pieces because it is the greatest treasure which man has. Then *Cavalcade* which, with all the memories of the bitter, the cynical and the cruel, had still fragrance – the essence of loyalty and love. In the future, no doubt, the very learned will attribute this play to Mr Winston Churchill since Noel Coward was too young to have witnessed the scenes called up for us who had lived through them. The imagination is something of which the modern man has little knowledge. (p. 267)

Obviously influenced and informed by stage designer/architect, Claude Bragdon, she took an interest in technical changes taking place in the theatre at this time.

I keep working out the prosceniumless theatre & feel it is a real escape from the film & television (the new encroacher). They cannot do what a ring can do showing all sides of the picture, but it will take a long time & new methods of acting. The present theatre suffers from its aloofness & the modern effort at realism makes for separateness. It was a revelation to see George Robey (do you know the music hall star?) playing Falstaff. His asides to the audience & their response as if they were invisible friends, aiders & abettors of his secret thoughts.¹¹

Rather like Peggy Ashcroft in the generation following her, Ashwell assumed the mantle of an 'elder statesman' in the theatre, providing advice and support when called upon. Such was her involvement with the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA), established soon after the outbreak of World War II. *Myself A Player* was written too early to include details of Ashwell's contribution, primarily by example, to this organisation which provided, with official support (unlike Ashwell's experience in the First World War), wartime entertainment for the troops. She was a member of the international advisory

¹⁰Quoted from the Illustrated Catalogue published by the British Drama League, 1936. Theatre Museum, London.

committee for ENSA, which was led by Basil Dean¹², and she convened and chaired the Lectures Section as well as organising some of the Concert parties that went to the Front, but ill health prevented her more active involvement.

Her niece on the Simson family side, Fiona Edwards, who stayed with Ashwell and Hilda Pocock in both London and at their house, 'Ponders', in Chieveley, Buckinghamshire, during the war, remembers that at this time Ashwell was in poor health, after undergoing a major operation in 1943 and recuperating at Chieveley.¹³ Despite this, when the Drama League convened its first Conference for seven years, held in Birmingham in the autumn of 1946, a recovered Ashwell was present and no doubt pleased that

Conspicuous amongst the delegates were the large number of Drama Organisers – a professional body of experts, increasing daily in number, appointed and paid for by Municipal and County Councils and the Carnegie Trust. The afternoon session opened with an air of apprehension. Unity Theatre, that brilliant left-wing theatre group, had tabled a motion which looked suspiciously like a vote of censure... but all they wanted was 'less complacency'. During this debate I could not help noticing the faces of the people on the platform. Six years of war had not altered them much – in fact they all looked rather well. The old faces were all there. Mr Geoffrey Whitworth, calm and unruffled... Miss Frances Briggs, modest, retiring and indefatigable. Miss Lena Ashwell, stalwart of the stage, founder member of the League, brimming with good humour and energy. (She had just proposed in a neatly turned and witty speech the need for more Municipal theatres.)

(*Drama*, Autumn 1946, p.18)

The League's membership and activities grew steadily throughout the 1930s and despite the wartime suspension, the Winter 1946 edition of *Drama* advised that "On October 31st, 1945, the League's membership stood at 5,805. It is now 6,767. As against the 4,247 affiliated organisations on the register last year, the total has now risen to 4,711" (p.30). By the spring of 1948 membership was 7,253, with affiliated societies numbering 5,292. However, the original founders were getting older and times were changing. On 7 April 1948 Geoffrey Whitworth retired as Director of the League. At a gathering at the British Academy, London, Ashwell

in a moving speech spoke of the way in which, at precisely the right moment, Mr Whitworth had brought together many movements for the good of the theatre, which would otherwise have languished in isolation. She also referred to the modesty and self-effacement, unusual in leaders of national movements, which he had always shown throughout his career. 'This man has done the State great service,' she concluded. 'And at last they know it.'

(*Drama*, Summer 1948, p.25)

¹¹Letter from Ashwell to Claude Bragdon, 28 February 1939. Rush Rhees Collection, Rochester University.

¹²Dean's book, *The Theatre at War* (London, Harrap, 1956), gives a detailed account of ENSA but only briefly acknowledges Ashwell's contribution.

¹³This statement is from a conversation between Fiona Edwards and Henry Macnicol in Jamaica, March 1995, recorded and reported to the author.

Whitworth died three years later¹⁴ and in October 1952 Ashwell unveiled a plaque¹⁵ to his memory, commemorating his work as a founder of the League. Ten days prior to this ceremony, Ashwell's role was acknowledged when Athene Seyler unveiled a bust of Ashwell¹⁶, created by Peter Lamda, at the League's headquarters in Fitzroy Square, London. Seyler paid tribute to Ashwell's contribution to the theatre, Ashwell responded with the information that Geoffrey Whitworth had set up a subscription "to purchase the bust for presentation to the future National Theatre" (*Times* 22/9/52). This appears to have been Ashwell's last official appearance on behalf of the League, which later became the British Theatre Association, continuing to serve the professional and amateur theatre. It was never able to attract sustained public funding and went into liquidation in the autumn of 1990. One of its main assets, the huge library, was split up with playscripts going to south Wales, under the auspices of the Drama Association of Wales, while the bulk of the archive and reference library was given to the Theatre Museum. After seventy years, its demise left a large gap in the training and advice services available to amateur drama groups in England, as well as reducing the accessibility of playscripts and other resources for such groups.¹⁷

Ashwell maintained a commitment to, and involvement in, the activities of the Poetry Society during the war. She took part in the Society's Friday afternoon weekly Poetry Matinees at its Portman Square, London, base. The *Picture Post* photographed Ashwell reading Love Poems and described the matinees as "an essential wartime service" (13/4/40). Given Ashwell's love of poetry and the spoken word, together with her religious pursuits, it is understandable that she was drawn to the work of Christopher Fry.¹⁸ Although the letters she wrote to him between 1952 and 1954¹⁹ give no indication of the origin of their friendship, they reveal her continuing passion for purposeful theatre. Her letters indicate she was particularly interested in *The First Born*, *A Sleep of Prisoners* (from which she quoted in a speech²⁰) and *The Dark is Light Enough*²¹, which Fry wanted to dedicate to her. She followed the progress of this play, presumably reading a number of drafts, but suffered a slight stroke around the time of the opening performances and was not able to see the production. Ashwell wrote to Fry on 27 January, 1954, from her London address, 5 Belgrave Mews West, delighted that he should want to dedicate *The Dark is Light Enough* to her –

¹⁴Geoffrey Whitworth's son, Robin, was elected deputy chairman of the League in 1952.

¹⁵This plaque was placed at the Town Hall, Crayford, Kent, where nearby (at the Rodney Hut) in 1918 Whitworth had given a lecture on the theatre and decided to establish the League.

¹⁶This bust subsequently went to the National Theatre. A copy was displayed at the Westminster Theatre library until 1999 and is now in the possession of Ashwell's niece, Daphne Waterston, the Administration Secretary for MRA.

¹⁷Robert Hutchinson and Andrew Feist, *Amateur Arts in the U.K.*, Policy Studies Institute, London, 1991, p.55-6.

¹⁸Fry, an English playwright, born in 1907, has written a number of plays, including some on religious themes, in blank verse. *The Lady's Not For Burning* (1948), "seemed to herald a renaissance of poetic drama on the English Stage" (*Oxford Companion to Theatre*, op. cit. p.308).

¹⁹These letters are in the Theatre Museum collection, London.

²⁰Ashwell described the occasion to Fry in a letter dated 21 January (no year – but either 1952 or 1953).

²¹This play premiered at the Aldwych Theatre on 30 April 1954 with Edith Evans as the Countess Rosmarin.

it is a really great play and may make the world here see the hopeless futility of war (and many other things besides), so someone really important now might help to open their eyes to what a sad world they are building. I belong to the past and have only one virtue – my profound belief in the transforming power of the spoken word in the theatre, on the change of heart and mind a play creates... this moment, on our bad little planet is the moment of the power of ideas. The miracle of what our little minds might grow into. So, most wonderful friend – dedicate the play to the future and not to one who tried a little, failed much! Lena.

Fry prevailed, however, and the published text of *The Dark is Light Enough* contains the simple dedication: “To Lena Ashwell with affection and admiration. Christopher Fry. Edith Evans.”²² On 6 April 1954, she wrote wondering how the play was progressing and anxious for it to be presented. She felt that

at this moment in civilization the theatre should be alive and real – these dreadfully stupid old plays, *A Woman of No Importance*, *The Way of the World*, are given at tremendous expense – over produced, over dressed, over expensive – seem a very poor tribute to the hope of a new world ... I am... praying that your play will come to show that the theatre has real life and brings a new hope and not these dead rays of the past.

Ironically, just two years later, John Osborne’s ‘kitchen-sink’ realism in *Look Back in Anger* rapidly began to displace Fry’s poetic drama as the new drama, though hardly a new drama that would have pleased the ailing Ashwell.

The letters Fry kept from his friendship with Ashwell and her sister Hilda Pocock also reveal Ashwell’s fragile state of health and her dependence on friendship at this time. The letters dated between 1 June and 28 December 1954 were dictated by Lena and written by Hilda, who takes the opportunity to give progress reports on Lena’s fluctuating condition. Ashwell retained her curiosity about her friend’s writings and welcomed visitors such as Edith Evans to keep her up to date. Fry obviously wrote regarding his work, but his letters to Ashwell have not been found.

MORAL RE-ARMAMENT

Two of Ashwell’s letters to Christopher Fry (dated 23rd September 1952 and 6 April 1954), make reference to Moral Re-Armament (MRA) and from the late 1940s this movement was to be the focus of her energy and commitment until her death. Moral Re-Armament (also known as the Oxford Group) was “a nondenominational revivalistic movement founded by U.S. churchman Frank N.D. Buchman (1878-1961).”²³ Launched in 1922, it sought to deepen the spiritual life of individuals while encouraging them to continue as members of their own churches.

Buchman hoped that the world would avoid war if individuals experienced a moral and spiritual awakening. In its peak years after World War II, MRA sent ‘task forces’ to all corners of the free world to carry out its program, in part through plays emphasizing cooperation, honesty, and mutual respect between opposing groups... Its theology was simple and conservative. It featured surrender to Jesus Christ and sharing with others whose

²²Christopher Fry, *The Light is Dark Enough*, Oxford University Press, London, 1954.

²³*New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Volume 8, Fifteenth Edition, Chicago, 1998, p.307.

lives have been changed in pursuit of four moral absolutes: purity, unselfishness, honesty, and love. (ibid)

Ashwell came in contact with the movement through her involvement with the Westminster Theatre (sited between Buckingham Palace and Victoria Station, London) and through the commitment of her nephew, Henry Macnicol. She helped raise funds to assist Anmer Hall when he converted the former Charlotte Chapel (built in 1766) from its 1920s adaptation as the St James' Picture Theatre into a live theatre, which Hall named the Westminster in 1932. During the 1930s the theatre saw many productions of avant garde drama, including plays by James Bridie and Pirandello. The Group Theatre presented works by Auden, Isherwood, Spencer and MacNeice, followed in 1938 by the J.B. Priestley/Ronald Jeans initiated London Mask Theatre. Ashwell attended many performances at the Westminster, including Priestley's *Music at Night*, which she described as "arresting, but [it] didn't quite come off."²⁴

"In 1946 the Theatre was acquired by the Westminster Memorial Trust as a living memorial to the men and women of Moral Re-Armament who had given their lives in the fight against Hitler."²⁵ Ashwell attended the dedication ceremony, meeting MRA playwright and chaplain, Alan Thornhill²⁶ and other MRA members such as Bunny Austin (the former tennis champion) and his wife, Phyllis. In 1948, when Ashwell was 79, Austin invited her to the MRA headquarters in Caux, Switzerland, where she began working as an advisor and producer with the group's actors and writers. Austin wrote of Ashwell at that time – "Lena was in her late seventies, but she had the vitality of a woman half her age... It was hard to keep up with her."²⁷

From all accounts, Ashwell thrived on this new theatrical venture. In his eulogy at her memorial service Alan Thornhill declared:

She had a marvellous way to see in actors, many rough and ready and many very new, some quality of unselfconsciousness and naturalness which touches with real conviction and sincerity that could be turned into artistry and power. She had the eye to see in these plays their real purpose to do again what the first plays in our theatre of the Middle Ages tried to do – to bring faith to simple men and women who at that time did not know how to read or write. And perhaps it is true that in this age, when so many people are spiritually or morally illiterate, we need miracle and mystery plays of today that aim to give men some of the ABCs of faith and of a cure for the ills that afflict us personally and in our nations.²⁸

²⁴Letter from Ashwell to Claude Bragdon dated 7 January 1940, Rush Rhees Collection, University of Rochester.

²⁵Quoted from programme note describing the Westminster Theatre in the programme for *Sentenced to Life*, by Malcolm Muggeridge and Alan Thornhill, Westminster Theatre, May 1978 (author's collection).

²⁶The Reverend Alan Thornhill's first MRA play, *The Forgotten Factor* (which included Ashwell's nephew Henry in the cast for the Westminster production in 1948), was premiered in 1943 in Washington. Thornhill continued as a writer and churchman, travelling from Denmark to London in March 1957 to conduct Ashwell's memorial service.

²⁷Bunny Austin, *A Mixed Double*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1969, p.180.

²⁸From a transcript, dated 20 March 1957, in MRA archives, courtesy of Aline Faunce, Wirral, Merseyside, England.

Ashwell subsequently met Frank Buchman and for the next few years travelled regularly to Caux, speaking at conferences and advising on productions of MRA plays such as the musical revue *The Good Road*²⁹ and Thornhill's *The Forgotten Factor*. When *The Good Road* was performed at His Majesty's Theatre, London, in November 1948, it was under the auspices of MRA's National Committee of Invitation, of which Ashwell was a member. This committee comprised seventy-three titled and important supporters of MRA, including author Daphne Du Maurier, the Countess of Antrim and Sir Robert and Lady Young. Ashwell returned to the stage playing the role of Lady Arlington in another Thornhill play, *Annie The Valiant*, which was premiered during the MRA World Assembly at the Theatre, Mountain House, Caux, Switzerland, on 14 July 1950. In early January 1951, during one of Buchman's extensive American tours, Ashwell performed the role with the company during a short season at the Lisner Auditorium in Washington. The play tells "the life story of Annie Jaeger, one of the pioneers of Moral Re-Armament in the world of labour."³⁰ While in America, Ashwell co-directed, with Howard Reynolds, a production of Cecil Broadhurst's musical play, *Jotham Valley*, with MRA members at New York's Coronet Theatre. Her suggestion that they perform a special matinee to inform actors and actresses of the work of the Moral Re-Armament movement was taken up, and provided Ashwell with the opportunity to address the audience "on her vision for the theatre and its part in inspiring a better world."³¹ This production was performed subsequently at the Beverley Hills High School Auditorium and the Carthay Circle Theatre, Hollywood, during July and August 1951. While in America Ashwell had a fall, breaking a bone in her leg. When she returned to London she was less able to travel, from then on concentrating her energies, with the assistance of her sister, on the promotion of MRA ideals in London.

On 25 March 1953 Ashwell and Hilda Pocock convened a meeting for women at the Cowdray Hall, London. They sought to inform leaders of groups such as the National Council of Women, the Anglo-American Teachers' Exchange, the Royal College of Nursing, the Colonial Office and Embassies, the Salvation Army and Co-operative organisations of the world advance of Moral Re-Armament. After a moment's silence in memory of Queen Mary, who had died the previous day, Ashwell and Pocock acknowledged there was prejudice against the movement but called on the 270 people present to use the opportunity to understand the organisation's motives. Ashwell reminded them that she had fought as a suffragette against the perception that "only ugly women want the vote!"³² She considered the uniting of nations through MRA to be as worthwhile a fight as that of the suffragettes. Besides informing women's groups of MRA's work and representatives (Ashwell and Pocock) in England, this meeting apparently

²⁹This was written by the cast who performed it in a preview in Caux on 11 September 1947 and subsequently in New York, Boston, Montreal, Washington, Los Angeles, San Francisco, then in Switzerland, Holland, Germany and England, opening in London at His Majesty's Theatre on 10 November 1948. MRA Archives.

³⁰Quoted from a MRA Press release dated 15 August 1950. MRA Archives. A script of this play was not found, but there may be a manuscript copy in the MRA Archives in the Library of Congress, Washington.

³¹From MRA archives and correspondence between the author and Henry Macnicol.

³²From a transcript of Ashwell's speech for this occasion. MRA archives.

Figure 45: Promotional material for *Jotham Valley*, co-directed by Lena Ashwell in 1951. (Moral Re-Armament Archives)

resulted in a radio broadcast on Woman's Hour on 1 June 1953, the eve of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, in which a housewife spoke of the ways in which the ordinary woman at home and at work could back the Queen in her task. Individuals also responded by arranging lunches in Birmingham and Eastbourne, as well as a meeting in Edinburgh.³³

Ashwell addressed a further MRA public meeting at the Royal Festival Hall, London, on 10 May 1953. At this, her last public appearance in England, she gave a short address, declaring

As old as I am, I am aiming to be here in another 20 years you know. It is a great thing to be 80 and know you have found something worth living for. With all my heart, I recommend you all to look at the deep freeze in your own minds, and open and melt it, so you see the great value, the great mission and great movement of Moral Re-Armament. (ibid)

Six weeks later, Ashwell and Pocock wrote what they called 'A Letter to the Women of Britain'. Dated 22 June 1953 and signed by the sisters, it appears to have been sent as a Press Release from the Moral Re-Armament office in Berkeley Square, London. As passionate as Ashwell's war-time pleas for support, the letter calls on the female half of the population to see "how very deeply materialism of the Right and of the Left is destroying the life of this country." Ashwell and Pocock declared they were hopeful that MRA was making a difference, but exhorted women to "Make it your business to know what is going on in the world and learn the answer. Pass on that answer to other women of all classes." Ashwell was seeking to involve local communities, as she had done when raising funds for the Concert parties and with the Friends of the Players. She and Pocock sought to encourage women to unite with their neighbours in establishing groups to promote the cause. They offered to provide answers to any questions, giving their home address as the point of contact. Ashwell's last public gesture for MRA was at Caux on 27 July 1953, when she addressed a Conference of supporters. "I have found the great value of the effort for personal change and mind you, it is very difficult and very hard, and very painful and the awful thing is that it is always going on. It never stops....it doesn't matter how old you are. You are still free to be changed."³⁴

However, by now her health was extremely fragile – tributes following her death indicate that the last few years of her life were spent very quietly. She suffered a number of strokes which rendered her speechless and bedridden, but she retained her enthusiasm for the ideals of MRA to the end. Hilda Pocock proved a devoted nurse to her sister. Bunny Austin has written: "These two old ladies were like sturdy oaks with their roots deep in the great traditions of Britain."³⁵

³³From the Letter to the Women of Britain from Lena Ashwell and Hilda Pocock, 22 June 1953. MRA Archives.

³⁴From a transcript in MRA archives.

³⁵*A Mixed Double*, op. cit. p.180.

CONCLUSION

Lena Ashwell died at home in London on 13 March 1957, aged 87. The *Times* obituary described her as “an actress whose emotional force and sincerity were perhaps unique in the English theatre during the comparatively short time during which she played leading parts... everything that she did rang true” (15/3/57). Her influence “in the theatre of her generation was always salutary” (ibid) – a view expressed by those who paid tribute in print³⁶ and those who spoke at her memorial service at Christ Church, Down Street, London W1 on 20 March 1957.³⁷ Edith Evans, Athene Seyler and the Reverend Alan Thornhill recalled her life-long youthful voice and passion for the theatre. Frank Buchman was unable to attend, but sent a message saying “Lena has taken her last call. The curtain goes up for her on the new world for which she longed and fought” (ibid).

Perhaps Violet Markham’s tribute, published in the *Times* three weeks after Ashwell’s death, best sums up Ashwell’s role in a changing world and the response, from her friends and colleagues, to her death.

Lena Ashwell was not only a distinguished actress but a woman of wide sympathies and culture who touched other and varied sides of life. As her life went on her power of spiritual insight grew ever greater. Her interests were deeply concerned with the borderland where the practical evidence of the five senses merges into a new experience of the life of the spirit. In a material world she hoisted and kept flying a banner inscribed with her faith in the spiritual basis of the Universe. Though this aspect of her life was not known to the general public, a wide circle of friends knew her as a guide and teacher to those who sought to follow the Way under her direction. She knew by experience the power latent in silence and meditation and their healing quality in the difficulties and perplexities of life. Sometimes I heard her speak with the inspiration of a prophet to the small group gathered around her. She was not concerned with creeds and forms but the bringing home to her class what she held to be the potent spark of the divine in the human heart and the infinite possibilities latent in it. It was a grief to her friends that sickness and ill-health should have laid a heavy hand on her closing years and not least to the sister who nursed her with such devoted care. The order of release, now it has come, has set free a fine and tender spirit. (*Times* 3/4/57)

Five years later, and two years before her death at the age of ninety-three, Hilda Pocock presented the Westminster Theatre with a sculptured head of Ashwell, which was unveiled by Edith Evans on 23 May 1962 and placed in the Dress Circle Foyer and subsequently, in the library. Sometime later, relatives provided funds to equip one of the theatre’s then new dressing rooms. Until recent building works at this site in 1999, there was a plaque on the door dedicating Dressing Room 2 to the memory of Ashwell – “actress, patriot, pioneer.”

Ashwell is best remembered as an actress who specialised in unconventional women and representatives of the ‘new woman’ in the Edwardian theatre. Her roles in *Mrs Dane’s Defence* (1900) and *Diana of Dobson’s* (1908) are referred to in accounts of the theatre of the period, partly because the plays were

³⁶Athene Seyler and Phyllis Whitworth paid tribute in *Drama*, Summer, 1957, No. 45, pp.35-36.

³⁷Transcripts of these tributes were provided from the MRA archives by Ms Aline Faunce, Wirral, Merseyside, England.

considered to be important examples of realism in a changing social environment and because the authors, Henry Arthur Jones and Cicely Hamilton, were also significant for their body of work and the points of view they expressed through their plays. Ashwell has received less recognition for her encouragement of new writing in the theatre, particularly at the Kingsway Theatre, but also during the 1920s, and for her support and encouragement of women playwrights. In the short periods of her forays into theatrical management before the First World War, she presented at least fifteen new full length and one-act plays. As a theatre and company manager she encouraged women to develop their skills as directors and back stage technical operators. Her innovations as a manager included the creation of repertory companies, support of young musicians and a genuine relationship with her audience and wider community. From as early as 1899 with her appearance in *Grierson's Way*, she was prepared to use the theatre to address the human condition, presenting and performing in such plays as *Leah Kleschna*, *The Shulamite*, *Irene Wycherley* and *The Earth*. Through the pursuit of a purposeful theatre, both an actress and manager, she began to find and use her voice as an effective means to challenge the status quo both on and off stage. Her role in the female suffrage fight has been given some acknowledgement, but accounts have failed to notice that Ashwell was one of the few members of the Actresses' Franchise League who progressed quickly through the movement to emerge as an articulate spokeswoman on women's issues beyond the winning of the vote. She continued the role of advocate for equality and shared responsibility until her death in 1957.

Ashwell's wartime achievements alone should have guaranteed her recognition. Her swift and immediate reaction to the outbreak of war in 1914 provided hope and comfort to thousands of soldiers and hundreds of performers. Since the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, governments have seen the need to provide comfort and morale boosters for the troops in the form of entertainment, but even accounts of the creation of ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association) imply that the idea was a new one in 1939.³⁸ Similar neglect can be found in accounts of public subsidy for the arts. Despite Ashwell's groundbreaking work with local councils during the 1920s and her consistent advocacy for government support as was being given elsewhere in Europe, historical accounts of the origins of the Arts Council of Great Britain (the principal state supported funding body for the arts) consider 1930, with the creation of the Pilgrim Trust, to be the starting point.³⁹ No mention is made of Ashwell's initiatives which provided practical examples of appropriate working relationships between the arts and the community, which are still part of the modus operandi of many regionally based arts organisations and local government authorities. These initiatives, together with her energetic involvement in the British Drama League,

³⁸For example, John Graven Hughes writes: "Although previous battles might well have been won without the help of troop concerts, what had been for centuries a minor inconvenience fought by hardened professionals became by the end of 1940 a universal death struggle... there developed among servicemen and war workers, in fact the whole population whose familiar world had crumbled, a longing to rediscover if only for an hour or two a magic enclave where war faded into insignificance" (*The Greasepaint War*, London, New English Library, 1976, p.56). He makes no mention of Ashwell's work in the First World War.

³⁹Eric W. White, *The Arts Council of Great Britain*, London, Davis-Poynter, 1975, Chapters 1 and 2.

helped shape arts provision (much now sadly eroded by financial constraints) not only throughout Britain, but also, by example, especially post Second World War, in Commonwealth countries as far afield as Australia.

Ashwell's memory has not fared well at the National Theatre – the bust stored in the Chairman's office there declares she was an 'Actress and Pioneer of a National Theatre', but she is not even mentioned as such in any recent accounts of the theatre buildings and company situated on London's Southbank.⁴⁰ It was many years after its completion in 1976 before the National Theatre began touring its productions to theatres elsewhere in Great Britain and Europe. More than fifty years before this, while others merely talked about it, Ashwell was on the road with her company, advocating a National Theatre as part of the provision of municipal theatres and providing communities with access to a wide repertoire of plays, including Shakespeare. Given her contribution, it is not easy to understand her neglect by social or theatre historians, even if the original protagonists were embarrassed by her activity in the face of their inertia.

Similarly, with the arts in education. Access to the arts in all forms is now an accepted part of formal education, but at the time when Ashwell was a strong voice in promoting both the credibility and benefit of such access, there were many who resisted – either because they considered the theatre lacked respectability or it was outside of their interest or experience. Ashwell's awareness of the beneficial impact of good music and drama on the soldier heightened her determination to share this experience in the wider community and she never missed an opportunity to promote this objective.

As with many changes to society that began after 1919, Ashwell was influential in changing attitudes and providing positive examples. This influence was also detected through her commitment to improve the conditions of work and status of actors. Throughout her career as an actress and manager she played an active role in professional organisations established to help their members in the pursuit of careers that have never provided much security or stability. Inspired by Henry Irving, she was not afraid to criticise what she saw as working against the credibility of the profession and she sought lively debate to ensure questions were asked and problems were addressed.

Even in retirement, enforced to a large extent by ill-health, Ashwell advocated the presentation of dramatic literature as a way of stimulating positive attitudes and countering superficial and materialistic responses to a rapidly changing world. Throughout all her endeavours, she inspired the support of like-minded colleagues and was sustained by a close-knit family, a fulfilling marriage and strong religious beliefs.

⁴⁰Given Laurence Olivier's appointment as the first Director of the National Theatre, while it is unforgivable of him to have ignored Ashwell's contribution, it is nevertheless understandable – perhaps he did not want to be reminded of the inauspicious start to his career with her company.

Figure 46: Lena Ashwell aged 80. (Photo courtesy Henry Macnicol)

It is hoped this thesis has provided substantial evidence that Ashwell made a major contribution to the theatre and society not only of her time, but that this contribution resonates even today through existing organisations and attitudes as well as in aspirations for future endeavour in the arts in society.

Hers was a formidable spirit, and as John Masefield acknowledged, when dedicating his *Sonnets of Good Cheer* to the Lena Ashwell Players:

Generally, the inspiration of all little communities that are worth their salt and are doing memorable work, comes from one person... Inspiration is a vague word for several qualities; such as faith, that the work is worth doing; hope, that the world may some day know this; and courage, to keep the thing going, in the midst of adversity. It is always by such qualities of soul that the individual inspires the little band to go down into the trouble to alter the thought of the world.⁴¹

⁴¹John Masefield, Preface to *Sonnets of Good Cheer*, London, 1925.

APPENDIX TWO

Wartime Poems performed by Lena Ashwell

SAINT GEORGE OF ENGLAND – by C. Fox Smith

From *Fighting Men* by C. Fox Smith, London, Elkin Mathews, 1916, p.53-55

“Saint George he was a fighting man, as all the tales do tell;
He fought a battle long ago, and fought it wondrous well.
With his helmet, and his hauberk, and his good cross-hilted sword,
Oh, he rode a-slaying dragons to the glory of the Lord.
And when his time on earth was done, he found he could not rest
Where the year is always summer in the Islands of the Blest;
So back he came to earth again, to see what he could do,
And they cradled him in England-

In England, April England –

Oh, they cradled him in England where the golden willows blew!

Saint George he was a fighting man, and loved a fighting breed,
And whenever England wants him now, he’s ready at her need,
From Crecy field to Neuve Chapelle he’s there with hand and sword,
And he sailed with Drake from Devon to the glory of the Lord.
His arm is strong to smite the wrong and break the tyrant’s pride,
He was there when Nelson triumphed, he was there when Gordon died;
He sees his red-cross ensign float on all the winds that blow,
But ah! His heart’s in England –

In England, April England –

Oh, his heart it turns to England where the golden willows grow.

Saint George he was a fighting man, he’s here and fighting still
While any wrong is yet to right or Dragon yet to kill,
And faith! He’s finding work this day to suit his war-torn sword,
For he’s strafing Huns in Flanders to the glory of the Lord.

Saint George he is a fighting man, but when the fighting’s past,
And dead among the trampled fields the fiercest and the last
Of all the Dragons earth has known beneath his feet lies low,
Oh, his heart will turn to England –

To England, April England -

He’ll come home to rest in England where the golden willows blow!”

THE SEA IS HIS by R.E. Vernede

From *War Poems and Other Verse* by R.E. Vernede, London, Williams Heinemann, 1917

“The Sea is His: He made it,
Black gulf and sunlit shoal
From barriered bight to where the long
Leagues of Atlantic roll:
Small strait and ceaseless ocean
He bade each one to be:
The Sea is His: He made it –
And England keeps it free.

By pain and stress and striving
Beyond the nation’s ken,
By vigils stern when others slept,
By many lives of men;
Through nights of storm, through dawnings
Blacker than midnights be-
This Sea that God created,
England has kept it free.

Count me the splendid captains
Who sailed with courage high
To chart the perilous ways unknown-
Tell me where these men lie!
To light a path for ships to come
They moored at Dead Man’s quay;
The Sea is God’s – He made it,
And these men made it free.

Oh little land of England,
Oh Mother of hearts too brave,
Men say this trust shall pass from thee
Who guardest Nelson’s grave.
Aye, but these braggarts yet shall learn
Who’d hold the world in fee,
The Sea is God’s – and England
England shall keep it free.”

THE BOMBING OF BRUGES – Paul Bewsher

From *The Bombing of Bruges: Poems by Paul Bewsher*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1918.

N.B. This is an epic poem of 296 lines – only the first 24 and last 42 lines have been included here to give a flavour of the poems Ashwell used to encourage patriotic support for her Concert Parties and to convey something of the war experience to her listeners.

“Sleep on, pale Bruges, beneath the waning moon,
For I must desecrate your silence soon,
And with my bombs’ fierce roar, and fiercer fire,
Grim terror in your tired heart inspire:
For I must wake your children in their beds
And send the sparrows fluttering on the leads!
Night after weary night no peace you know,
But o’er your roof you hear our engines go:
Poor stricken town, so long the home of those
Your very stones cry out against – your foes,
Who tramp your cobbled squares with heavy feet
And mock your country in its sad defeat,
Night after night, your troubled sleep is torn,
And, cold and weary, you await the morn,
Which brings you peace, and to your tired eyes
Reveals the smoke which pours towards the skies,
And is a silent record of our flight
Hid in the darkness of the cursed Night!
Sleep on - sleep on – your time is yet to come:
Your sentries have not heard our engines’ hum
As at their posts they wander up and down
Upon the outskirts of the sleeping town.
Beside the ready guns the soldiers sleep:
The countryside is wrapt in silence deep.

* * * * *

We have escaped at last! I laugh and shout,
For we have passed through Hell, and have come out
Unscathed – untouched! The ending of the strain
Brings for a moment madness to my brain!
My hand is shaking and the palms are wet:
But in this new found peace I soon forget
The thousand terrors which beset my mind
In those dread minutes we have left behind.
Home lies before us now, and food, and sleep, -
The voice of friends who patient vigil keep
Upon the ground, and wait for our return,
And search the East where soon our lamps will burn

Like two small emerald and scarlet eyes
Which slowly move across the star-decked skies.
Now do I talk to him, whose ready mind
Has fought these terrors we have left behind
And quote unmoved by all the seething fire
Has piloted this ship of wood and wire;
Who with a sensitive and ready hand
Has guided me above the hostile land,
And now conducts me back towards the lines
Where, here and there, a drifting star-shell shines,
And droops, and falls, and slowly dies away,
And lets the friendly darkness follow Day.
Now Fear has gone, and we can talk and eat,
As on the floor we stamp our freezing feet.
The lines draw near... we pass them... and are free,
And then a splendid gladness comes to me.
Life seems so wonderful, and strangely dear,
As it must do when Death has drifted near
And you have stared him in his mocking eyes,
High in the terrors of the hostile skies!
We land... we laugh... and it is all a dream...
Bruges... and the bursting shells... and all its gleam
Of rigid searchlights in a flaming ring,
And glittering balls of green... string after string.
I creep inside my soft and quiet bed
And on my pillow lay my tired head.
I thank my God that He has brought me back
And feel Him by me... then my thought grows black.
Sleep kisses me upon each shuttered eye
And God smiles on me from His quiet sky.”

APPENDIX THREE

THE PURPOSE OF THE THEATRE. The Value of Well-Ordered Amusement.

By Lena Ashwell

When people come to use their gift of self expression, the universal gift possessed by us all, most of the ills of life will be cured. What really matters in life will be cured. What really matters in life as well as the theatre is a proper sense of values. If the commercial standard is made the chief essential in the policy of the theatre its tendency is to kill art in its highest form. It is just the same in daily life. By the modern standard of values people only thought things worth doing by what they got out of them.

What I should like to see taught in the schools is that we all have within us a great emotional force and power, which in industrial life has no outlet at all. The trend of the day is for people to specialise in one subject, or one particular part of a subject, and stick at it because they are afraid to step out of it. The result is that they cannot do anything unless it is in a commercial or social value.

Get hold of that emotional power in yourself – train it and develop it – use all the arts in the service of that development and you will be amazed at the result you will achieve. Everyone wants to express themselves in some form or other. It is the outlet from the dull things of life. It is the chief means to real and abiding happiness.

The reason why the theatre is so important is because that in the witnessing of a great play all human emotion is brought into action – and this stirring of the highest emotions

IS OF IMMENSE BENEFIT

to the human body, soul and spirit.

People should take a hand in their own recreations and a definite part in getting what they wanted instead of accepting what is pushed upon them – and which is measured as a rule by the lowest common denominator.

We should go to the theatre not merely for amusement but to have our emotions quickened – and for that reason our amusements must be of the highest. In modern life recreation is as essential as our water supply. Well ordered amusements had more power to change morals and character than anything else. The actor's real purpose in life was not only to act himself but to help other people to act. Acting is not the mere recital of so many words in a given time, it is the power of visualising the beauty of life – the power of linking up player and audience in one great bond of humanity.

What is demanded by the worker of to-day is that his amusement should make an appeal not only to his desire for entertainment, but to something more deeply seated, something within him that sometimes he is scarcely conscious of possessing. It is not in the workshop or the laboratory or within the boundary walls of the establishment that has his name on its pay roll that he gets life's

inspiration – but in his quiet times – in his leisured pursuits. It may be only at odd moments that this real self is stirring, but it is exactly these odd moments that colour his whole existence.

(Published in the *Scarborough Mercury*, 5 May 1922, and in other newspapers at that time.)

APPENDIX FIVE

LEADING ACTORS/DIRECTORS/MANAGERS FOR THE LENA ASHWELL PLAYERS

Iris Baker, born 1901, studied at Central School of Drama, first stage appearance in 1922, performed with Lewis Casson and Sybil Thorndike, joined the Players in 1928, then the Old Vic, followed by a long career on stage in London and the provinces, as well as touring for ENSA and many repertory companies.

Leslie J. Banks CBE (1890-1952), first appeared with the Benson Company in 1911, joining the Players in 1921 and subsequently enjoying an extensive career on stage in England and America. Was President of British Actors' Equity from 1948 and appeared in many films from 1932.

Leo G. Carroll made his first appearance on stage in London in 1912 and subsequently in New York as Dick Rutherford in *Rutherford and Son*. He toured the provinces in England in the early 1920s and was based in London in 1923 and 1924 when he worked with the Players. He returned to America and made his film debut there in 1934.

Edward Chapman, born in 1901, he first appeared on stage with Nottingham Repertory Company in 1924. While in London in the mid 1920s he worked with the Players, followed by three years with Birmingham Repertory Company. As well as maintaining a stage career, he entered films in 1930.

Esme Church, born 1893, studied at the Guildhall School of Music and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, making her first appearance on stage in 1913. Joined Ashwell's Concert Party in 1916 and was with her throughout the 1920s when she could have had a higher profile in the West End. Ashwell's company gave her the opportunity to play some 150 roles and to develop her skills as a director, later put to use with the Old Vic company and CEMA tours.¹ In 1936 she was made Head of the Old Vic School of Acting, performing with and directing the company and launching the Young Vic, touring children's theatre. In the early 1960s she worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford. In February 1926 the *Kentish Mercury* featured Church, interviewed after the triple bill at the Century in which she appeared in all three plays, at the same time providing an insight into the workings of the Players.

I found her busily engaged in removing the vivid makeup which she wears, like the other players, in *The Proposal* [Tchekov]... Miss Church showed me the beautiful hand-embroidered Russian peasant dress which she wears... It is made by Grace Vallumay's² people at their Warsaw camp for the Polish Relief Fund, conducted at Great Russell street, W.C. (A most deserving fund, by the way, in which Miss Church is much interested.) The scenery for *The Proposal* was made on the spot by one of the Players – Mr Napier Jones. It is certainly original and in keeping with the characters and costumes. *Fame and the Poet*, said Miss Church, is, of course, satirical! To me it gives the idea of modern fame, come into bodily existence, as it were, and behaving like a third-rate Press agent!' Miss Church's performance... is very cleverly and unexpectedly vulgar! Certainly, only a really gifted actress could

¹ Esme Church seems in many ways to have been similar in her acting style to Ashwell, given the roles she played with such impact. Her versatility is unquestioned – perhaps Ashwell, given the opportunity would have been as versatile – they certainly had a lot in common and shared similar ideals.

² Grace Vulliamy (correct spelling), to whom Ashwell pays tribute in *Myself a Player* Chapter 9.

undertake, in one night, three parts so diverse, and the third – that of Ygraine, in Maeterlinck's *Tintagile*... so tremendously exacting. It is a tragic play... Miss Church says she finds increasing meaning and beauty in *Tintagile* every time she plays it. Indeed, her work seems to be as much a delight to her as it is to others and she has a big sympathy with her audience whom she finds 'eager' to lap up all the good things given to them. 'I find my work a means of giving pleasure to others, and that is a great thing in these 'tricky' times, when cheap cinema shows abound, and do nobody any good. The theatre shows people other phases of life, and broadens their views by teaching them... that other folk are just as human as themselves. There is far too much ugliness about! ...I feel that one's efforts would not have been wasted if just one play had been successful, for instance, in making someone kinder! Repertory playing is good for the memory! One gets into a fresh part... I am not likely to leave the Players, for this is the work I enjoy – team work – where no one stands out more prominently than the others. That is where versatility comes in... for without that surely one would be merely – a star!' (5/2/26)

Douglas A. Clarke-Smith (1889-1959) First professional appearance was in *The Great Adventure* at the Kingsway in 1913. After the war was a member of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, then joined the Players in 1919, directing 20 productions. Subsequently continued career as an actor, with many stage appearances before a film career which began in 1929.

Frederick Cooper (1890-1945) Made his first appearance on stage in 1910, performed with the Liverpool Repertory Company and made a great success as Mr Prior in Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound* in 1923.

William Daunt (1893-1938). First appearance on stage was in 1911, worked subsequently with the Compton Comedy Company, Annie Horniman's Manchester Gaiety and the Liverpool and Birmingham Repertory Companies before joining the Players. Had a long association with the Aldwych Theatre, London and was a popular comic actor.

Marion Fawcett (Katherine Roger Campbell, Scottish actress/director, 1886-1957), first appeared on stage in Liverpool in 1899. An established character actress, she went into production and management in 1918 and was the Players' first manager. Subsequently, she was engaged as producer at the Opera House, Malta, returning to London for many performing roles in the 1940s.

Helen Ferrers (1866-1943), first appeared on stage in London in 1885 as Pauline in *Frou-Frou* (an Ashwell role). After a long career, mainly on stage in London, she appeared in many films from 1931.

J. Leslie Frith (1889-1961), studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and after war service made many appearances in West End productions. As a playwright he translated and adapted a number of French works for the stage and later in his career made many television and film appearances.

Harold Gibson. Before going on the stage and into theatre company management, was ordained in 1908. During the First World War he had a distinguished war record, including honorary chaplain to the forces, and was Vicar of Shirehampton and Avonmouth between 1912 and 1917 (*Bath & Wilts Chronicle* 11/8/28).

Irene Hentschel, born London 1891, daughter of producer Carl, married Ivor Brown (theatre commentator and director), studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, making her first appearance on stage in 1912. She joined the Players in 1919, working with them for six years, continuing to direct many plays at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon and London during the 1930s and 40s, including *Eden End* and *Time and the Conways*.

Godfrey Kenton,³ who joined the Players as a very young actor in 1925, trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London and had a very successful career as the juvenile lead in the 1930s and 1940s and was still acting at the age of 94. In the 1930s Kenton set up a company, the Greater London Players, with another Ashwell company member, Olive Walter. One of Kenton's most memorable experiences with the Players was as Ariel in *The Tempest*: "I was all silvered all over, face and silver costume."⁴

Frederick Leister, (1885-1970), originally intended for the Law, made his first stage appearance in 1906. Toured in musical comedies prior to the First World War and joined the Players in 1920. Subsequent successful West End career up to 1959. Appeared in many films.

Viola Lyel, born in Yorkshire in 1900, studied at the Guildhall and Old Vic where she made her first appearance in 1918. Toured with various repertory companies before joining the Players. Toured with ENSA during the Second World War and had a successful West End career during the 1950s and 1960s.

Norman V. Norman (1864-1943), made his first stage appearance in 1884, and subsequently created and toured his own companies as well as touring with Ben Greet and producing plays in London.

Nancy Price (CBE) actress/director born 1880, married Charles Maude. She first appeared in London at the Lyceum in 1900 and had an extensive career, playing many Shakespearean roles. She founded the People's National Theatre in 1930 and subsequently the English School Theatre Movement, touring plays to schools. Wrote many books and appeared in a large number of films.

Kynaston (Philip) Reeves, born London 1893, served in the Army 1914-18, studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, first performing on stage in 1920. Joined the Players in 1922, remaining with them until 1928. Subsequently toured America with Ben Greet's company and was still performing in the West End in 1963 as well as appearing in many television productions and on film.

Dan F. Roe, born 1877, first appeared on stage in 1887 (in Montague Roby's *Midget Minstrels*), and had early experience as a stage manager as well as excelling in farce and light comedy roles.

Irene Rooke (1878-1958), played many Shakespearean roles with Ben Greet's company after her first stage appearance in 1895. She toured America extensively and played a variety of roles at the Gaiety, Manchester under Annie Horniman's direction. She had a long running stage career and appeared in such films as *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Hindle Wakes* (with Norman McKinnel) and *Pillars of Society*.

³ Godfrey Kenton was interviewed for this research, aged 94, in 1995 (he died 1998). I am indebted to theatre historian and biographer, Michael Kilgarriff of London, who put me in touch with Kenton and gave me access to his own interview notes recorded in 1991.

⁴ Quoted from an interview with Kenton by the author.

Christine Silver (1884-1960), first appeared on stage in 1902. She understudied Ashwell in 1907 (for *Irene Wycherley*) and toured for Ashwell in *Diana of Dobson's* in 1908. She played many leading roles in the West End before making her first appearance with the Players in *Mrs Dot* in 1927. She continued her acting career well into the 1950s.

Cecil Trouncer (1898-1953), who married **Queenie Russell** (another member of the Players), made his first London stage appearance in 1921, and joined the Players in 1926 before touring Egypt in late 1928 with Robert Atkin's company. He made many West End appearances as well as touring for ENSA and performing with the BBC Drama Repertory company in the 1940s.

Olive Walter (born 1898), trained as a ballet dancer. Her first performance on stage was in *Grit* at the Kingsway (with Ashwell) in 1908. After successful West End appearances, she was a member of the Players between 1922 and 1927, subsequently touring America and Canada before becoming managing director of the Greater London Players (with similar aims to the Lena Ashwell Players) in 1930. She was still performing in 1954.

Alan Webb, born 1906, made his first appearance on stage with the Players in 1924, remaining with them for two years. He then toured extensively in repertory companies before joining the Old Vic-Sadler's Wells company in 1934. He appeared in many productions of plays by Noel Coward.

Beatrice Wilson, born in India, married **Norman V. Norman**, first appeared on stage in London in 1898. She toured extensively with Norman's company and with Ben Greet and appeared at the Old Vic, where she later taught. Directed plays for the Players during the 1923-24 season and continued to act and direct during the 1930s.

Duncan Yarrow, born London 1884, studied at the Ben Greet Academy of Acting, making his first appearance in 1904. He toured with Greet and the Benson company and played at the Old Vic during the Great War. Worked with the Players between 1922 and 1924 and was constantly in work throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

APPENDIX SIX

LENA ASHWELL PLAYERS REPERTOIRE 1919 to 1929

An examination of the 250 (approximately) plays performed by Ashwell's company over ten years (some of which Ashwell had performed in during her own stage career and some she commissioned) can provide insight into the company's style, the target audience and to some extent into some of the reasons why the company closed in 1929. It is not possible to generalise except from the point of view of the staging – all would have been done simply with very basic sets and props. This was a touring company, with a small base and very few technical facilities. Historical drama was mostly avoided by Ashwell throughout her management career (having played with Irving she had seen the production demands made in seeking historical verisimilitude). The plays can be divided to some extent into genres – comedy, farce, domestic or historical drama, tragedy and so on, and these have been indicated in the following compilation. Mostly, there is a very perceptible change in subject matter and its treatment between plays written prior to 1914 and those written during or after the First World War. More than half (155) of the plays performed by the company were written before the War (i.e. prior to August 1914). Many of the plays have faded into obscurity and only a few, besides the classics, would stand up to contemporary interpretation. Many of the plays were published by Samuel French as acting editions and were the staple fare of amateur drama companies throughout the English speaking world in the 1930s -1950s. Many of these plays available in Australian libraries were originally in the British Drama League collection.

Where it has not been possible to view the script, quotations from reviews which give an indication of the theme, characters and setting of the play have been included. It has not been considered necessary to give a synopsis of plays by Shakespeare or other familiar works from the repertoire, for example Shaw, Sheridan, Goldsmith, many of which are available in standard, modern editions. The date at the end of the comment on each play, indicates when the Lena Ashwell Players first included, or revived, the work in their repertoire. A few plays have been included which may or may not have been performed by the Players. These plays were listed in various company announcements of repertoire but given that it has not been possible to find details of all the company's performances, some dates, which may have included these plays, are not known.

It is particularly interesting to find that the Players rarely repeated a play in the ten years the company visited centres around London and elsewhere. The few plays that were repeated for more than two seasons included *Trilby*, *Twelfth Night*, *She Stoops to Conquer* and works by Cicely Hamilton. It is also notable that despite the large number of works by Shaw performed by the Players, *Heartbreak House*, was not included in the repertoire¹. At least fourteen of Shakespeare's plays were presented (fifteen if *Cymbeline* was actually performed); many of these were being studied in school English courses. It is clear these productions were not radical interpretations but straightforward readings of the plays and dependent on the actors rather than elaborate scenery or costumes.

MR ABDULLA by Reginald Berkeley. Not seen. First performed at the Gaiety Theatre, Hastings, 25 January 1926, then at the Playhouse, London. A mystery farce in three acts. "The work is highly improbable, mysterious, farcical, but withal extremely interesting and abounding with amusing situations... Walter Fitzgerald... role of a very aged Home Secretary... Godfrey Kenton played the dashing hero with an unpronounceable name" (*Middlesex Chronicle* 18/2/28). February 1928.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN by John Drinkwater, 1918. First performance, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 12 October 1919, transferred to Lyric, Hammersmith, London, ran for over a year, then played in

¹ Shaw based the character Captain Shotover on Ashwell's father, Captain Pocock, whom Shaw called "a captain of souls." Ashwell had told Shaw of her father's seafaring life and his irascible and blasphemous behaviour when he refused communion of his deathbed unless he could have some cheese with his consecrated bread. (Stanley Weintraub, *Bernard Shaw 1914-1918 Journey to Heartbreak*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, p.163). Ashwell and her husband built and lived in a country house near Walton on the Hill, Surrey, called The Ship, in memory of her father.

America in 1920. Published in the *Collected Plays of John Drinkwater, Volume II*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1925. This was Drinkwater's most successful play in which he shows the impact of war on attitudes to historical figures dealing with issues of relevance to the current situation. Lincoln is portrayed as a very sympathetic, intelligent, sensitive man – desirous of peace but more determined for equality and the Union. Written in poetic style, each of the six scenes is introduced by two chroniclers, in blank verse, indicating passage of time, progress and setting the scene, as well as commenting on Lincoln's actions. With a large cast, mostly male (doubling possible). The Lena Ashwell Players performed it with a cast of forty-two, some of whom were likely to have been non-professionals. Settings are Illinois 1860, Washington 1861, 1863, Appomattox 1865, theatre in April 1865, covering the years from Lincoln's acceptance of the presidency to the night of his assassination. Shows both the public and private Lincoln, dealing one to one with great sensitivity and warmth. Insight into Mrs Lincoln's role, that of his advisers, generals and the representative of the black, anti-slavery point of view. Stylised, showing depth of feeling created by this great man and the impact of war. January 1928.

ADMIRAL GUINEA, written in 1884 by R.L. Stevenson and W.E. Henley, during the first months of Stevenson's residence at Bournemouth. It was privately printed in 1884 and first published in a collected edition in 1892. Published in the *Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Tusitala Edition Vol.24 The Plays*, London, William Heinemann, 1924. In four acts with three men and two women and set in Barnstaple, Devon, over a day and night in 1760. Admiral Guinea is John Gaunt, once captain of the Slaver ship *Arethusa*. He is a hard and sad man, mistakenly thought to have considerable wealth and miserly tendencies. He is reluctant to allow his only child (Arethusa) to marry her lover Kit, a sailor who has not proved himself utterly reliable. Kit is obliged to prove himself while Arethusa must wait and hope. Into their lives comes the dishonest and self-seeking blind beggar, David Pew, once boatswain on Gaunt's ship. He wants money from Gaunt and plans to rob him after Gaunt sends him away. Pew assaults the terrified Arethusa, then persuades Kit to lead him back to Gaunt's house late one night, pretending he will speak well of Kit in his quest for Arethusa's hand. They are caught and all seems lost. However, Kit rescues Gaunt and Arethusa from Pew's further attempts and the lovers can be together as Gaunt realises that the loss of his own wife should not prevent Arethusa's happiness. March 1921.

THE ADVENTURES OF LADY URSULA by Anthony Hope. First performed at Duke of York's, London, 11 October 1898, with Evelyn Millard. Published by Samuel French, New York, 1910. A comedy in four acts for twelve men and three women. Settings include the Earl of Hassenden's House in North London and Sir George Sylvester's house nearby. Lady Ursula, initially as a dare, tries to get Sir George to break his vow, about not seeing women, made after an unfortunate duel in which a friend was killed. She unwittingly gets her beloved brother involved in a challenge to a duel with Sir George. She dresses as her younger brother to try to convince Sir George not to fight. After various, tedious episodes, inevitably Sir George and Ursula fall in love and no duels are fought and everyone is in their rightful place in the scheme of things. Contains some witty, stylish and entertaining dialogue and repartee. October 1928.

ADVERTISEMENT by Basil MacDonald Hastings, first performed at the Kingsway Theatre, London, 15 April 1915, and dedicated to John Vedrenne and Dennis Eadie, with cast including Lilian Braithwaite and Sydney Valentine. Published by Samuel French, London, 1915. A drama in four acts, with ten men and four women. Set in Luke Sufan's home and office, before, during and after the war. A thoughtful play about many issues of the time – Jewishness, changing values due to experience of loss as result of war, the power of the press in advertising. Looks ahead on a personal basis past the war. Deals with a Jewish man whose wife is a gentile, and whose son is killed in the war. She can no longer live with her husband, considering him to be corrupted by money making and obsessed with conning the public through advertisements. She leaves him, but eventually, years later, returns to him after he has undergone much change. "When it was first produced in 1915 it led to a good deal of controversy because of its exposure of certain advertising methods, and its character studies of Jew and Gentile" (*Kentish Mercury* 21/10/27). October 1927.

ALL OF A SUDDEN PEGGY by Ernest Denny, first performed Duke of York's, London, 27 February 1906 and in New York the following February. Produced by Charles Frohman with Gerald du Maurier and Marie Tempest. Published by Samuel French, London, 1910. A light comedy in three acts with six men and five women. Each act is subtitled: Act I: *The Suddenness of Peggy*, set at the White Hall, Hawkhurst, Lord Crackenthorpe's county house; Act II: *The Suddenness of Consequences*, at Jimmy Keppel's flat in London a week later and Act III: *The Consequences of Suddenness*, returns to Hawkhurst. Lord Crackenthorpe is an eccentric, on whom his mother, sister and uncle depend. They are threatened when he is fascinated by the O'Maras – a widow and her impetuous and pretty young daughter, Peggy, who get him interested in the study of spiders. Attempting to stop Peggy getting to him, they bring the younger son, Jimmy, to distract her. They fall in love but she wants to be an independent author. She decides to arrange the marriage of her mother and Lord Crackenthorpe, but fears that unless she is spoken for, her mother will not marry. Following the plan she and Jimmy have devised, ostensibly for one of her novels, she pretends she has married Jimmy and leaves Hawkhurst, going to his flat in London. Complications arise when the uncle places an article about the 'marriage' in the *Morning Post* and everyone assumes they are actually married. They go through some difficult moments, trying to work out their real feelings amongst the chaos. Eventually, all ends well, with Peggy's mother engaged to Crackenthorpe and Peggy and Jimmy deciding to actually marry. A long winded, over written, social comedy of its time but apparently an ideal vehicle for Gerald du Maurier and Marie Tempest as the young lovers. May 1923.

ANN by Lechmere Worrall, first performed 18 June 1912, Criterion Theatre, London, with Charles Wyndham and Mary Moore. Published by Samuel French, London, 1913. A farcical comedy in three acts with three men and three women. Set at Edward Hargraves' chambers in a residential hotel, London. Ann is an American newspaper reporter (representing openness and 'spirit') who falls in love with Edward after reviewing his book, and sets about to catch him, with the tacit agreement of Edward's mother, the wife of a parson. Edward, ignorant of love, proposes to Evangeline, a spiritless girl, who nevertheless provides Ann with the opportunity to be outrageous in the pursuit of her man. Ann wins in the end. April 1924.

ARMS AND THE MAN by George Bernard Shaw. Three act comedy written in 1894, first published in *Plays Pleasant*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1898. Set in Bulgaria in 1885-6, with three women and four men. February 1921 and April 1922.

AS YOU LIKE IT by William Shakespeare. January 1923 and February 1926.

AT MRS BEAM'S by C.K. Munro. First produced by the Stage Society at the Royalty Theatre, London, on 2 April 1923 and at the Guild Theatre, New York, on 24 April 1926. Revised and performed at the Everyman Theatre, London, March 1923. Published in *Great Modern British Plays*, edited by J.W. Marriott, London, George G. Harrap, 1929. A three-act comedy with seven women and four men. "‘Truth first’ was the motto of the new drama, which set about its business of truth-telling in a plain dealing, naturalistic way, eschewing high-flown symbols" (Harold Brighouse, *Great Modern British Plays*, p. 698). This is an extremely naturalistic, long-winded piece set in a boarding house run by Mrs Beam in Notting Hill Gate, London, where we meet the inmates in all their variety, loneliness and prejudices. An apparently mysterious and exotic couple, who turn out to be thoroughly unattractive thieves, arrive with a big trunk. The permanent boarders immediately set out either to ingratiate themselves with the smooth Mr Dermott or to prove that he is the murderer from Paris who ruthlessly woos and kills women. By behaving badly the couple contrive to be asked to leave, where upon they clean the place out of any valuables and disappear. Depicts certain aspects of relationships which were not shown on the stage before the war. December 1928.

AT THE BARN by Anthony Wharton. First performed at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London, 11 April 1912. An 'idyll' in three acts published by J. Williams Ltd, London, 1912. With four women and seven men, the play is set in novelist Kenneth Maxwell's home, The Barn, near Southampton. Compared to Wharton's *Irene Wycherley* and the one-act *Nocturne*, this is a very light, conventional love story in which a recluse male and his two friends are intruded upon by a young actress seeking escape from city

life and the attentions of a young man to whom she is obligated for his help in getting her started in the theatre. Inevitably the actress and novelist fall in love after she has stayed two weeks - he tries to establish where her true affections lie, and once certain, contrives to make her stay with him. Reasonably clever dialogue but nothing like the impact of his earlier play. March 1928.

THE BATHROOM DOOR by Gertrude Jennings. One act farce, first performed 10 January 1916, Victoria Palace Theatre, London. Published by Samuel French, London 1916. With three women and three men – can be played with four women and two men. Set in passageway on fourth floor of Hotel Majestic at 8am. A minor classic – the assorted residents of the hotel, including a Prima Donna, spend some time trying, amid much comings and goings and room doors opening and closing, to get access to the bathroom which appears to be occupied for a very long time. Eventually, the increasingly hysterical Prima Donna is convinced her husband has committed suicide in the bathroom. When the ‘Boots’ is finally summoned by much bell ringing, he opens the bathroom door (declaring it often gets stuck) to reveal an empty room and the curtain falls on his advice to the Prima Donna that her husband is downstairs having breakfast. April 1921 and March 1922.

THE BEGGAR PRINCE by Cicely Hamilton. Licenced date 23 December 1922, first performed by the Lena Ashwell Players in the Longfield Hall, Ealing in late December 1922/ early January 1923. Lord Chamberlain’s Collection, British Library. Children’s play for Christmas with two children, three women, four men plus extras. Begins with the reading of a bedtime story, which comes to life. Contains ideas from *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Cinderella* - about a princess who refuses to marry any of her suitors and is given by her furious father to a beggar (a prince in disguise). She learns to say thank you and to understand the real world before the beggar reveals his true identity. The fairy godmother figure plays an important role in showing the princess how to be gracious. Serious purpose, well written, but amusing, with songs and dances. January 1923 and 1924.

BELINDA by A. A. Milne. First performed New Theatre, London, 8 April 1918, with Irene Vanbrugh and Dion Boucicault. Published in *Four Plays* by A. A. Milne, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1939. An ‘April folly’ in three acts with three men and three women. Set in Belinda’s country house and garden in Devonshire. Whimsical and romantic, as with Milne’s other plays, it looks at marriage from youthful and more mature perspectives. Belinda’s early marriage went wrong, her daughter is now 18 and back from school in Paris. Belinda has two unsuitable suitors (one of whom eventually ends up with her daughter) and she begins to value her husband who has been absent for 18 years. Fortuitously, he turns up, all is safely sorted out in a light hearted manner and Belinda has her husband again. Very safe, nothing dangerous in exposing these relationships, light hearted but genuine. December 1923.

BERNICE by Susan Glaspell. First performed by the Provincetown Players, in America, set up by George Cram Cook and his wife, Glaspell, in the summer of 1915. Published by Ernest Benn, London, 1924. A play in three acts with two men and three women, set in Bernice’s house in the country. The dead Bernice exerts an influence over her husband, having asked her servant to tell him she had committed suicide, although it seems she died of illness. While the wayward husband is forced to value his dead wife more (for her apparent devotion to him), her friend Margaret cannot believe Bernice would commit suicide and starts to question her knowledge and understanding of her friend. All those (Bernice’s father, servant, husband, sister-in-law and friend), whose lives were touched by Bernice, are forced to re-assess their relationships and understanding of the dead woman, obviously the influence she intended to exert beyond the grave. July 1927.

A BILL OF DIVORCEMENT by Clemence Dane, (pen name for Winifred Ashton). First performed at St Martin’s Theatre, London, 14 March 1921. A play in three acts with four women and five men set in a small house in the country, over 24 hours. “The action passes on Christmas Day 1933. The audience is asked to imagine that the recommendations of the ‘Majority Report of the Royal Commission on Divorce v. Matrimonial Causes’ have become the law of the land.” Quoted from title page of the play as published in *Great Modern British Plays* ed. J.W. Marriott, London, George G. Harrap, 1929. Looks at the dilemma for a woman and her daughter who have to deal with the return of their husband and father, who has spent

15 years in a mental institution apparently suffering from shell shock. The wife has, a year before his return, obtained a divorce and it about to marry a man she truly loves, but she is weak and the return of her husband, declaring his love and need for her, unnerves her and she agrees to stay with him. Her daughter, however, maintaining a quiet strength gained when she realises her father's madness may be hereditary, gives up her own relationship, insisting her mother escapes to find some happiness and takes on the burden of looking after her father. In the course of the play there are many observations on attitudes to divorce, madness and the independence of women - aided by the views of the wife's dreadful aunt-in-law and the daughter's potential father-in-law, a narrow minded member of the clergy who decides he cannot perform the marriage ceremony for a divorced woman whose husband is still alive - nor can he allow his son to marry her daughter. A strong work from a female writer. January 1924.

THE BISHOP'S CANDLESTICKS by Norman McKinnel. One act play first performed at the Duke of York's, London, 24 August 1901 (with McKinnel as the Convict), and revived by Ashwell at the Kingsway in December 1907. Published in *Nine Modern Plays*, edited by John Hampden, London, Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1926. With three men and two women, set in the kitchen of the Bishop's cottage, from whence the candlesticks are stolen. Based on an incident from Hugo's *Les Miserables*. April 1921.

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE by Cosmo Hamilton. No first performance details found. Published by George H. Doran, New York, 1913. Four act romantic family drama, with three men and five women, about responsibilities of parents in creating awareness in their children, especially in relation to sex education. The mother's dilemma – the dangers of ignorance versus knowing too much, too soon. The catalyst is a young man (Archie) who, when his own father despairs of him, becomes part of a caring vicar's household. The vicar's seventeen-year-old daughter is alone a great deal, given her parents' commitments in the parish. She and Archie fall in love, forcing her parents to recognise their personal responsibility to make their daughter more aware, especially given the example of the village girl who 'gets into trouble'. For its time, thought provoking and sensitive. January 1922.

BOUGHT AND PAID FOR by George Broadhurst. Not seen. Subsequently published as a novel of the same title by Arthur Hornblow by T.Fisher Unwin, London, 1912, and Grosset & Dunlap, New York 1912, using illustrations from the play. First performed 26 September 1911 at the Playhouse, New York, and ran for 431 performances. The novel reads like an adaptation of something with the constraints of the theatre at the time, with only four main characters (two men and two women) plus the mother, a male friend (Hadley) and Japanese butler. Set in New York, scenes include small house/shop in Harlem, hotel reception area, Robert Stafford's luxury apartment, Fanny/Jimmie's drab little rooms in Harlem. Mostly the 'scenes' involve two or four characters. Title is self explanatory – Virginia, poor but educated and serious, with her sister Fanny, faces a life of difficulty and poverty when their parents die. Fanny loves an amusing but useless fellow whose next idea will be the moneymaker. Virginia, working in an hotel, meets Stafford, who sets about to win her as his wife, on the assumption that money can get him what he wants. Once married, they have some happiness, then he begins drinking too much and assaulting her in the name of love. She finally leaves him, after he declares, in a drunken state, that he has bought and paid for her. She prefers hard graft and dignity to such humiliation. Eventually they get together again, she genuinely in love, and he once again helps her family to a decent life style.

THE BRAVE AND THE FAIR by Cicely Hamilton. Licenced on 16 February 1920, first performed by the Lena Ashwell Players at the Excelsior Hall, Bethnal Green, London, 23 February 1920. Lord Chamberlain's Collection, British Library. In three acts, with three men and three women, it begins in March 1918 in a Canteen Workers' Hostel, somewhere in France. The scene moves to March 1919, an officers' mess in the Devastated area and concludes in May 1919, at Edna Franklyn's house in Craddestone, England. A taut, perceptive little drama - using her experience of wartime life, Hamilton creates the character of the heartless Edna to make comments on love and relationships. Edna flirts, breaks hearts callously until she is taught a lesson by the male friend of two of the men she destroys. Hamilton had a very balanced view of human nature and her plays in no way 'blame' men or women, presenting rather aspects of human nature in particular situations. April 1923.

BULLDOG DRUMMOND adapted by ‘Sapper’ (Cyril McNeile, 1888-1937) and Gerald du Maurier from the novel by ‘Sapper’, first performed at Wyndhams Theatre, London, 29 March 1921, then in New York, 26 December 1921. Published by Samuel French, London, 1925. An adventure romance in four acts with fourteen men and two women. Original staging would have included elaborate sets (five different settings) and special effects. A team of criminals are posing as nursing home staff, using drugs to extract money from wealthy, elderly Americans. Drummond is called on by his friend Phyllis to solve the mystery of certain evil goings on. He is a gung-ho adventurer, prepared to take many risks and assume disguises to trap his prey. Amidst great enjoyment and exposed to considerable danger, he saves the day and gets the girl. January 1929.

THE BUTTERFLY ON THE WHEEL by Edward Hemmerde & Francis Neilson, 1911. Not seen. “It deals with one of those charming and irresponsible members of society who is best described as ‘a butterfly’, and it shows with great dramatic power the difficulties into which her irresponsibility can bring her. The play was first produced by Lewis Waller at the Globe Theatre, London, 18 April 1911, and had a long and successful run, and was produced in New York the following year” (from LAP press release, *Tottenham and Edmonton Weekly Herald* 4/11/27). Drama in four acts with a central scene in which a merciless K.C. conducts a High Court cross examination. “Cannot be said to be a brilliant play, because the opening acts are rather mechanical and obvious pointers to the divorce trial scene, yet it has strong interest in its revelation of the experiences undergone by a light-hearted indiscreet young wife” (*Kentish Mercury* 2/12/27). November 1927.

CAESAR'S WIFE, a three-act comedy by W.S. Maugham, first performed at Royalty Theatre, London, 27 March 1919, with Eva Moore. Published by William Heinemann, London, 1922. With five men and four women, plus some extras, it is set in the house and garden of the British Consular Agent in Cairo, Egypt. Young Violet is married to an older man, the British Consular Agent. She falls in love with his young secretary and they consider running away together. With her husband’s support (and to some extent his emotionally cruel manipulation of her youthful understanding of life) she finds a way to work through her passionate love and is eventually reconciled to her role as a diplomatic wife, remaining by his side. The play has a genteel quality, and while not referring to the Great War, is obviously written from the perspective of its occurrence. Seems to be saying there can no longer be a frivolous attitude to love; personal and public loyalty must to maintained if chaos is to be avoided. December 1928. (The Players also performed this play for three performances at the Century Theatre in 1925-6, but did not take it on the road at that time.)

CANDIDA by George Bernard Shaw, 1895. A mystery in three acts. First performed in London privately in 1900, in New York 1903 and at the Royal Court Theatre, London, 26 April 1904, with Granville Barker, Kate Rorke and Norman McKinnel. First published in 1898 and in *Plays Pleasant*, London, Penguin, 1946, reprinted 1966. January 1922.

CAPTAIN DREW ON LEAVE by Henry Hubert Davies. First performed at the New Theatre, London, 24 October 1905, with Charles Wyndham, Mary Moore and Marion Terry. Published in Volume 1 of *The Plays of Hubert Henry Davies*, London, Chatto & Windus 1921. A comedy in four acts with four men, two women, set in the summertime in rural England. Captain Drew is a naval officer on leave from duty. He makes a wager he will make quiet, shy little Mrs Moxon fall in love with him. Gradually their friendship grows into love, while Mr Moxon remains oblivious. Others, including the flirtatious Miss Mills interfere, together with the gruesome Mr Hassall. Drew realises he has gone too far and must leave. Mrs Moxon visits him late at night on impulse to say goodbye. They are discovered and Moxon wants his wife to leave. All is resolved as Drew convinces him that the problem lies with his lack of affection for his wife and the need to show it. Underlying serious purpose but not entirely convincing. March 1922.

CAROLINE by W. S. Maugham. Not seen and no published version identified. First performed at New Theatre, London, 8 February 1916, with Irene Vanbrugh. “A most laughable and amusing comedy... Caroline was a middle-aged woman whose husband had been living abroad for the last ten years. During all that time she had had an ardent admirer in Robert Oldham, a prosperous lawyer. When the news

arrives of her husband's death, Robert, in duty bound, proposes. But both Caroline and Robert in their inmost hearts feel that they would rather continue their platonic friendship than embark on marriage at their time of life. In the end, Caroline pretends the story of her husband's death was a mistake, and the marriage does not take place. She has two personal friends who take great interest in her love affairs. Isabella Trench is a very sympathetic friend, and Maud Fulton, a blunt, outspoken one. Rex Cunningham is a young man of the type that is happiest when miserable" (*Ilford Recorder* 2/5/24). With four women and three men. April 1924.

THE CASE OF LADY CAMBER by Horace Annesley Vachell. First performed Savoy Theatre, London, 16 October 1915, with H.B. Irving and Ben Webster. Published by Samuel French, London, (n.d.). In four acts with four men and four women. A rather long winded, but tense 'medical' drama/love story, involving a nurse (Esther Yorke) 'with a past', who is working for Dr Napier when he takes on Lady Camber's case. She is fading away from frustration, unhappiness in a loveless marriage – her callous and selfish husband having previously had a relationship with Esther, who no longer cares for him, being in love with the apparently indifferent Napier. Through the machinations of Lady Camber's nasty, jealous maid, Peach, Lady Camber discovers her husband's feelings for Esther and sets about to trap him. It is too much for her and she dies suddenly, with Napier suspecting Esther has used his discovery, talin, which cannot be detected, to kill Lady Camber. Napier sets about to find out the truth of Esther's actions (she actually stole the talin to commit suicide because she thought Napier was throwing her out) and her feelings for Camber. When he realises she loves him and tests prove she did not use the talin, they declare their love and Camber is left to suffer alone. A well-made play with good roles for women. November 1921.

THE CASE OF REBELLIOUS SUSAN by Henry Arthur Jones. First performance by Charles Wyndham, Criterion Theatre, London, 3 October 1894, and in New York in December 1894. Published by Macmillan & Co., London, 1901. Comedy in three acts with seven men and four women. Covering a period of just over two years, it is an upper class comedy of romance and manners set in London. When Susan discovers her husband is having an affair, she goes off and meets a young man, with whom she may or may not have an affair before she returns to her husband and resolves to make a go of it. There is deliberate ambiguity as to whether she is unfaithful or not. As a counterpoint, there is a 'New Woman' character, enabling presentation of fashionable arguments about the institution of marriage. Kato, Susan's uncle, is the device to set things right and dispense kindly advice. February 1928.

CASTE by Thomas William Robertson. First performed Prince of Wales Theatre, London, 6 April 1867, with the Bancrofts. A comedy in three acts with five men and three women. Published by T.H. French, London, (n.d.). The Hon. George D'Alroy falls in love with ballet dancer, Esther, who has a supportive sister and a drunken, useless father. He faces immediately the problem of 'caste', advised by his loyal friend Captain Hawtree not to defy society's rules. Without his mother's knowledge, he marries Esther and is happy until duty calls him to India, where while his wife is delivering his son and heir, he is reported dead. She mourns, her father drinks all the money left to her and she suffers poverty. However, he finally returns and eventually all is reconciled – she having proved herself a lady without any formal training or upbringing – accepted by her mother-in-law and happy to see her sister married to the hard working and kindly man she loves. March 1924 and April 1929.

THE CELLULOID CAT by Roger Pocock (with annotations by Lena Ashwell), originally performed as by Anonymous, premiered by the Lena Ashwell Players at the Longfield Hall, Ealing, 17 March 1924. Not published, available in Lord Chamberlain's Collection, British Library. Also called *Luck* and *The Claimants*. Originally in three acts, then four - authorship indicates Ashwell and Pocock. A later revision was submitted in March 1926, when Acts III and IV were condensed once again into one act. Handwritten note, Lord Chamberlain's office, 17 March 1926, "It has been made more lively, I think, and there is nothing in it to trouble the censorship." With two women and seven men, the first two acts were set at a miner's log cabin in Northern Canada, with Act III/IV in New York. A somewhat longwinded and complicated plot about two women, both claiming to be the wife of a wealthy American, who has apparently tried to drown one of them, Mary, so that he can be with her sister, Rebecca. Mary claims to

have seen her husband drown but the story is not utterly convincing, particularly when the husband and Rebecca arrive on the scene. During an altercation, Texas, a frontiersman, shoots the husband dead and both the women now claim he was their husband with no real proof. After the dead man is buried, both women are questioned individually by Toby (the Justice of the Peace) and the Constable. By Act III, Toby apparently believes Rebecca and they are now married and living well in New York. Moses, speaking mostly in cod Yiddish, arrives and reveals Rebecca as the fraud. The act ends with Toby calling the police. Meanwhile, Mary has made a life for herself in the log cabin with Luck (a fisherman who had rescued her). When word arrives that Rebecca is in jail and Mary is to inherit her former husband's millions, she opts for the simple life and the play ends with a simple wedding. In the revised version, Mary and Luck confront Rebecca and Toby in the New York apartment with the truth (the Jewish character is cut). Mary pretends the police are on the way, forcing the hasty departure of Rebecca and Toby. Mary and Luck declare their love as the play ends. Obviously based on Pocock's frontiersman experiences and life style, but it is not well structured and is overly dependent on 'devices' rather than character development. Despite the revisions and renewed licence, the Players appear only to have performed the original version in March 1924.

THE CHARITY THAT BEGAN AT HOME by St John Hankin. First performed Court Theatre, London, 23 October 1906, produced by Granville Barker with Dennis Eadie. A comedy for Philanthropists in four acts, in collection of *Three Plays with Happy Endings*, Samuel French, London, 1907. An ironical, but somewhat overstated piece which gently satirises 'doing good', with six men and six women - set in Lady Denison's house. She has been convinced by a quasi religious man to do good by inviting people to her home who would normally never be invited to house parties because of their gauche or anti-social behaviour. Put together they all have a dreadful time. Her daughter seems to love a man who really can't relate to do-gooders - he recognises the element of hypocrisy and realises despite his love for her, he could not bear to be married to her as he would be a constant disappointment to such a truly good person. He makes her realise she would be better married to the religious man and her mother realises doing good can be done in other ways without creating disharmony at home. December 1925.

A CHILD IN FLANDERS by Cicely Hamilton. Written for performance during the war - a nativity play in a prologue, five tableaux and an epilogue. Christmas music arranged by Theodore Flint. Published in *One-Act Plays of To-Day*, Second Series, London, George G. Harrop & Co., 1925. The Prologue & Epilogue are set in a French peasant's cottage a few miles behind the trenches - with four men. The Prologue and five tableaux take place on Christmas Eve, the Epilogue on Christmas Day. In the tableaux (the Vision) there are nine men, one woman and a boy (although roles can be played by male or female). Three soldiers seek shelter in a peasant's house - where his wife has just given birth to a baby boy. They are allowed to stay on condition that they do not disturb the mother and baby. While they are sleeping they dream of the birth of Christ and the visit of the Shepherd and kings to the stables. The next morning they briefly discuss their shared vision before the peasant bids them safe journey. "[Cicely Hamilton] ...has caught the spirit of the mediaeval mysteries, the better for its lack of any self-conscious archaisms. Like the artists of the Middle Ages, she can understand that when a thing happens both in time and in eternity it is as much Now as it was in B.C.4 or A.D. 1320... The whole is simple to naivete - so simple that it is not sentimental. And its sincerity has a real dramatic sense to guide it, that shows in the deft contrast between the straightforward realism of the induction and the absolute adherence to familiar convention in the visions, that gives a breath-catching value to the moment of crisis when they intersect" (*Time and Tide* review 8/1/26 of Old Vic production). December 1920, 1921 and 1923.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL adaptation by Beatrice Wilson of Dickens' novel. Stage adaptation not seen. Performed by the Lena Ashwell Players with *The Child In Flanders*. December 1923.

COME OUT OF THE KITCHEN, a comedy in three acts by Albert Ellsworth Thomas, based on the story of the same name by Alice Duer Miller, first performed at George M. Cohan Theatre, New York, 23 October 1916, with Ruth Chatterton and Bruce McRae. Published by Samuel French, New York, 1921. Set in the present day but with no reference to the war in Europe. Setting - the Daingerfield mansion in Virginia, US, with five women and six men. The action takes place over three days. With their parents

abroad (father very ill) and no money, four young adult siblings are forced to rent out the family mansion for six weeks. When four servants fail to turn up, they decide, directed by Olivia, to undertake the duties for a few days until replacements are found. Olivia, as the cook, just about copes, but is let down badly by the others in the face of the horrendous Mrs Falkner, guest of Burton Crane, the young man who has rented the house. They get into various scrapes while Crane is falling in love with Olivia. After three days he decides, having dismissed three of the 'staff', to break his lease, but finally declares his love for Olivia.
November 1926.

COOK by Jerome K. Jerome. Licenced 1917. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain's Collection, British Library. "The adventures of a greatly adored Socialist leader, who had an evening off with his own cook, and who finished at the police-station... a leader of the people... locked up for fighting in a palais de danse, and who [gives]... another man's name and address [instead of his own to the police]" (*South Western Star* 16/1/25).
January 1925.

THE COUNTRY WIFE by William Wycherley. First acted in 1675. Published in *Restoration Plays*, Everyman's Library, J. M. Dent & Sons, London, 1912, reprinted 1966. Five act comedy with eight men and seven women. "It is a comedy of contemporary manners, and portrays them with such frankness that it is quite impossible to produce it today as it was originally written. In 1766 David Garrick produced an adapted version of the play at Drury Lane under the title of *The Country Girl*, which was well received... The play as presented by the LAP is after the Garrick version, but Miss Beatrice Wilson, who has produced it, has cleverly reintroduced some witty passages which Garrick cut out" (*Rugby Advertiser* 25/7/24).
January and July 1924.

COUSIN KATE by Henry Hubert Davies. First performed Haymarket Theatre, London, 18 June 1903, with Cyril Maude. Published by William Heinemann, London, 1910. Comedy in three acts, with three men and four women, set in a rural district of England. Kate, in her late twenties, is the much loved cousin of Mrs Spencer and her two children. She arrives for Amy's wedding, having met her ideal man on the train, to find Amy and her fiancé, an artist, have had a tiff and he has vanished. Meanwhile, the visiting Reverend James Bartlett, more suited to Amy, has fallen in love with her and is trying to make sure the marriage with the artist does not go ahead. The artist (Heath) has returned (the man on the train) but when Kate goes to air the engaged couple's proposed home, she meets Heath and neither knowing the identity of the other, they declare love for each other. All ends well, with the right couples together – all very honourable and jolly.
December 1922.

THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH, a 'fairy tale of home' by Charles Dickens. Adapted from the novel and produced by Marion Fawcett. Stage adaptation not seen. With four men and six women. Performed by the Lena Ashwell Players with *Five Birds in A Cage* by Gertrude Jennings.
December 1922.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT adaptation by Lena Ashwell and Roger Pocock from Dostoevsky's novel. Licenced 3 December 1926, for performance at the Century Theatre, 1927. With eight men and three women. With a Prologue (the murder), and three acts. Act I: Rodya's garret, the morning after the murder; Act II: Office of Criminal Investigation department where there is a discussion on the behaviour of the guilty with Rodya, Razumihin and the chief investigator; Act III: Sonia's room, when Rodya confesses his guilt. Tight, effective dramatisation of the novel – acknowledges and pays tribute to the Lawrence Irving version (*The Unwritten Law*) lost when he drowned in the sinking of the Empress of Ireland. Act II is the most dramatically tense section. It required simple staging and works well as a moral tale, concentrating on the emergence of Rodya's guilt.
February 1927.

CUPID AND COMMON SENSE by Arnold Bennett. First performed at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, by the Stage Society on 26 January 1908. Published by Frank Palmer, London, 1912. Four act play with three men and six women. Set in Bursley, a small Northern English industrial town, between 1901 and 1907. A rather severe little play about Alice, daughter of penny pincher Eli, who inherits her mother's wealth (with interest) on reaching age 25. She has a younger sister who looks after their father,

especially once Alice marries Ralph Emery, up and coming citizen who eventually becomes Mayor. However, Alice loses her heart early on to Willie Beach, whose father commits suicide when he can no longer pay his debts. Willie is weak and to help his father forges a credit note, which Alice manages to destroy, thus saving Willie from prison and making it possible for him to make a new life in Canada, where he marries a rather stupid girl with lots of money. This match enables him to remain weak and content to do very little, evident when he returns for a visit some five years later. Alice, meanwhile, having been imbued with great commonsense, despite being drawn to Willie, marries Ralph and helps his career. There is a realization, however, from Alice and her aunt at least, that she has denied herself true love by her sensible, rational approach to life. April 1922.

CUPID AND THE STYX, comedy by J. Sackville Martin. Licenced 1909. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain's Collection, British Library. The only sustained review of this play by the Players does not tell the story, rather choosing to admire the actors for making something of the farcical material, involving two doctors, Esme Church as a nurse and "a series of stock jokes." (*Kentish Mercury* 11/3/21) Apparently not very taxing on the actors. Considered to be a "strange bedfellow" (*ibid*) when performed with Shaw's *O'Flaherty VC*. March 1921.

CYMBELINE by William Shakespeare. May not have been performed, originally scheduled for November 1923.

DADDY LONG LEGS by Jean Webster. Not seen. Available in the Lord Chamberlain's Collection, British Library. First performed Gaiety Theatre, New York, 28 September 1914 and at the Duke of York's, London, 29 May 1916. Adapted for the stage from the original book first published in 1912. Paperback edition published by Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1987. Set pre first world war in America. Main characters are Judy and her friends, the orphanage manager, Daddy Long Legs (Jervie Pendleton-Smith), the couple at the farm she visits and the parents of her friends. Story, told in the form of letters (to which there are no replies) from a young orphan girl (between ages 17 and 21) to her unknown benefactor who puts her through college and provides her with the opportunity to obtain an education and become a writer. Gradually the reader becomes aware (even though the writer doesn't) that the young man she is falling in love with (the uncle of a class mate) is actually her benefactor, whom she has nicknamed Daddy Long Legs because she glimpsed him leaving the home and noted his height. The letters reveal a growing maturity and enthusiasm for literature and life which is endearing – a film was made of the story, presumably similar to the play, where the man is real early on, while the writer continues to imagine him and respond to his actions via a secretary. In four acts with a cast of seven men and thirteen women, some doubling possible (programme York Theatre Royal July 9 1928). December 1927 and July 1928.

DANDY DICK by Arthur Wing Pinero. First performed Court Theatre, London, 27 January 1887. Athene Seyler directed a revival at the Lyric, Hammersmith in March 1948. First published 1893. Published in the Drama Library by Heinemann, London, 1959. Three-act farce with four women and seven men. Dandy Dick is a racehorse, part owned by Georgiana Tidman (sister of the Dean) and Sir Tristram Mardon, both of whom turn up just before the Race meet. The Dean, who lacks money and has two expensive, frivolous daughters, condemns all forms of gambling and horse racing. But he needs money, as do his daughters, to pay debts for their dresses to the military ball (which they plan to sneak away to with their suitors), especially since he had made a rash promise to match seven other contributors to the church spire repair fund. When Dandy Dick looks like a sure winner, bets and nerves start to rise to the surface. The Dean is encouraged by his sister to gamble on the horse, who is then the subject of an arson attack at the nearby hotel stables. The horse, with singed tail and slightly damp, is to be housed in the Dean's stable. He decides to administer a bolus to prevent chill. The Dean's less than trustworthy manservant, who has bet on another horse, spikes the bolus. The Dean is caught and locked up – finally rescued by his former cook (married to the local stupid Mr Plod) without too much public knowledge. Dandy Dick wins and following a few more farcical twists, all ends well and order is restored, with a slightly more aware set of people residing in the Deanery. December 1924.

THE DARK LADY OF THE SONNETS, an interlude by George Bernard Shaw. First performed at the Haymarket Theatre, London, 24 November 1910, for two charity matinees on behalf of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. First published in a collection with *Misalliance* and *Fanny's First Play*, Brentano's, New York, 1914. With two men and two women, set in Shakespeare's Elizabethan England, at Whitehall Palace, summer. Ashwell recorded this play, with Shaw, for BBC radio during the 1930s. May 1924.

DAVID GARRICK, a comedy in three acts by T.W. Robertson, first performed at Haymarket Theatre, London, 30 April 1864, with Mr Sothern. Published by Samuel French, London, (n.d). A representation of the love life of the famous actor. Set in 1742, with nine men, three women. Ada Ingot is in love with the actor, Garrick. Her father invites him to dinner, first extracting a promise that he will not fall in love with his daughter and that he will convince her to marry a dreadful cousin. Garrick, although realising he loves Ada, acts the drunkard and disreputable rude character expected of him by the other guests. Ada is convinced by his behaviour, until her cousin reports on Garrick's sadness and explanation of his evening after leaving Ada's house. She goes to Garrick to prevent him duelling, the cousin displays all his bad qualities, her father realises Garrick's worth and all is well – the girl gets the boy. November 1922.

THE DEATH OF TINTAGILES, a very short five act drama by Maurice Maeterlinck. First published in 1922 and included in *A Treasury of Plays for Women*, edited by Frank Shay, New York, Core Collection Books, 1979. Drama with six women, one man and one boy. Tintagiles is approaching death and his sisters go with him to try to stave off the inevitable moment when the 'Queen' (of Death) will take him. Ygraine goes the furthest with him, trying, to no avail, to save him. A tense, symbolic work, relying on strong performances by women to keep it from slipping into full melodrama. February 1926.

THE DEVIL'S DISCIPLE by George Bernard Shaw. A melodrama in three acts, 1897. Published in *Three Plays for Puritans* 1901, then by Penguin, London 1946. Set in the town of Westerbridge, New Hampshire, during the American War of Independence. With three women and ten men. May 1924.

DIANA OF DOBSON'S by Cicely Hamilton. First performance Kingsway Theatre, London, 12 February 1908 with Ashwell as Diana. First published by Samuel French in 1925. Published in *New Woman Plays* edited by Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner, Methuen Drama, 1991, A comedy in four acts set in 1908 with nine women and four men. The action of the play takes place over six weeks. Diana is a shopgirl, forced to support herself through hard, ill paid work from which the only escape is marriage. In the first act Diana is railing against the conditions – sharing a dormitory with others and suffering under the tyrannical hand of her superiors. An outspoken, independent woman, she constantly faces fines for unbecoming conduct. When she receives the news that a relative has died, leaving her £300, she decides to 'live it up' for as long as the money lasts, knowing she will have to return to drudgery, but will have had the experience of travel, fine clothes and polite company. Pretending to be a young widow, Diana goes to stay in a hotel in Switzerland where her apparent wealth is of interest to Mrs Cantelupe. Her nephew, Captain Victor Bretherton, has fallen in love with Diana – and Sir Jabez Grinley is also pursuing her. Grinley is the proprietor of the establishment Diana worked for before going to Dobsons. When Diana's money runs out, she prepares to return to London, not before she has informed Victor of her true position – he is outraged that she is not a wealthy widow. She challenges him to live on the £600 a year he receives – or to attempt to earn his living, something he has never had to do. Three months later, Victor and Diana meet on the Thames Embankment – she very down on her luck, he trying to live by the work of his hands as she suggested. He realises he could live happily with her on £600 a year and the play ends with the likelihood that they will get married. April 1922 and April 1924.

DIPLOMACY by Victorien Sardou, four act play. Not seen. English version of Sardou's *Dora*. First performed in English at the Adelphi Theatre, London, 8 March 1924, with Gladys Cooper. Subsequently made into a film. "The story is of a young Englishman in the Diplomatic Service (attached to the Embassy in France) who meets and falls in love with the attractive daughter of a volatile Marquise; also a Russian (nee German) spy and certain other characters, scrupulous and otherwise, who have, for various reasons, interests in diplomacy. The Englishman marries, then misses some plans which his country has entrusted to him. He is in a position of trust, and she – well, Caesar's Wife should be above suspicion, but

fortunately for the play she is not... Diplomats may run the world, but women run the diplomats" (*Bath & Wilts Chronicle* 31/7/28). With five women and eight men, set in Monte Carlo and Paris. "The somewhat improbable nature of the plot is more in the incredulous style we are constantly being tortured with at 'the pictures'. Nevertheless, the play has its compelling moments" (*Middlesex Chronicle* 3/12/27).

November 1927.

THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA, a tragedy in five acts by George Bernard Shaw, first performed Court Theatre, London, 20 November 1906, with Granville Barker and Lillah McCarthy. First published 1908 and by Penguin, London 1946. Expose of the sham of the medical profession. July 1925.

A DOLL'S HOUSE by Henrik Ibsen.

December 1923.

DOORMATS, a comedy in three acts by Henry Hubert Davies, first performed Wyndham's Theatre, London, 3 October 1912, with Gerald du Maurier, Marie Lohr and Nina Boucicault. Published by Chatto & Windus, London, 1921, in Volume II of the *Collected Plays of Henry Hubert Davies*. With three men and three women, the action takes place over a period of ten weeks in a London house. A domestic comedy about relationships. Noel Gale, an artist, and his wife, Leila, drift apart, she into the arms of Captain Maurice Harding. His aunt and uncle come to stay, providing a complementary situation in their relationship, where the wife who calls herself a 'doormat' to her husband's 'boot', recognises the necessity of both types of people. Noel goes to America; when he returns he realises he must either save or abandon his marriage. When he tries to lay the ground rules, his wife resists, only to find her 'future' husband resisting even more and she decides to stay with Noel, with a greater understanding of their relationship and how their marriage can work. February 1923.

THE DOVER ROAD by A.A. Milne. First performed Theatre Royal, Haymarket, 7 June 1922, with Athene Seyler and Henry Ainley. Published in *Four Plays* by A.A. Milne, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1939. A comedy in three acts with four men and two women, set in the reception room of Latimer's house and taking place over four days. A whimsical look at relationships and marriage. Two couples, running away to France, apparently 'stumble' upon Mr Latimer's house en route to Dover, after car trouble. Latimer and his staff set about to provide opportunities for the couples - in this case the woman in one is the wife of the man in the other pair - to really get to know each other before they make the wrong commitment. Latimer appears all knowing, all understanding, but he is drawn to Anne - but she ultimately has the good sense to escape on her own, while the two men go to France, leaving Eustasia to care for an ill member of Latimer's staff. The best situation all round! October 1925.

DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE adapted by Lena Ashwell and Roger Pocock from Robert Louis Stevenson's story. Licenced 22 February 1927. First performed by the Lena Ashwell Players, Public Hall, Sutton, 14 March 1927. Lord Chamberlain's collection, British Library. In three acts with two scenes each. An effective and theatrical retelling of the story with suitably dramatic high points - contains moments of humour and demonstrates shrewd understanding of the theatrical form. "They (Ashwell and Pocock) have allowed themselves considerable latitude, and have not hesitated to bring it up to date in some respects. For example, they make use of the telephone, a necessary part of the equipment of a doctor's consulting room today, but a practically unknown thing in the days of Stevenson. However, they have left in all the essential parts of the story and many of Stevenson's original lines. The result is an extraordinarily thrilling play full of incident and clever dialogue" (Lena Ashwell Players' press release quoted in *Enfield Gazette and Observer* 18/3/27 and other local papers). March 1927.

THE DUKE OF KILLIECRANKIE by Robert Marshall. Licenced 26 January 1904, first performed Criterion Theatre, London, 20 January 1904 and ran for 328 performances. Lord Chamberlain's collection, British Library. A light, romantic comedy in three acts with four men and four women, set in London and Scotland. Of its time and dependent on the notion that a lady's honour is her most important public asset. The Duke uses many tricks to get his childhood friend, Lady Henrietta, to love him and agree to marry him. At the same time his friend Welby seeks to repair his relationship with Mrs

Mulholland – so as a foursome they retreat to Scotland, making ‘prisoners’ of the ladies until they achieve their ambitions. Not much character development, but entertaining, witty moments. October 1921.

THE EARTH by James Bernard Fagan. First performed Kingsway Theatre, 14 April 1909, with Ashwell as the Countess of Killone. Published in London by T. Fisher Unwin (n.d.). A drama in four acts with three women and eleven men, set in London and including Janion’s newspaper office in the City. Sir Felix Janion is a newspaper proprietor intent on destroying a new Wages Bill due for introduction into Parliament by M.P. Denzil Trevena. Janion is prepared to use any means to stop the bill which he thinks will undermine his profits and he is waging a strong campaign in his publications to influence public opinion. He discovers a relationship between Trevena and the unhappily married Lady Killone and decides to use this to force Trevena to withdraw the Bill. Trevena, to save Lady Killone’s reputation from scandal and the divorce court, agrees. When she discovers the blackmail she confronts Janion, then Trevena, declaring her reputation is not important compared with Trevena’s work and career – she is prepared to face exposure rather than deny Trevena his future. Janion is adamant he will destroy them both. She then declares she will tell the whole story to the Press Association, bringing Janion down in the process. He relents, returns the evidence of their relationship and the play ends with the realisation that the press is still all powerful but can be checked by such people as Trevena and Lady Killone.

April and June 1925.

THE EASIEST WAY, a play by Eugene Walter, licenced 1908. Not seen. First performed at the Belasco/Stuyvesant Theatre, New York, 19 January 1909 and at the Globe Theatre, London, 10 February 1912. Novelised version by Walter and Arthur Hornblow, published by T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1911. A story of metropolitan life in America - appears to be about a woman, Laura Murdoch, who calls herself an actress and attempts to redeem her scarlet past, but fails. (However, disclaimer at beginning of novel declares she is not representative of the true theatrical professional.) ”With so few economic options for women, the blame is more society’s, the play suggests, than that of the women’s weak morals” (*New York Times*, January 1909). “The play is not of the pleasantest character; it deals with the seamy side of the stage and of a certain type of wealthy theatrical proprietor” (*West Herts and Watford Observer* 28/10/22). With three women (one a negro servant) and three men. October 1922.

THE EDUCATION OF MR SURRAGE by Allan Monkhouse. First performed at Liverpool Repertory Theatre, 4 November 1912. Lena Ashwell Players gave first performances of this play in London in October 1925. Published in London by Sidgwick & Jackson, 1913. An off-beat comedy of manners in four acts - in some ways ahead of its time. With five men and three women, the first three acts are set in the hall of a country house, forty miles from London and the fourth act in an ante-room of a Bond St Gallery. Mr Surrage is a middle-aged widower whose son and two daughters invite three very odd people for a weekend house party. Mr Suckling, a playwright, Mr Vallance, an artist with a very rude and independent disposition, and Mrs Staines, with whom Vallance has had a relationship in the past. Mr Surrage begins to learn the ways of the world through these unattractive people, all in some way on the make. He realises he has led a very sheltered existence and must be more aware of the world. Vallance steals from him, his children become embarrassed by the whole situation, including Mr Surrage’s attraction to Mrs Staines. They too are ‘educated’ by this appalling behaviour. The fourth act sees Mr Surrage managing Vallance and arranging for Vallance and Mrs Staines to marry - perhaps he has learnt they are ‘made for each other.’ Not very well received, hence its delay in reaching London. October 1925.

THE ELDER MISS BLOSSOM by Ernest Hendrie & Metcalfe Wood, 1898. Not seen. A three-act comedy frequently played by the Kendals. After performances in England, they performed it at the Knickerbocker Theatre, New York, for 39 performances from 20 November 1899. “The play deals with the predicament of a man who, by a misapprehension, sends a written proposal of marriage, not to the young lady whom he thinks he loves, but to her aunt. After three years absence abroad he returns home to find his mistake was due to his theft of the handkerchief which the girl had borrowed from her aunt. This bore the aunt’s name” (*West Herts and Watford Observer* 4/11/22). November 1922.

ELIZA COMES TO STAY by H.V. Esmond. First performance, Criterion Theatre, London, 12 February 1913. Published by Samuel French, London (n.d.). A farce in three acts with five men and four women. With a single set - the Breakfast room of the Hon. Sandy Verrall's flat in London, over a period of five weeks. Eliza is the daughter of a man who saved Sandy's life. Before the man's death Sandy promises to look after his daughter, assuming she is a very young child (initial improbable premise). When she arrives, she is eighteen. After a series of farcical turnabouts, Eliza and Sandy end up happily ever after, but not before Sandy's fiancée marries his uncle; Monty has proposed marriage to Eliza and Sandy goes away to escape the issue. Eliza, initially dowdy, learns of the importance of dressing herself up and blossoms into a suitable wife for Sandy. Entertaining for its time, but post-war would have felt old fashioned and limited in its approach to women. November 1928.

THE ENCHANTED COTTAGE, a fable in three acts by Arthur Wing Pinero, first performed at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, 1 March 1922. Published by William Heinemann, London 1921. With four men, five women and extras for the fantasy sequence. Set in a cottage on the edge of Fittlehurst Park, Lord Wisborough's seat in Sussex after the Great War. This was not one of Pinero's successful works, but nevertheless a serious product of the postwar era. It would have been a difficult play technically to stage given the fantasy sequence, requiring extra people, special lighting and other effects. Oliver has been wounded physically and mentally by the war and retreats to an isolated cottage to get away from his damaged life and lack of future. When his mother suggests his sister comes to look after him, in desperation he marries a very kind but extremely plain local girl. Their friend Hillgrove has been blinded by the war but is reconciled to his situation and very wise. They have a housekeeper, Mrs Minnett, who is suspected of witch-like behaviour. Act II is a fantasy sequence where they become beautiful and well in the eyes of each other and their imagined wider world through a dream sequence. One character suggests Hillgrove has influenced their thoughts. The third act returns them to reality, when their families converge and realise the hopelessness of their position. However, the couple has established a relationship and sense of identity which will sustain them through life. A thought provoking, although imperfect, play. Pinero was grappling with a situation many ex-service people were facing after a devastating war. July 1929.

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE by Henrik Ibsen. A play in five acts first performed in 1882. Published in *Ghosts and Other Plays* by Henrik Ibsen, translated by Peter Watts, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1964. With seven men, two women and two boys. November 1925.

EVERYMAN by Anonymous, but attributed by the Lena Ashwell Players to the Belgian theological writer, Peter Dorlandus who died in 1507. Mediaeval mystery play. The Players attempted in their production to recreate a 16th century Venetian performance of the work. Esmé Church who played the title role of Everyman "bore herself very humanly, and made us strikingly conscious of our many weaknesses... In the stead of scenery much of the necessary atmosphere was produced by the voices of unseen singers, the Misses Winifred Clarke (contralto) and Minna Woodhead (soprano) and their accompanists... Another striking note was the richness of the costumes, which were appropriately colourful" (*Kentish Mercury* 1/4/21). March 1921.

THE FAKE, a play in three acts by Frederick Lonsdale, first performed at the Apollo Theatre, London, 13 March 1924. Published by Samuel French, 1926. A family drama with seven men and five women. A daughter is married (sacrificed) to a drug addict and drunkard to satisfy her father's need for social acceptance. She endures the marriage for six years, then, when desperate to leave her husband because she fears his violence, her father prevails upon her to try a further six months, for the sake of reputation. An old family friend decides to help by taking the drunk away, during which time he gives him an overdose of alcohol and drugs. He dies – it looks like suicide and the father can still claim all is well for the family reputation. The daughter, although finally released from the torment, has lost her own sense of life and purpose. The family friend, Geoffrey Sands, forces the father to recognise his role in his daughter's distress. October 1926.

A FAMILY MAN, a family drama in three acts by John Galsworthy, first performed at the Comedy Theatre, London, 2 June 1921, with Norman McKinnel and Olive Walter. Published by Duckworth & Co., London, 1922. Set in the Midland town of Breconridge, with ten men and five women. A strong play about the conflict between generations. John Builder considers himself a good family man and solid man of the community. However, his two daughters and wife eventually rebel against his repressive manner, causing his public shaming and humiliation. The women gain strength but at the end of the play the audience is not sure how much understanding he achieves. Tight family drama of its time, includes issues relating to post-war women and a rapidly changing society. February 1925.

FALLEN ANGELS by Michael Morton and Peter Traill (pen name for Guy Mainwaring Morton, Michael Morton's son). Licenced 1924. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain's Collection, British Library. "Deals with the problems presented by the modern girl" (*West Herts and Watford Observer* 25/10/24). With three women and four men. "The story - a slight one - hinges on the feverish vagaries of the post-war flapper who is continually seeking some new excitements, often at considerable risk to herself. In this case... the daughter of parents living in the odour of high respectability... visits a night club of very questionable character, and afterwards goes with Derrick Younge to his bachelor flat. Here she encounters Freddie Beaumont and Sybil Farlowe - a lady of easy virtue who has long lost all illusions. She talks straightly to the flapper, who, suddenly realising the company she is in, rushes home to her parents" (*Enfield Gazette and Observer* 24/10/24). October 1924.

FAME AND THE POET by Lord Dunsany. One-act play. Not seen. "A clue... is the time it is supposed to take place - February 30th. Harry de Reves is a poet and erects an altar to Fame, and seeks to woo her with his sonnets. He falls asleep and lo! She appears. But fame brings him disillusionment. The vulgar mob want, not to hear his poems, but what he eats, about the games he plays, the implements of his craft. Sickened by the limelight publicity which the goddess has brought him, he is reduced to the last stages of despair when he learns that she is to remain his companion forever... [A] delicious satire" (*Bath & Wilts Chronicle* 6/8/26). August 1926.

FANNY AND THE SERVANT PROBLEM, 'a quite possible play in four acts' by Jerome K. Jerome, published by Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1909. No first performance details found. For a large cast - with one scene requiring twelve young ladies to represent countries of the Empire, otherwise the main cast is six women and five men. Set in Lady Bantock's boudoir, Bantock Hall. Entertaining comedy but, given the subject matter and situation, very dated. Fanny, a music hall singer, just married to Lord Bantock, discovers that his staff, consisting of a butler and his entire family, are her dreaded relations. How she finally deals with this situation is the story of the play. She calls on her music hall manager and friends to help and manages to achieve her rightful place in an all's-well ending. January 1926.

FANNY'S FIRST PLAY, a play in three acts by George Bernard Shaw, first performed at the Little Theatre in the Adelphi, London, for a matinee on 19 April 1911. Published by Brentano's, New York, 1914, with *Misalliance*, *Dark Lady of the Sonnets* and *Treatise on Parents and Children*. Described in his preface by Shaw as a potboiler on the substitution of custom for conscience - and the breaking away from that and the lampooning of theatrical critics. Induction and Epilogue - Country house setting, with seven men and one woman. Centre piece - three-act play with five men and four women. January 1921 and December 1922.

FIND THE WOMAN or THE THIRD DEGREE, a melodramatic comedy in four acts by Charles Klein, first performed at the Garrick Theatre, London, 17 June 1912, with Arthur Bouchier and Violet Vanbrugh. Not seen. The novelised version by Klein and Arthur Hornblow was published by Arthur F. Bird, London, 1912. Also published as *The Third Degree* (a novel) by T. Fisher Unwin in 1909. Called a narrative of metropolitan life. "The plot is not extraordinary; we have the ne'er-do-well son, the poor wife, the cruel father, and a murder charge... the first act provided an enlightening example of the famous American method of cross-examination, 'The Third Degree'" (*Enfield Gazette and Observer* 14/11/24). Howard Jeffries is wrongly accused of the murder of Robert Underwood who had actually committed suicide. "The troubles of two young wives, one of whom, because of her working class background, has

led to the estrangement between her husband and his father. When a bankrupt art dealer (Robert Underwood) commits suicide, this woman's husband is accused of his murder and his wife thought to be the dead man's midnight visitor prior to his death. The other wife finally confesses it was she who visited Underwood, in response to his threat to shoot himself" (ibid). November 1924.

FIVE BIRDS IN A CAGE, a one-act comedy by Gertrude Jennings. Originally performed for a matinee performance at the Haymarket Theatre, London, 19 March 1915, joined the evening bill on 20 April 1915. Published in *One-Act Plays of Today*, Fourth series, selected by J.W. Marriott, London, George Harrap & Co., 1928. With three men and two women. Set in a lift in the London Underground, a break down forces the occupants to acknowledge each other – Susan, the domineering Duchess of Wiltshire, the useless Lord Porth, Bert a young workman, Nelly a milliner's assistant and Horace, job's worth liftman. Nelly is nervous because she is taking a dress to a demanding lady (who in the end turns out to be the Duchess) and fears being late. She and Bert are drawn to each other, especially when Bert climbs out to seek assistance and we know that romance will blossom. Porth proves himself a total wimp, Susan is no more humble at the end but does admire the handsome, kind hearted Bert. Nelly has found a true companion, while you know Horace will never change his ways. December 1922, presented with *A Cricket on the Hearth*.

FIVE MINUTES FAST by Michael Morton. Licenced 28 January 1925, first performance by the Lena Ashwell Players at the Public Hall, Sutton, 9 February 1925. Lord Chamberlain's Collection, the British Library. A comedy in three acts. Amusing, but not particularly noteworthy, it gently satirises an American couple who think they should divorce - the very English Miss Harry Cave-Orme uses almost military intelligence skills (following her success at this during the war) to protect her sister-in-law from being involved in the hapless Comptons' divorce. Harry is almost compromised in the process. February 1925.

FRENCH LEAVE by Reginald Berkeley. First performed at the Devonshire Park Theatre, Eastbourne, 7 June 1920, and at the Globe Theatre, London, 15 July 1920. Transferred to the Apollo, played 278 performances in all. Revived Vaudeville Theatre, January 1930. Published by Samuel French, London 1922. A light comedy in three acts set in the Mess room of a Brigade resting out of the line, 'Somewhere in France', over a 24 hour period, with six men and two women. Dorothy, desperate to see her husband, Captain Gleinster, whose leave has been cancelled at the last minute, pretends to be the dancer daughter of the French concierge so they can have some time together. Pretence and subterfuge (once he realises she is in the house), are used by the couple to fend off the attentions of the other men in the Mess, all of whom fancy their chances with Dorothy. They pass through some 'dangerous' moments as he would be seriously compromised if caught. However, there is never any real danger and his superior is deflected at the last minute. Attempt to show the lighter side of life during the war. January and April 1928.

THE FUGITIVE, a play in four acts by John Galsworthy. First performed at the Royal Court Theatre, 16 September 1913. Published by Duckworth & Co, London, 1913. With five women and eleven men plus extras, the story takes place over the period of a year. A gloomy, evocative piece, well written and highlighting a problem for women who cut loose from family and friends without support. The Fugitive is Clare, who leaves her husband because she does not love him and cannot live with him, despite his threats and promises. For a while she thinks she loves the writer Malise, but he is really another lost soul like herself. She becomes a fugitive from her family, helpless, not able to get a job and in the end commits suicide rather than become a prostitute, the only alternative for such a woman at that time. April 1927.

THE GAY LORD QUEX, a comedy in four acts by Arthur W. Pinero, first performed at the Globe Theatre, London, 8 April 1899. Published by William Heinemann, London, 1900. Action takes place over twenty-four hours, with four men and ten women, plus extras. Principal setting is the establishment of Sophy Fullgarney, Manicurist and Dispenser of Articles for the Toilet, 185 New Bond Street, London. A longwinded romance about the games people play to win hearts and husbands. Sophy interferes persistently in the affairs of the heart of her friend Muriel, attempting to expose the worthlessness of one man and then of his rival. All is sorted out in the end, when love wins the day. Very popular at the time,

especially as Lord Quex was a vehicle for a handsome, suave actor to be indulged by his women admirers.

March 1921 and January 1929.

GETTING MARRIED, a 'disquisitory' play by Bernard Shaw, first performed at a matinee performance, Haymarket Theatre, London, 12 May 1908. Published in London by Constable & Company in 1913. Performed at the Booth Theatre, New York, 6 November 1916. May 1923.

GOOD FRIDAY, a play in verse by John Masefield. Given a try-out performance by the Stage Society at the Garrick Theatre, London, 25 February 1917. Published by Heinemann, London, 1917. With seven men, one woman, and extras, the play is set on the paved Court outside the Roman Citadel in Jerusalem and is played in one long continuous scene. Poetic rendering of the crucifixion of Christ, very much a product of war time experience and suffering. Presents the dilemma for Pilate, who does not want to execute Christ. There is pressure from the rabble. A madman, the lone voice pleading for Jesus, has the most poetic and descriptive passages to speak. Simple staging, very gentle piece, performed by the Lena Ashwell Players to celebrate Easter. The character of Jesus is not on stage at all – we see the situation very much from Pilate's point of view, and that of his wife who pleads with him not to kill Jesus.

April 1925.

THE GRAIN OF MUSTARD SEED, a hard hitting, realistic play in three acts by H.M. Harwood. First performed at the Ambassador's Theatre, London, 20 April 1920, with Norman McKinnel, subsequently transferred to the Kingsway. Published by Ernest Benn Ltd, London, 1926. For three women and ten men, the play covers a period of five weeks. Addresses, and no doubt accurately portrays, immediate post war personal despair, political necessity and the confrontation of a changed world. Weston is a rising politician more in tune with the attitude of the people than the older hands. He is prepared to fight hard, using modern techniques (learnt as a business man) to promote his cause. Portrays a real sense of the old school versus a changing world. He falls in love with Marjorie, the daughter of an M.P. At the end of the play she is brutally honest about having been the mistress of another man, confronting Weston with contemporary reality. Important post-war repertoire piece.

October 1924.

THE GREAT ADVENTURE, a 'play of fancy in four acts' by Arnold Bennett, first performed at the Kingsway Theatre, 25 March 1913, by Granville Barker. Published by Methuen & Co, London, 1913. With twelve men, three women and three extras and set in London. Each act consists of two scenes and the play covers a period of over two years. A witty, perceptive piece about the life and role of the artist and public expectations and pressure, which the character of Carve tries to escape. A famous artist, Ilam Carve, returns to England having lived abroad. His valet is taken ill and dies; the doctor assumes the dead man to be Carve and the story quickly gets out that he is dead. The valet is buried with full honours at Westminster Abbey while the artist, out of choice, lives quietly with a good woman, who was originally planning to marry the valet. Carve can't suppress his artistic talent and eventually his identity is discovered. To save face for those who arranged the Abbey burial, he plans to go abroad again.

October 1925.

THE GREAT BROXOPP, 'Four Chapters in His Life' by A.A. Milne. First performed St Martin's Theatre, London, 6 March 1923. Published in *Three Plays*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1923. In four acts, with six women and five men, the play cover a period of twenty-seven years. Another of Milne's gentle satires-showing great affection for characters who remain true to themselves and value basic principles. Broxopp and his wife Nancy are devoted to each other. As a struggling advertising copywriter he stumbles on success, creating the Broxopp Beans Baby and considerable wealth. Their son, however, reaching his early 20s, wants to throw off this association and he, his fiancée and her father (Sir Roger Tenderden – of whom, given his title, Broxopp is somewhat in awe) convince him to sell up, take his wife's maiden name and retire gracefully, which he duly does. Sir Roger makes bad investments on their behalf, losing all their money, during which time their son realises he is not an artist and must now recompense his indulgent parents -who happily start again, relishing the chance to work and battle together – but now accompanied by their more understanding son and his wife. Charming, light, thoughtful piece.

April 1928.

THE GREEN GODDESS, a play in four acts by William Archer, first performed at the Booth Theatre, New York, 18 January 1921, with George Arliss. Published in *Sixteen Famous British Plays* compiled by Bennett A. Cerf and Van H. Cartmell, introduced by John Mason Brown, The Modern Library, NY. Random House, 1942. Set in remote region of the Himalayas, with seven men, two women and many extras. A serious, romantic adventure, more appropriate to film treatment. It would be difficult to stage as the settings include a crashed plane and mountain cave and involve many extras playing soldiers, temple attendants. Crespin and his wife Lucilla and Dr Traherne crash land in remote Rukh and become hostages in an international incident. Their 'host', the Raja, kills Crespin after he has radioed for help and in the nick of time the lovers Lucilla and Traherne are saved. February 1929.

HAMLET by William Shakespeare. November 1924.

TO HAVE THE HONOUR by A.A. Milne. First performed at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 22 April, 1924, with Gerald du Maurier. Published in *Four Plays* by A. A. Milne, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1939. A comedy in three acts with five men and six women, set at Simon Battersby's cottage, Wych Trentham, over one evening and the following morning. Another of Milne's whimsical, romantic and stylish comedies. 'Prince Michael' of Neo Slavonia 'returns' to England four years after having left his wife Jennifer - they have both invented other lives/personas to deal with their failed marriage but eventually get together again understanding better each other's need to seek freedom and variety. There is something of the sense that being apart until one grows up a bit (or has lived) is a good thing for a marriage. Post-war entertainment, insubstantial but charming and apparently popular with Ashwell's audiences. December 1926.

HAY FEVER by Noel Coward. First performed Ambassadors Theatre, London, 8 June 1925, with Marie Tempest as Judith Bliss. Published by Samuel French, London, 1927. A light three-act comedy with five women and four men. February 1927.

HER HUSBAND'S WIFE, a light comedy in three acts by Albert Ellsworth Thomas. First performed at the New Theatre, London, 5 September 1916, with Dion Boucicault, Marie Lohr and Irene Vanbrugh. Published by Samuel French, London, (n.d.). Setting throughout is the Drawing room of the Randolph's cottage in the country. Irene, a hypochondriac, decides she is dying despite any real evidence that she is ill. Without telling her husband, she selects the woman he should marry after her demise, so that she may be remembered in the best possible light. The prospective wife is Emily, an apparently dowdy friend of Irene, who has recently returned from abroad. Irene does not know that Emily was once engaged to her brother Richard. Irene enlists Uncle John in her project but doesn't reckon on Emily's reaction - anger, followed by revenge. Once Emily begins to 'play up' to the unsuspecting husband, Irene becomes jealous. The situation goes through many misunderstandings and some irritating longueurs. Eventually all ends appropriately, when Irene realises she must stay alive and stop indulging in foolish behaviour. January 1925.

HINDLE WAKES, a domestic drama in three acts by Stanley Houghton, first performed for the London Stage Company, Aldwych Theatre, 16 June 1912, by Miss Horniman's Manchester Gaiety company. Published by Heinemann Educational Books, London 1988. (Date of original publication not known). Later made into a film with Norman McKinnel as the factory boss. With five women and four men. Effective drama about conflict of ideas, expectations between older and younger generations. Houghton from the 'Manchester' school of writers, set his play in the growing industrial north of England. He raises issues about women's independence, including the vote. Highlights differences between the sexes and changing attitudes to women. Fanny refuses to marry Alan (her father's boss's son), despite having spent a weekend with him. She wants to decide her own future, representing a strong woman not prepared to conform to outdated mores. October 1926.

HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR, a farcical romance in three acts by Robert Marshall. Published by William Heinemann, London, 1901. With ten men, three women, set in the late 1890s in the Vestibule of Government House, Amandaland Islands, Indian Ocean. The Governor, Sir Montagu Martin,

has forbidden contemplation or action in relation to matrimony for himself and his staff. This is possible to adhere to while there are no women about. The Governor is also trying to impose monogamy on the natives and unrest is feared. A minister of the British Cabinet arrives for a holiday on the islands, bringing his sister and daughter. In addition, an attractive, forthright concert artiste, Stella, known to Montagu previously, arrives for a concert tour around the islands. The expected happens, love is in the air, with three men falling in love with the Cabinet Minister's daughter (Ethel) and the cabinet Minister falling for Stella. After an imagined siege by the natives, Ethel sorts out who she wants (Charles Carew) and the play ends, with love once again an acceptable emotion on the island. Fairly slick and well-written, but very predictable.
March 1922 and October 1924.

HIS HOUSE IN ORDER, a comedy in four acts by Arthur W. Pinero. First performed at St James' Theatre, London, 1 February 1906. Published by William Heinemann, London, 1906. With eight men, one boy, four women and extras. Set at Overbury Towers, Mr Filmer Jesson's country house in the Midlands, over twenty-seven hours during the Easter recess. Nina, Filmer's second wife, has to find a way to deal with the memory of his first wife and her family. When it is discovered that the first wife was less than perfect, Nina finds a way to cope, feels less inadequate and begins to take on her new family.
November 1921.

HIS OWN by Evelyn Greenleaf Sutherland. Not seen. One-act negro play. Premiered by the Lena Ashwell Players in England at the Century Theatre on 22 February 1926. "The scene is laid in the Southern States, and the play deals with the joys and sorrows of the negro people. A delightful feature of the play is the frequent singing of negro spirituals" (*Enfield Gazette and Observer* 12/2/26). "A strong and effectively intense tragedietta of negro life in the Southern States some fifteen years after the close of the American Civil War. It is from the practised pen of that well-known American lady journalist and dramatist... part author of *Monsieur Beaucaire*, and, acquired by Miss Lena Ashwell in America. The significance of the title, *His Own*, resides in the fact that prior to the abolition of slavery no negro could regard as 'his own' wife, children, house, land, or any other property, and due stress is laid upon this by Job Duke, a prosperous and sincerely devout, if very austere, preacher, when speaking to his wife, Rosa, about his supposed little boy, Matsy, whom he was about to lash with a strap for having taken away a loaded gun. The boy had met and taken for a tramp his real father, Lincoln Treff, who had just come out of jail after serving a term of ten years. Rosa had been married to Job, to go through ten years of Hell, as she says, a fortnight after Lincoln had gone to prison, and Treff, on his return, persuades her to fly and find new happiness with him. The elopement might have come about but for the attempted thrashing of the child by Job, at first petrified by Rosa's hasty revelation of the truth about herself and Lincoln, but determined to hold his own all the same. This he does even in death, for, whilst he is forcing Rosa to take poison (with effects resembling those of swampy fever), he is shot by Lincoln with the very gun that had caused all the trouble. Apparently free to escape with her lover, as other negroes are heard chanting on the way to a prayer meeting, Rosa imagines that the dead preacher is still holding her as his own and falls dead or insensible by his corpse. For the interpretation of this harrowing little drama the exponents of the four characters tried sedulously to adopt the negro mannerisms of speech, which made some of the dialogue rather difficult to follow" (*Stage* 25/2/26).
February 1926.

HOBSON'S CHOICE, comedy by Harold Brighouse. Originally performed at the Princess Theatre, New York, on 2 November 1915, ran for 135 performances. First performed Apollo Theatre, London, 22 June 1916, with Norman McKinnel, ran for 246 performances. Published in *Great Modern British Plays*, edited by J.W. Marriott, George G. Harrap, London, 1929. A Lancashire comedy in four acts with seven men, five women.
March 1924.

THE HOUSE WITH THE TWISTY WINDOWS, 'an episode in one act' by Mary Pakington, premiered by the Lena Ashwell Players at the Century Theatre, London, April 1926. Published with *The Marble God and other One-Act Plays*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1926. Tight, tense hostage drama with four men and three women, set in the cellar of a house in Petrograd during the 'Red Terror' (early days of the Revolution in Russia).
April 1926.

HOW HE LIED TO HER HUSBAND by George Bernard Shaw. First read at the Victoria Hall (Bijou Theatre - later the Century), London, on 27 August 1907, first performed in New York, 26 September 1904. First published 1907. Published in *Selected Short Plays* by Bernard Shaw, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987. One-act play with two men and one woman. February 1925.

HUSBANDS ARE A PROBLEM, a comedy in three acts by Harris Deans, who wrote for *London Opinion* and the *Sunday Herald* with the *nom de plume* of Mr Prim. First performed at the Ambassadors' Theatre, London, 3 August 1922. Published by Samuel French, London, 1923. Set in the summer at an English country house, with four women and four men. An ex-husband returns, after 20 years, to a household of women and their suitors. There follows various comic manoeuvres over relationships and vested interests but all is resolved - ex-wife and ex-husband get together again and daughter is suitably paired off. Deals with "difficult problem of matrimony in a delightfully humorous and homely way... some exceptionally entertaining characters: they include a lovable but obstinate wife, a forbidding and managing widow, several well meaning bachelors, and one very attractive but - matrimonially speaking - trying husband. The action takes place in the country, and a picnic - that happy British institution which no amount of uncertain weather can ever quite spoil - is planned at a critical moment of the play" (*Middlesex Chronicle* 27/2/26). February 1926.

IF FOUR WALLS TOLD by Edward Percy. 'A village tale' in three acts, published by Samuel French, London 1928, first performed at the Royalty Theatre, London, 13 April 1922. With five men and five women, set in a coastal cottage, this family drama is the story of Jan Rysing, married to the younger Liz, who has lost a child in childbirth. Doubt and suspicion creeps into their marriage when the illegitimate teenage daughter of a recently deceased village woman is taken into their household. Liz thinks Jan is the father of this girl, feeling betrayed as he should have married the girl's mother years ago. A gale blows up and Jan goes to help rescue a sinking ship. A body is brought in - thought to be Jan and Liz suffers deep remorse. When Jan is found alive, the unknown man is buried while Liz fights with her inner conflict. It transpires the drowned man is Jan's long absent brother, father of the girl, to whom he leaves his wealth gained abroad. The play explores the pain and joy of love and the need for forgiveness, understanding and honesty. A tight drama and very different to much pre-war writing. February 1928.

I'LL LEAVE IT TO YOU, a light comedy in three acts by Noel Coward, published by Samuel French, London 1920. First performed in Manchester and subsequently at the New Theatre, London on 21 July 1920, with Noel Coward as Bobbie. With six women and four men and set in Mrs Dermott's home, Mulberry Manor, outside London, over period of eighteen months. Uncle Daniel arrives from South America, apparently wealthy and ready to help his destitute widowed sister and her five free-loading nearly adult offspring. In order to get them off their backsides, he secretly promises each one his fortune if they make good before he dies of a mysterious illness in three years time. Eighteen months elapse and they have all applied themselves, proving they are able and talented. In quiet moments they each suggest he gives the money to the others as they don't need it, but are furious to discover he is penniless and healthy. When finally reconciled to his 'joke', which has helped them all, he suddenly appears to strike it rich - but the curtain falls on his final joke as he admits he sent the struck rich telegram to himself. Behind the comedy, a clear statement that the days of idleness were over forever. March 1929.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST by Oscar Wilde. First performed St James' Theatre, London, 14 February 1895, with George Alexander and Irene Vanbrugh. Published in *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, edited by G. F. Maine, Collins, London, 1948. Three-act comedy with five men and four women. April 1921 and December 1924.

IN THE NIGHT by Cyril Harcourt. From a French play or novel by Sommi Picenardi. First performed Kingsway Theatre, London, 31 December 1919. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain's collection, British Library. Set in Paris, with one woman and four men, it deals with "Pauline Levardier, the victim of a love-less marriage with an Examining Magistrate. She is involved in an intrigue with a lover on whom a false charge falls" (*West Herts and Watford Observer* 31/1/25). "A somewhat sensational play. M. Levardier is an examining magistrate... and his daily experience of the seamy side of life in the Police

and Divorce Courts have tended to make him morbid. He declares the law is an ass. His young wife loves and is loved by George Guerand, a friend of Levardier” (*Enfield Gazette and Observer* 16/1/25). Levardier goes away on business, having put a large sum of money in his desk in the presence of his wife and Guerand. Guerand stays the night with Pauline, during which an intruder breaks in, steals the money and overhears Pauline and Guerand’s expression of love. Pauline calls the police, but her husband suspects Guerand, who is further compromised when the Intruder offers to sell him the money back in return for his silence on Pauline’s love. Pauline accuses her husband of stealing her youth. Finally the Intruder confesses his guilt and Levardier agrees to release Guerand. January 1925.

THE INVISIBLE FOE by Walter Hackett. Not seen. First performed at the Savoy Theatre, London, 23 August 1917, with H.B. Irving. Involves character of an American widow interested in spiritualism, with a cast of three men and two women. “This is a strong psychic play, and dealing as it does with the return to earth of the spirit of a dead man to protect his daughter from the evil attentions of his wicked nephew, should be seen by all interested in this highly debatable question” (*Rugby Advertiser*, 15/6/23). “The play is one which grips the audience from the start, and some of the incidents are very tense and dramatic” (op. cit 22/6/23). April 1923.

THE IRON HAND by H. Caine. Licenced 1916. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain’s Collection, British Library. One act, with two men and two women. Performed as a curtain raiser to *The Invisible Foe*, June 1923.

IT PAYS TO ADVERTISE, a farce in three acts by Walter Hackett and Roi Cooper Megrue. First performed at the George M. Cohan Theatre, New York, 8 September 1914. Published in *Representative American Dramas, National and Local*, edited by Montrose J. Moses. Little, Brown & Company, Boston, USA, 1925. With four women and eight men, set in New York. “The story is founded on the attempts, by a hitherto lazy son of a wealthy soap magnate, to start up a soap business that will capture the world’s trade. With the assistance of his fiancée and a typical American advertising agent, he sets to work. How they fare is cleverly and humorously worked out” (*West Herts and Watford Observer* 9/2/29). Not very logical, but fast paced and making use of the double-con (all the characters attempt to pull the wool over the eyes of each other at various stages), the play explores the impact of saturation advertising in creating demand for a product which does not yet exist. It begins as a father’s ruse to get his idle son moving, the son begins to enjoy the ‘game of business’ and the stakes are raised. Success would lie in the timing and energy of a mostly young cast. February 1929.

JANE CLEGG, a play in three acts by St John G. Ervine (dedicated to Bernard Shaw). First performed Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, 21 April 1913 and at the Royal Court, London, 19 May 1913, with Sybil Thorndike. Published by Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1914. Setting is the sitting room of the Clegg’s house – with two children, two women, and three men. A strong woman, Jane, married to a weak husband, who is an adulterer, gambler and thief. Jane tries to protect her inheritance for their children and to maintain a stable home, which they share with Henry’s mother. Henry, planning an escape with his mistress, is caught after having stolen money from his firm. Jane is obliged to repay the money he has stolen, which she does as a final gesture in their relationship. They part, with Jane left to cope with the children and his mother, while he presumably continues his destructive path. Described by Christopher St John as “This ugly, depressing, sordid play has some amusing moments... is not a play which tests the creative imagination of its interpreters, or demands from them brilliant and powerful execution” (*Time and Tide* 4/8/22). November 1926.

JOHN DRAYTON MILLIONAIRE by Henry Mackinnon Walbrook. Not seen. Premiered by the Lena Ashwell Players in Ilford on 17 November 1925 and at the Century Theatre, London, on 23 November, 1925. A version appears to have been written in 1904 and produced at the Theatre Royal Dover on 25 June 1906 (*Ilford Recorder* 20/11/25). However, the version performed by Players was first licensed by the Lord Chamberlain’s office in 1925 and performed by the company in November 1925. “A young writer becomes so possessed with the reality of the book that he is writing that it seems to him that all the characters really live and all the events actually happen. The result is that the play in its movement and

characterisation becomes so real that it seems as if it must have happened. The book deals with the craving for wealth and the selfishness of men and for once in a way the best side of human nature triumphs splendidly" (*South Western Star* 6/11/25).
November 1925.

JOHN GLAYDE'S HONOUR by Alfred Sutro. First performed St James' Theatre, London, with George Alexander and Eva Moore. Published by Samuel French, London, 1907. Four act drama set in Paris in 1906 over twenty-four hours, with six men and five women. A powerful work about relationships - Glayde, in seeking wealth and power has ignored and neglected his wife for years. She falls for an artist, planning to run away with him. Prompted by the artist's mother, Glayde returns and their relationship is exposed. When they talk about their situation, Glayde realises he has forced his wife to lie and deceive to hang on to love and finally realises he must let her go with her lover. Pertinent exposé of the time in relation to the American experience of seeking after wealth at the expense of other things. Message Glayde learns is of the importance of achieving a balance in life.
April 1922.

JULIUS CAESAR by William Shakespeare. November 1925.

JUST TO GET MARRIED by Cicely Hamilton. Lord Chamberlain's Collection, British Library. Published by Samuel French 1914. Licensed 31 October 1910 and performed at the Little Theatre soon after. Strong personal drama, continuing on Hamilton's theme of *Marriage as a Trade*. In three acts with four men and five women. Set in the home of Sir & Lady Grayle, the uncle and aunt of Emmie. The unmarried Emmie articulates her sense of failure when not needed as a wife by someone. She wishes she had been forced on her own resources years before, so that she would not now feel useless and incapable. Act II: Emmie to Adam: "every woman is expected to get herself a husband, somehow or another, and is looked on as a miserable failure if she doesn't. I didn't want to be a miserable failure, so I said yes to the first man who asked me. If you had been anyone else, I should have said 'yes' just the same... you needn't think you'd have acted differently if you'd been in my shoes. You don't know what it is - you don't know... I'm no use to anyone, I'm no particular use to myself. I've got to be kept by somebody, and you've got enough money to keep me, so I said I'd have you." She finally does get married, but with a much greater understanding of a shared relationship between husband and wife. Thought provoking, pertinent.
February 1921 and March 1925.

KING JOHN by William Shakespeare. March 1925.

THE KISS CURE, a comedy in three acts by Ronald Jeans. Licensed 1914, first performed at the Kingsway. Published by Samuel French, London, 1925. With four men and two women. Set at the Noyes' country house, south England, late spring, over five days. A lighthearted and rather silly romantic comedy that in retrospect seems like the last vestige of decadence prior to the outbreak of war. Peter loves Joanna, who is somewhat indifferent to him; her brother is on the lookout for a pretty face; Stella is escaping the attentions of various suitors, including Maurice, who pursues her and pretends to hurt his ankle so that he can stay at the house with her. She declares she finds Peter attractive because he does not try to attract her attention. However, she advises Joanna to flirt with Maurice so that Peter will be forced to act decisively. She has a method she suggests others use to decide whether love is real - you must kiss the person to know one way or the other. They all try this activity and eventually Maurice and Joanna get together, as do Stella and Peter, leaving Joanna's brother out on a limb as the callow youth who has not used the kiss cure to useful effect.
December 1924.

A KISS FOR CINDERELLA by J. M. Barrie. Published in *The Plays of J.M. Barrie*, edited by A.E. Wilson, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1928, reprinted 1947. First performed at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 16 March 1916, with Gerald du Maurier. In three acts with ten men and twelve women plus extras. A satirical fantasy which would have been a difficult play for the Lena Ashwell Players to stage, given the gold ballroom scene imagined by Cinderella. She is a young orphan who dreams she is the Cinderella of the children's story, the story she reads to the four small children from different countries who have lost their parents in the war. She struggles to feed and keep them warm, staying happy because of her fantasy. A young policeman (Mr Bodie) seeks her out because he thinks she is a spy but he falls in

love with her and tries to help her realise her dream - that of going to the ball and marrying the Prince. While waiting for her fairy godmother in the snow she dreams of the ball, peopled with characters of the day who are exposed to some gentle satire by Barrie. In the final act, Cinderella is in a sanatorium, very ill and being looked after by the kindly Mr Bodie's rather fierce sister, Dr Bodie and her somewhat eccentric staff. Finally the policeman and Cinderella declare their love, but we are fearful that Cinderella may not survive. An odd mix of styles – stark realism about the poor of London and a great degree of fantasy – but appealing of its type. January 1929.

LADY FREDERICK, a comedy in three acts by W. Somerset Maugham, set in 1890. First performed at the Court Theatre, London, 26 October 1907. Published in *Plays, Volume I* by W. Somerset Maugham, London, William Heinemann, 1931. With five women and up to seven men with some doubling of roles. A comedy of manners and romance. Lady Frederick, in need of money, has various suitors, including a younger man who she is finally obliged to turn off by appearing to him without make-up or hair properly styled; his mother's attempts to thwart his advances having failed. Lady Frederick finally marries an old flame after a series of financial negotiations to settle debts. Interesting because when first written no actress was prepared to play the scene in which Lady Frederick appears without makeup. The role was played by Esme Church for the Lena Ashwell Players. December 1920.

LADY INGER OF OOSTRAAT, an historical drama in five acts by Henrik Ibsen, written in 1854, first performed at the Bergen Theatre, directed by Ibsen, in January 1855. In 1874 Ibsen published a revised version of the play, performed in Christiania in 1875. Performed in German in Berlin in 1880. In January 1906 two performances were given in London at the Scala Theatre by the Stage Society with Edyth Olive and Henry Ainley. Published in *Everyman's Library of Poetry and Drama*, translated by R. Farquharson Sharp, J.M. Dent, London, (n.d.). A complex plot, dealing with one of the blackest periods in the fortunes of Norway in 1528, set in the Castle of Oostroat, on the Trondhjem Fjord. With two women, seven men, and extras. Lady Inger, in an environment of suspicion, duplicity and betrayal, plays a dangerous game, both wittingly and unwittingly, with the lives of both her daughter and her son. The end is tragedy and the loss of both her children as well as her power and the strength of Norway. The Lena Ashwell Players performed this play in October 1927 as their contribution to the celebration of the centenary of Ibsen's birth.

LADY PATRICIA by Rudolf Besier (author of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*). First performed Haymarket Theatre, London, 22 March 1911, cast included Athene Seyler. Published by T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1911. A comedy in three acts, dedicated to Elizabeth Fagan, with six men, three women. A very silly, irritating piece about false affections. Lady Patricia and her husband Michael pretend undying affection for each other while indulging being in 'love' with a young couple (Clare and Bill) who eventually fall for each other, leaving Lady Patricia and her husband to come to terms with their own relationship and to begin to work at restoring what was once real love. They are helped to realise their folly through the machinations of Mrs O'Farrell, the Dean (Clare's father) and some fairly intelligent servants. The *Sunday Times* thought the Lena Ashwell Players' revival was well worth it – "Mr Besier's piece is witty throughout, and that the wit has retained its savour is largely due to the fact that he keeps to the point" (10/1/26). January 1926.

LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN by Oscar Wilde. First performed St James' Theatre, London, 22 February 1892, with George Alexander. First published in 1893. Published in *Plays* by Oscar Wilde, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1954. A 'play about a good woman' in four acts, with seven men and nine women. January 1923.

THE LAND OF PROMISE, a comedy in four acts by W. Somerset Maugham, first performed at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, 26 February 1914, with Irene Vanbrugh. Subsequently made into a film in the 1920s. Published in *Plays Volume II*, William Heinemann, London, 1931. Set in 1912, with six women and seven men, the action takes place in Tunbridge Wells, England and in Manitoba, Canada. Maugham satirises the idleness of the moneyed classes while admiring the pioneering spirit of the new colonies. Norah, a lady's companion for many years, is forced, on the woman's death and due to lack of

money, to go to her brother in Canada, where she finds the going tough, especially in the presence of her brother's wife. In fit of pique she agrees to marry the rough hired man, Frank Taylor and then struggles on his lonely and isolated farm. Only when she has opportunity to return to England, does she appreciate the value of her new life. February 1927.

THE LAST OF MRS CHEYNEY, a comedy in three acts by Frederick Lonsdale. First performed at St James' Theatre, London, 22 September 1925, with Gerald du Maurier and Gladys Cooper. Published by Samuel French, London, 1929. With eight men and six women. Mrs Cheyney, groomed to rob from the rich, attends Mrs Ebley's house party and plans to steal some pearls. Lord Dilling, who is in love with Mrs Cheyney, suspects her. When he catches her in the act, Mrs Cheyney prefers to admit her intended crime and plans to expose, via a letter the others wish to suppress, the foibles of her new society friends. All ends well, with Lord Dilling and Mrs Cheyney 'taming' each other. September 1928.

THE LAUGHING LADY by Alfred Sutro. Performed at the Globe Theatre, London, November 1922, with Marie Lohr. First performed at Longacre Theatre, New York, 12 February 1923 with Ethel Barrymore. Published by Duckworth and Co, London, 1922. Three-act comedy with five men and five women, set in fashionable London. "The play opens with a dinner party at which the respondent in a notorious cause celebre meets her husband's lawyer who has literally flagged her during the divorce case that same day. He becomes infatuated and gives his wife the necessary information for a divorce in order that he may throw up everything and go away with her. The third acts sees the better side of their natures coming to the fore and they finally agree to do the right thing. He returns to his wife and she to her divorced husband" (*West Herts and Watford Observer* 24/10/25). "A well constructed play... it is dramatic, it is amusing, it is witty, not certainly with the wit that sets the Thames on fire, but of a variety amply sufficient to set an after-dinner audience chuckling. Last but not least, it is entirely artificial" (*Time and Tide* 1/12/22). This critic goes on to point out that although divorce and unhappy endings are fashionable, Sutro has a strict, conventional morality about his plays. October 1925.

LEAH KLESCHNA by C.M.S. McLellan. First performed Manhattan Theatre, New York, 12 December 1904, with Minnie Maddern Fiske. Published by Samuel French, London, 1920. Extracts published in *The Best Plays of 1899-1909*, edited by Burns Mantle and Garrison P. Sherwood, Blakiston Company, Philadelphia, 1944. A drama in five acts with eleven men and six women, set in Paris and Austria, over a three year period. Leah is the daughter of a professional burglar, recently arrived in Paris from Austria. She has been obliged to help him and his offsider, Schram, with burglaries and is sent to rob the home of distinguished member of the Chamber of Deputies, Paul Sylvaine. When he catches her, she recognises him as the man who had saved her family years before in a storm at sea. Sylvaine releases her and she resolves to no longer burgle for her father. However, Raoul Berton, the brother of the woman Sylvaine is soon to marry, and who has led a dissolute life (befriending Kleschna because he is in love with Leah), arrives at the house in time to witness Leah and Sylvaine's exchange. When Sylvaine is out of the room, he steals the jewels Leah had been sent to take. Sylvaine suspects Raoul, who is eventually discovered to be the thief. When Raoul goes to Kleschna to seek help to escape, Leah's father attempts to force her to go with them. She declares she will kill herself before continuing a life with them, and plans to return to the peasant life of her mother in Austria. She escapes her father as he and the others are about to be cornered for their crimes. In the final short act, Leah has made a life for herself working in the fields, when Paul finally comes to take her back with him to be his wife – the planned marriage with Claire Berton had been cancelled when Raoul was found to be the thief. Leah was Ashwell's role in England, and despite being rather melodramatic, the play was popular with the Lena Ashwell Players' audiences in the 1920s. October 1920, October 1922 and October 1924.

THE LIARS by Henry Arthur Jones, First performed at the Criterion Theatre, London, 6 October 1897. Four act comedy of manners with ten men and six women. Set in 1897. Published in *Great Modern British Plays*, edited by J.W. Marriott, George G. Harrap, London, 1929. "[On] the subject of truth and falsehood... the lies are told by a group of characters trying to protect an indiscreet wife from the sullen vengefulness of her unpleasant husband. The play... creates a cynical and contemptuous picture of matrimony and sexual relationships in 'society'. It reveals the social and moral values of a group of

people...which to modern eyes are distasteful and, to a woman, deeply enraging. The values of the society, the conventions, the cruelties are mercilessly shown...the satire is so strong. It presents to us with clarity the double standard and cruelty of a rigid society, observing the forms of a dual morality, serving the interests of men, and degrading the women" (*Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones*, Penny Griffin, Macmillan, London, 1991 pp.60-83).
November 1923.

THE LIKES OF HER /('ER), a play in three acts by Charles McEvoy, first performed by the Lena Ashwell Players on 30 January 1923, at Battersea Town Hall, London, then the play had a season at St Martin's Theatre, London, from 15 August 1923. Published by Samuel French, London, 1923. With five women and nine men, plus children, the play is set in the East End of London during demobilisation after the Great War, over a period of three days. A strong drama which depicts the harshness of life and the pain and despair as men return battered from the war. The central character, Sally, loves the wounded, much changed George. He, although terribly wounded, has been made a Colonel – way above his expected station in life, and he fears she will reject him. Their reunion is thwarted by the young, beaten Florrie, whose treatment at home is turning her into a dishonest, petty criminal. All is resolved, with Sally helping Florrie to change her ways and realise she need not live life so destructively.

February 1923 and March 1926.

THE LILIES OF THE FIELD, a comedy in three acts by John Hastings Turner, first performed at the Ambassadors' Theatre, London, 5 June 1923. Published by Samuel French, London, 1925. With four men and seven women. An irritatingly silly piece about the twin daughters of a vicar - what starts as a bit of a game for them, in relation to who gets the chance to stay in London for the season, ends up with them both falling in love. Their grandmother (played originally by Gertrude Kingston) is prepared to allow any wiles to be used to win a man, while their father feels responsible for their behaviour and wants to come clean.

March 1929.

THE LION AND THE MOUSE, a play in four acts by Charles Klein, first performed Lyceum Theatre, New York, 20 November, 1905. Published by Samuel French, New York, 1906. With eight women and ten men, set in New York in 1905. Shirley, the daughter of Judge Rossmore is in love with Jefferson, the son of Ryder, who is trying to disgrace the Judge. Shirley sets out to save her father, through a book she has written which exposes Ryder's ruthless pursuit of power and destructive capitalism. The play follows the traditional pattern of 'girl meets boy, girl loses boy and girl gets boy story'. Shirley is portrayed as strong, intelligent and with attractive values, as opposed to Ryder who is shown the error of his ways, so that all ends well and happily.

March 1922.

THE LITTLE MINISTER, a comedy in four acts by J.M. Barrie, first performed at the Haymarket Theatre, London, 6 November 1897, with Cyril Maude and Winifred Emery, in a season which ran for 320 performances. Revived in September 1914 for 131 performances, and again at the Queen's Theatre in November 1923 for 133 performances. Published in *The Plays of J.M. Barrie* edited by A.E. Wilson, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1928. With twelve men and four women, set in Caddam Wood about 1830. One of Barrie's most popular plays. The young Reverend Dishart, respected in the village, tries to stop the weavers' rebellion. They are fighting against soldiers brought in by manufacturers threatened by the weavers' demands. Dishart falls in love with the rebellious Lady Babbie, who disguised as a gypsy, tries to help the weavers. She is the daughter of the local earl, who seeks to put down the mutinous workers. Prejudice and power games are exposed and ridiculed, with love winning the day. The women are the most interesting and strongest characters, as is often the case in Barrie's plays. This play captures particularly the local atmosphere, dialect and rural foibles.

November 1926.

LORD RICHARD IN THE PANTRY, a farce in three acts by Sydney Blow and Douglas Hoare. Published by Samuel French, London, 1924. First performed at the Criterion Theatre, London, 11 November 1919. With five men and seven women, set in Lord Richard's house, London. A good example of the immediate post war need to escape and forget the pain of the recent years. Also demonstrates the shift in the balance of cast members in writing at this time – there are more female characters than male. Lord Richard, fairly stupid and incompetent, has got mixed up in a shady financial deal which collapses

as his two business partners make their getaway leaving many investors with a loss. Lord Richard is forced to let his house and try to find a job. He finds himself engaged to one silly woman, while in love with another, more sensible creature who has rented his house. He thinks he has fooled her with his disguise – she, out of her own love and concern, employs him as a butler while he has to remain in hiding and tries to sort out the situation. There is added complication when the much older cook falls in love with him. Then he mistakenly sells (and has to retrieve) some of his ‘mistress’s’ silver in order to pay back those in the serving class he meets who have lost through his business failure. He then tries to fake his death and his ‘fiancee’ announces she has decided not to marry... and so it goes on. Eventually, of course, all ends well and he gets the woman he loves, who may or may not be able to make a man of him.
December 1927.

THE LOST LEADER, a drama in three acts by Lennox Robinson. First performed 19 February 1919, at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. Published by H R Carter Publications, Belfast, 1954. Set in October 1917 over two days, with eleven men and two women. The leader of the title is Charles Stewart Parnell, Irish Nationalist Party politician who died in 1891. The premise of the play is that Lucius Lenihan, uncle of proprietress of fishing hotel in Irish backwater, either imagines himself to be (or indeed is) Parnell – not dead (as was assumed 26 years ago) but alive and having found a solution to Ireland’s internal and British problems. Various people gather at the hotel (journalists, opponents and supporters) to try to establish the credibility of his story. He gets them all to assemble at the Standing Stones where he will disclose his solution once his identity is clarified. There is debate, much discussion and rising anger. Mary, his niece, uncertain of his sanity, is concerned for his health. A quarrel breaks out between Long John Flavin (an old opponent) and Lucius – who, before he discloses his identity or a solution to the situation, is mistakenly struck and killed by blind Tomas Houlihan. A somewhat wordy drama about the search for truth and understanding. Lucius’ main contention in his old age being that before it can advance, Ireland must find its soul and spiritual focus, rather than material well being.
March 1925.

MACBETH by William Shakespeare.

October 1924.

MAGDA, a drama in four acts by novelist Herman Suderman. Translated from the German by Charles Edward Amory Winslow, copyright 1895, and published by Sock & Buskin Library, Lamson Wolfe & Co, Boston 1896. The play was licensed in England in 1902. First performed in New York at the Republic Theatre, 13 January 1902, with Mrs Patrick Campbell in the title role. The Lena Ashwell Players’ version was translated by Louis N. Parker. Set in the 1890s, with six men and six women. A psychological drama, but not lacking in humour. Schwartz has two daughters, one of whom is Magda, by his first wife. He has married for a second time, to Augusta and they live in a city in Germany. Before the play begins, Magda has left the repressive atmosphere of her home to escape having to marry a man of her father’s choosing and because she has succumbed to a man she loves but for whom ambition is the higher priority. Unknown to her family, she has a child and becomes a successful opera singer, returning under her professional name to her hometown to perform in a music festival. She seeks reconciliation with her family (including a sympathetic stepmother and sister who is being held back from marriage to the man she loves for want of a dowry). Magda knows her presence will be a catalyst for pain, especially when she meets her former lover. Her father, determined she should not sully the family name, tries to get the old lovers to marry, but the ambitious male will only do so if their child remains unacknowledged as his. Magda cannot accept this and wants to leave, fearful for her father’s health if she remains. Her father dies unforgiving. The following seems to be Suderman’s point: Pastor to Magda: “As you stood before me yesterday in your freshness, your natural strength, your – your greatness, I said to myself ‘That is what you might have been if at the right moment joy had entered into your life’.” Magda: “We must sin if we wish to grow.” (p.99 in the above published version). A strong play for its time, the central character an independent, artistic woman coming up against attitudes no longer acceptable to her. Jeanne Heaton played the title role for the Lena Ashwell Players. “Movingly portrayed” (*Kentish Mercury* 2/11/28).
October 1928.

MAGIC, a fantastic comedy by G.K. Chesterton, first performed at the Little Theatre, London, 7 November 1913. Published by Martin Secker, London, 1913. With six men and one woman, set

throughout in the drawing room of the Duke's country house. Unusual play about illusion and reality. Patricia Carleon believes a stranger/conjuror has magical powers which he attempts to both prove and disprove. Other characters, including her brother, a doctor, local churchman and the Duke, go through varying stages of belief/disbelief - finally Patricia gets her man. Involves performance of some magic tricks. October 1926.

THE MAGISTRATE, a farce in three acts by A.W. Pinero, first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, 21 March 1885, with Marion Terry and Arthur Cecil. First published by Samuel French, London, 1892 (revised editions 1920, 1936). With eleven men and five women. Mr Posket is the magistrate, recently married to a woman who has lied about her age and pretends that her son from a previous marriage is much younger than he really is or acts. The new Mrs Posket, desperate to maintain her secret, tries to see an old acquaintance at his hotel before he comes to dinner, to ask him to keep quiet about her past. In the meantime, her son Cis encourages his stepfather to go to his room at the same hotel for a night out. The inevitable happens, they are all caught in the hotel after hours. The magistrate and Cis escape but Mrs Posket and her friend must be brought before the magistrate for charging. After various farcical attempts to cover up and save face, all unravels and ends without too much damage. January 1927.

MAN AND SUPERMAN, 'a comedy and a philosophy in four acts' by George Bernard Shaw, 1903. First performed at the Court Theatre, London, 23 May 1905. Published by Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1956. With up to six women and seven men plus extras. February 1924.

THE MAN FROM HONG KONG by Mrs Clifford Mills. Not seen. First performed at the Queens Theatre, London, 30 July 1925. In three acts with ten men (four of whom are Chinese) and five women, plus extras – doubling possible for some of the male roles. Set in a restaurant in Hong Kong and, two years later, in a bungalow and houseboat, Thames river, London. "A play of thrilling adventure, full of exciting incidents and thrilling situations" (York Theatre Royal programme, 17 June 1929). June 1929.

THE MAN FROM TORONTO, a comedy in three acts by Douglas Murray. First performed at the Royalty Theatre, London, 30 May 1918, with Iris Hoey as Mrs Calthorpe. Subsequently transferred to the Duke of York's Theatre, with a total of 486 performances and was later made into a film. Published by Samuel French, London 1919. With three men and six women, set in the parlour of Beach House, Teignmouth, England. Mrs Calthorpe, a young widow, is staying at Teignmouth with her nephew. She is visited by her guardian/lawyer, who urges her to meet Canadian Fergus Wimbush, who has been left a fortune on condition that he marry her – his deceased uncle having failed to win her when they met on a cruise. She decides to play at being a parlour maid to see what he is like. Inevitably, he falls in love with her and decides to abandon marriage to Mrs Calthorpe. His sisters arrive to apply pressure and eventually Mrs Calthorpe is forced to identify herself, upon which Fergus declares he will marry no one. But all ends happily as they fall into each others' wealthy arms at the final curtain. November 1923.

THE MAN OF DESTINY by George Bernard Shaw, written 1896, first performed in Croydon 1897, New York in 1899, at the Comedy Theatre, London, 29 March 1901 and in Berlin 1904. First published in *Plays Pleasant*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1898. With three men and one woman, subtitled "A Fictitious Paragraph of History", it is a one act play set on 12 May 1796 in North Italy near Milan. January 1923.

THE MAN WHO STAYED AT HOME, a play in three acts by Lechmere Worrall & J.E. Harold Terry. Published by Samuel French, London, 1916. First performed at the Royalty Theatre, London, 10 December 1914, with Dennis Eadie as Christopher Brent. Transferred to the Apollo, 20 March 1916. An early play inspired by the war, romantic, optimistic and patriotic, an inevitable theme for this period. "Deals with the methods of German spies during the war" (*West Herts & Watford Observer* 14/4/23), and is set in a private hotel on the east coast of England over a period of fifteen hours in September 1914. With six men and six women. The setting makes it possible to bring together an unlikely set of people, including the proprietress, who had been married to a German; their son, working in Admiralty department; a Dutch/German waiter and a German spinster who has lived in England for twenty years

(the baddies). On the other side are Brent, who cannot tell any one of his work despite many demands made on him to justify why he has not enlisted; his fiancée and her father; a female co-spy there to help him protect the coastline from a German submarine approach and various others who get involved. Brent has to play the fool while unearthing the German plans, which he does, thwarting their every move and saving the day. March 1923.

THE MARRIAGE OF COLUMBINE, a comedy in four acts by Harold Chapin (who was killed in action, aged 29, during the First World War). First performed at the Court Theatre, London, 1910. Published by Samuel French, London, 1924. With four men, five women and one boy, the action takes place in Dunchester, an old and respectable town at the end of the nineteenth century. Old fashioned, slow, mildly comic tale about an ignorant young woman, who is convinced by a bible bashing journalist that she is living in sin with her husband and three children. Her husband is an older man, a famous clown, touring and performing throughout England, so she is alone a lot in the evenings. The journalist tricks Columbine into marriage, but eventually all is sorted and ends happily. March 1927.

THE MARRIAGE OF KITTY, adapted from the French of 'La Passerelle' (authors Fred Gresac and F. de Croisset) by Cosmo Gordon-Lennox. A three-act comedy of manners, first performed at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, 19 August 1902. First New York production, at the Hudson Theatre, was on 30 November 1903. Published by Samuel French, London, 1909. With three women and four men, elaborate sets required. A year passes between Acts I and II. A light hearted play – Kitty is formally married to Sir R. Belsize to conform to the conditions of his benefactor's will, so he can eventually marry someone else. After he and Kitty spend a year apart, they meet again and fall in love, to live happily ever after – with the gentle intervention of Kitty's lawyer godfather. December 1922.

MARY GOES FIRST, a comedy in three acts and an epilogue by Henry Arthur Jones, first performed the Playhouse, London, September 18, 1913. Dedicated to Marie Tempest who was the original Mary. Published by G. Bell & Sons, London, 1913. With eight men and four women, set over a nine-week period in the drawing room of Felix Galpin's home in a middle class, provincial town. At the time H.A. Jones was threatened with an action for libel over this play – a heavy handed political and social satire about local representatives and the ambitions of wives to head the social order in the town. It clearly touched a nerve at the time. Mary is seeking to maintain and build on her social position, against the wishes of her reluctant husband. Mary's methods are not attractive as she seeks to publicly embarrass Lady Bodsworth. "The play is a lampoon on the methods and morality of politicians, their attitude towards their work, a revelation of self-interest and insincerity underlying party caucuses, a scathing caricature of the 'nouveaux riches'" (*Middlesex Chronicle* 22/10/27). October 1927.

MARY, MARY QUITE CONTRARY, a light comedy in four acts by St John G. Irvine, first performed at the Belasco Theatre, New York, 1923, published by Allen & Unwin, London, 1923. Also made into a musical which played in London's West End in 1928. With five women and five men, set in a country Vicarage over a two-day period. Mary Westlake, an actress, visits the family home of a serious young playwright, whose father is Reverend Canon. There are various escapades and an engagement. As a post war piece is appears rather inappropriate in the context of Ashwell's attitude, but it is light entertainment for the flappers and therefore close to some of the popular entertainment of the time. February 1928.

THE MASTER BUILDER by Henrik Ibsen, 1892. Published in *The Master Builder and Other Plays* by Henrik Ibsen, translated by Una Ellis-Fermor, Penguin, Hamondsworth, 1958. Drama in three acts with four men and three women. January 1927.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE by William Shakespeare. April 1921 and April 1923.

MERELY MARY ANN, a comedy in four acts by Israel Zangwill, from his novel of the same name. First performed Garden Theatre, New York, 28 December 1903, and at the Duke of York's, London, 8 September 1904. Published by Samuel French, New York, 1921. With eight men and eleven women, set in a London boarding house. Lancelot is a struggling composer, wanting to write serious music. Mary

Ann is a serving maid at the boarding house. She falls in love with Lancelot and is on the point of going with him to live in a country cottage in penury, when through the death of her brother, she comes into a large fortune and Lancelot knows he cannot take her with him. Despite his ideals, he finally writes popular tunes to live and becomes wealthy and famous. Mary Ann meanwhile languishes unhappily with her wealth, until they are re-united at the end of the play. A romantic comedy about class, the artistic ideal and necessity. October 1922.

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR by William Shakespeare.

January 1924.

A MESSAGE FROM MARS by Richard Ganthony. Not seen. First performed at the Avenue Theatre, London, in 1899, for 544 performances: one of Charles Hawtreys' greatest successes as Horace Parker, 'the most selfish man in the world'. "A plot which has a tendency to the ultra-fantastic" (*Kentish Mercury* 6/1/22). The play has a large cast, of approximately twenty-one characters, mostly male. Besides Horace, there is the Messenger from Mars and a tramp, plus two leading ladies. Other characters "mostly incidental" (*ibid*). "The message from Mars to Horace Parker appears to be one of converting him from selfishness to almost indiscriminate generosity. Motives must always be questioned and balanced with understanding of the consequences" (*Ilford Recorder* 9/12/27). "The production of this work requires much in the way of lighting and other effects, and the limitations of a small hall would, in the ordinary way, prove an insurmountable obstacle... The moral of the play points to the selfishness and egotism of the modern world and demonstrates that, from the point of view of the Christian ethic, the human race is degenerating rather than progressing... sermons preached through the medium of the Messenger... marvellous effect by Harold Gibson [member of the Lena Ashwell Players], with the aid of luminous paint, extraordinary clothing... powers of elocution... delivered the long soliloquies" (*Middlesex Chronicle* 17/12/27). December 1921 and December 1927.

MILESTONES, a comedy of manners in three acts, by Arnold Bennett and Edward Knoblock. First performed at the Royalty Theatre, London, 5 March 1912, with Dennis Eadie. Published in *Great Modern British Plays*, edited by J.W. Marriott, George G. Harrop, London, 1929. A three-act play spanning the years 1860 to 1912. With nine men and six women, it is set throughout in the same house in London. "The method pursued in writing *Milestones* is understood to have been general consultation, with *Punch* volumes of appropriate years for historical arbiter; play construction entirely by Mr Knoblock and dialogue entirely by Mr Bennett" (*Great Modern British Plays*, p.16). The fortunes, romantic and business, of a family over fifty-two years – the focus being on the years when they were forced to embrace change, progress and acknowledge the 'growing up' of the young – observes the fates of those prepared to adapt and those who resisted. Reflection of changing times, social mores, parental pressures and disappointment. Includes aristocracy as well as working people. Fascinating construction, actors needed to be able to play wide age range. 'Live and learn' conclusion. October 1923.

THE MIRROR FOR SOULS -medieval mystery play. Not seen.

April 1924.

MISALLIANCE, comedy by George Bernard Shaw. First performed at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, 23 February 1910. Lena Ashwell played the acrobat Lina in this production. Published by Brentano's, New York, 1914, with *Fanny's First Play* and the *Dark Lady of the Sonnets*. Set in May 1909, at John Tarleton's (of Tarleton's Underwear) weekend house at Hindhead, Surrey, the play is in a single act with no scene breaks or set changes. With six men and three women. December 1925.

MISS HOBBS by Jerome K. Jerome. A comedy in four acts, published by Samuel French, London, 1902. First performed at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, 18 December 1899, with Herbert Waring and Evelyn Millard. With five men, four women, set in Newhaven near New York, including the third act on the yacht 'Good Chance'. Light, sophisticated play in which a young married couple quarrel and a friend, Miss Hobbs, takes it upon herself to try to convince the wife that she would be better away from her husband. Assumptions are made about Miss Hobbs and her apparent aversion to men and marriage. An old friend of the husband takes up the challenge of Miss Hobbs - through a series of 'arranged' mishaps and mistaken identity, all three couples involved are reconciled - the 'new woman' having been

made attractive to a man who needs someone of independent spirit. "Much more amusing today because the changed position of women gives an added piquancy to many of the lines" (*Middlesex Chronicle* 25/12/26).
December 1926.

THE MOCK DOCTOR (Le Medecin malgre lui) by Moliere. First performed 1666 in France. Ashwell's company performed Henry Fielding's version of the play, first produced in London in the autumn of 1732 (and published in *Plays from Moliere by English Dramatists*, George Routledge & Sons, London 1883, introduced by Henry Morley). It is very similar to the original, although Fielding has given the characters English names and slightly shortened the work, into nineteen short scenes, adding a number of popular, contemporary 'Airs' sung by different characters. Moliere's play (as in the Everyman edition, J.M. Dent, London, 1929, 1968) is in three acts, with short scenes and the action of the play is continuous.
March 1922.

MONEY DOESN'T MATTER, a comedy by Gertrude Jennings. Not seen. "This fairly diverting comedy of wartime manners ran for some forty-five performances at the Aldwych in the spring of 1922... a young married couple, Philip and Pansy Berkeley... have to live for a time in discomfort in a noisy Battersea working class flat" (*Stage* 25/2/26). "The part of 'Pansy Berkeley' is drawn on somewhat conventional lines, but Miss Mercia Cameron made even its commonplaces attractive. Mr Wilfred Babbage's 'Pip' (Philip), the husband, was also cleverly accomplished, and with notable sincerity, and his scuffle with 'Hug' (Sir Hugh Chiswick) in the second act carried conviction... One of Miss Jennings' old favourites in the garrulous charwoman, 'Mrs Piper', was humorously represented... also 'Miss Cardew' and the "society" butterfly, 'Lady Belton'" (*Kentish Mercury* 19/2/26).
February 1926.

THE MOLLUSC, a romantic comedy in three acts by Hubert Henry Davies, first performed at the Criterion Theatre, London, 15 October 1907, with Charles Wyndham. Published in *Late Victorian Plays 1890-1914*, ed. George Rowell, Oxford University Press, London, 1972 (and previously by William Heinemann in 1919). The setting is the Baxter's Sitting room, with a cast of two men and two women. The 'mollusc' is Mrs Baxter who refuses to do anything and is waited on by her husband and governess. Her brother arrives from America and falls in love with the governess, forcing the mollusc to take action – ie get off her sofa and make a contribution to her household and husband.
March 1927.

THE MORALS OF MARCUS (ORDEYNE), adapted from the novel by William J. Locke. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain's collection, British Library. Licenced 1906, first performed in a production by Arthur Bouchier at the Garrick Theatre, London, 30 August 1906 and had a long and successful run. Involves a love triangle – Marcus, who develops an affection for an eastern girl, Carlotta, and Judith Mainwaring, who is jealous of her. "Carlotta, [is] the disturbing young lady who blows into a sedate English home straight from a Syrian harem" (Lena Ashwell Players' press release, *South Western Star* 29/2/24). With two men and three women.
March 1924.

MR HOPKINSON, a farce by R.C. Carton. First performed at the Avenue Theatre, London, 21 February 1905, published by Samuel French, London, 1908. In three acts with eight men and three women. A long winded piece about a Duke and Duchess whose attitudes to marriage are very casual but within the bounds of social acceptability. They try to marry their 'ward' (Thyla) to a wealthy but mean buffoon (Mr Hopkinson) to protect their own financial investments involving her absent father. She secretly marries a somewhat disreputable chap leaving the others, especially the truly awful Mr Hopkinson (who left his fiancée when he came into wealth), to stew in their own juice. A farce about manners and social behaviour.
December 1921.

MRS DANE'S DEFENCE by Henry Arthur Jones, 1900. First performed at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 9 October 1900, with Lena Ashwell and Charles Wyndham. First published privately by Chiswick Press in 1900, then by Macmillan, London, 1905 and by Samuel French, London, 1908. A drama in four acts with four women and eight men. The action of the play takes place at Sunningwater, a short distance from London in 1900. Mrs Dane has almost succeeded in becoming accepted into the community of Sunningwater when a visitor thinks he recognises her as a woman whose affair with a

married man in Vienna led to his wife's suicide. Although he then announces she is not the same woman, because the adopted son of a distinguished judge is in love with her and wants to marry her, the investigations begin and she is ultimately caught in the trap of her deception. There is considerable sympathy for Mrs Dane in trying to rehabilitate herself and make a new life for herself and her child but ultimately she is sacrificed to social pressures and after an intense cross-examination scene, she has to leave the village and the man she loves. October 1922.

MRS DOT, a farce in three acts by W.S. Maugham, first performed, as *Worthley's Entire*, at the Comedy Theatre, London, 26 April 1908, when the cast included Marie Tempest as Mrs Dot Worthley. Published by William Heinemann, London, 1912. Set in 1908, with eight men and four women. Mrs Dot (a widow with fortune acquired through bravery) wants to marry Gerald, a young man initially in debt. Through family deaths he inherits a title and estate. He is promised to another, despite loving Mrs Dot. The play is about her efforts to ensure she marries Gerald and that the other young lady marries someone else. Series of scenes about real and feigned affections, games played and social obligations. September 1927.

MRS GORRINGE'S NECKLACE, a comedy drama in four acts by Hubert Henry Davies, first performed at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 12 May 1903, with Charles Wyndham and Mary Moore. Published by Chatto & Windus, London, 1921, in Volume 1 of the *Plays of Hubert Henry Davies*. With five men and five women, set in the library of Colonel Jardine's house in a town near London, over a period of twenty hours during a weekend house party which includes Mrs Gorringle. She who foolishly leaves her diamond necklace unsecured and it is stolen by David, who is engaged to Isabel Jardine. Mrs Gorringle thinks Captain Mowbray is enamoured of her. He is, in fact, in love with Isabel. A detective is called in to investigate the missing necklace, there are various twists – David is unable to return it, Mowbray discovers his guilt, but is accused as the thief. David is too weak to admit and secretly marries Isabel before he is due to go abroad. Mowbray is about to disclose David's involvement after the necklace is found, but learns of the marriage and to protect Isabel prepares to continue as the guilty party. David finally realises he cannot allow Mowbray to suffer for him. He kills himself, leaving the way open for Mowbray to be with Isabel. October 1920 and December 1922.

MR PREEDY AND THE COUNTESS by R.C. Carton. First performed at the Criterion Theatre, London, 13 April 1909. Published by Samuel French, New York and London, 1911. An original farce in three acts for nine men and four women. Social comedy based on misunderstanding and apparently compromising situations which unravel in the course of the play - with the inevitable titled ladies, gents, maids, butlers and 'true' romance. Preedy is asked by his boss to look after the Countess of Rushmere - while behaving honourably, everyone assumes he is not - but his boss turns out to be the most dishonourable and is suitably punished. Lady Rushmere recognises Preedy's qualities, she returns to her husband and Preedy gets his girl back. November 1927.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING by William Shakespeare. October 1921.

MY LADY'S DRESS, a play in three acts by Edward Knoblauch, first performed Royalty Theatre, London, on 21 April 1914, with Dennis Eadie, Gladys Cooper, Beryl Mercer, Edith Evans and Lynn Fontanne. Published in *Kismet and other plays*, introduced by John Vere, Chapman & Hall, London, 1957. A fascinating play which begins with the fact that Anne has ordered a new dress for an important business dinner with her husband. She rests, and while sleeping, dreams the whole process of preparing and making the dress – the silkworms, weaver, lace maker, rose maker, sable hunters, models at dress shop. She also dreams about these workers difficult and mostly unhappy lives. She wakes determined to be a better person and to recognise the worth of others. "To Miss Esme Church and Mr Walter Fitzgerald fell the onerous tasks of each representing no fewer than seven [or eight according to *Middlesex Chronicle*] distinct persons" (*Kentish Mercury* 10/12/26). "A triumph of stage-management and versatility of action... the varied costumes and scenes, involving quick changes of both dress and setting, were presented without a hitch... the play holds a far reaching moral in its text, its scenes and action. And how well Esme Church taught the lesson!... The audience were taken to Italy, France, Holland, Russia,

the East End and the West End in turn; shown the torn lives and broken limbs of the workers, and the contrasts – the vice and carelessness of the rich” (*Middlesex Chronicle* 11/12/26). December 1926.

9.45 by Owen Davis and Sewell Collins. A mystery play or a comedy-melodrama in three acts. First performed at the Comedy Theatre, London, 22 December 1925, with Beatrice Wilson and Frederick Leister (both had been members of the Lena Ashwell Players). Published by Samuel French, London & New York, 1927. With ten men and six women, the action takes place over one evening in the library of Robert Clayton's house in New York, and the Ritz Hotel. The play opens just after the apparent murder of Howard Randall, an irresponsible young writer. It gradually transpires that practically everyone in the play had a motive for killing him and visited him just before his death, leaving a trail of evidence and guilt. To protect their relationships, some characters declare their responsibility in order to shield someone they love. The police inspector, Dixon, is greatly frustrated. Finally it is declared the young man committed suicide - dying at the time the maid Mary shot him, a wound which on its own would not have killed him. January 1929.

THE NAKED TRUTH by George Paston (pen name for Evelyn Symonds) and W.B. Maxwell. Not seen. First performed at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 14 April 1910, with Charles Hawtry as the wearer of a ring which obliges him to tell only the truth. Comedy/farce with seven men and six women. November 1923.

THE NEW MORALITY by Harold Chapin. First performed at the Comedy Theatre, London, 29 November 1920. Published in *Great Modern British Plays*, edited by J.W. Marriott, George G. Harrop, London, 1929. Three-act comedy with four men and three women. The action takes place on the Jones' houseboat, nearby to the Wisters' boat, on a hot summer evening. "The comfortable middle-classes provoked him (Chapin) to laughter and his humour is faintly flavoured with cynicism" (*Great Modern British Plays*, p. 533). Betty Jones has insulted her neighbour within earshot of many others. She feels her husband is looking foolish by paying too much attention to this woman, Mrs Wister. She will not apologise and thus begins a dispute which brings the woman's husband to seek a proper apology or legal action. The manservant quietly sends for Betty's brother, a KC who is very relaxed about the whole situation. There is much discussion about the new morality – post war, about which the rather drunk Mr Wister is eloquent prior to falling in the water. What Betty really wants is for her husband to stop looking foolish. When this is resolved and their relationship is sorted, she is prepared to apologise. A clear comment on the changing roles of men and women and what is acceptable behaviour. January 1926.

NIOBE (All Smiles) by Harry and Edward Paulton (1842-1917). Not seen. First performed at the Strand Theatre, London, April 1892, and ran for nearly 600 performances – Harry Paulton played in this production as Peter Amos Dunn. A comedy in which Dunn is "the married man placed in a decidedly awkward position by the unexpected 'arrival' of Niobe" (*Kentish Mercury* 24/2/22). With five men and six women. February 1922.

NOCTURNE by A. P. Wharton. No first performance details found. Published by Samuel French, London, 1913. One act play with three women and two men. Set on a night in June, 1912, in the back sitting room of Number 121 Kingsmere Road, Balham, London. A sad, ironical little fantasy - Wharton seems to understand women's desires and the roles forced upon them - the writing is spare, effective and sympathetic and tells the story of a bad tempered, miserable, spinster teacher (sharing drab rooms with a young girl about to marry) who dreams the man of her dreams (someone she saw briefly nine years ago) has sought her out and will take her from her sad and empty little life. However, she is realistic enough to know that it is not true and that only her dreams sustain her. December 1921.

NOBODY'S DAUGHTER by George Paston (pen name for Evelyn Symonds). First performed at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 3 September 1910, with Gerald Du Maurier and Lilian Braithwaite and ran for 185 performances. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain's Collection, British Library. A drama of a young woman deserted by her parents, raised by another. With six men and five women, characters include two

couples – the Framptons (he is managing director of the Wolverswyck Pottery Works) and the Torrens, he the Colonel commanding the Regimental Depot at Wolverswyck. March 1923.

O'FLAHERTY, VC by George Bernard Shaw. 'A Recruiting Pamphlet', written in September 1915 and first published in 1917. First presented by officers on the Western Front at Treizennes, Belgium, 17 February 1917, with Robert Loraine. First professional performance in New York on 21 June 1920, then by the Stage Society at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, on 19 December 1920. Published in *Selected Short Plays* by Bernard Shaw, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987. One act with two men and two women. March 1921.

OTHELLO by William Shakespeare. February 1924.

OUR BOYS by H.J. Byron. First performed at the Vaudeville Theatre, London, on 16 January 1875. A comedy in three acts published by Samuel French, London, (n.d.). With six men and four women. Two fathers, of very different backgrounds and attitudes, await the return of their sons who have travelled together. The responses and expectations of the parents and their offspring are exposed. The Baronet's son, Talbot, is not all his father hopes for, while Charles, the buttermen's son, has done well. Match making by the Baronet fails, with the wrong son falling for the wrong sister. Both fathers cut the boys, who go to London from Hertfordshire without their support to make their way and eventually prove their love to the girls they want. In the third act, all ends well – the boys have succeeded to the best of their ability and forgiveness is given. There is an older, wiser woman, who helps in the resolution. November 1920.

OUR FLAT by Mrs Musgrave. Licensed March/April 1889. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain's Collection, British Library. A farcical comedy with three women and four men. "Humorous incidents connected with a newly-married couple's unfortunate experiences in buying furniture on the hire purchase system. In the second act... the company's agents remove the furniture, and the lady of the house, with the assistance of her maid, substitutes orange boxes and other articles, the true nature of which is hidden by covers, but which, as may be imagined, collapse when sat upon. It is farce of the broadest type and provides a good entertainment" (*Kentish Mercury* 15/3/29). "At last the wife writes in her husband's name a comedy which is sold to a farcical producer... this enables them to satisfy their most immediate creditors, and in the end they are reconciled to the wife's wealthy father" (*Ilford Recorder* 15/3/29). Characters include the renters of the flat, Margery and Reginald Sylvester, a miserly and peppery father-in-law, an eccentric maid, a milkman, and an absent minded theatrical agent (ibid). March 1929.

OUTWARD BOUND by Sutton Vane. First performed at the Everyman Theatre, Hampstead, London, 17 September 1923. Cast included Lena Ashwell Player Frederick Leister. Published by Chatto & Windus, London, 1924. Three-act play with six men and three women, set on board ship, over a period of six days. The characters (except for Ann and Henry, who are 'half-ways' and terrified of being parted) are all dead, on board a mysterious ship sailing to meet their 'examiner'. Tom, the young drunken drop-out who has squandered his chances, is the first to realise his predicament, besides the long term steward/crew member Scubby. The others take longer to understand – all still behaving as they did in life. Mr Lingley, who turns out to be a fraudulent business man, tries to organise a collective response to put to the examiner (who turns out to be a former colleague of the priest, Mr Duke, on board). However, ultimately, everyone must answer for themselves and their actions, finding opportunities to redeem themselves. Ann and Henry are saved – their attempted suicide having been foiled, apparently by their devoted dog, and they are given a second chance at life together. October 1927.

A PAIR OF SILK STOCKINGS, a comedy in three acts by Cyril Harcourt, first performed at the Criterion Theatre, London, 23 February 1914. Published by Samuel French, London, 1920. With eight men and six women, set in a country house in England. A divorced couple, Molly and Sam, end up together again after a number of contrivances, including amateur theatricals, fear of burglars, hiding in wardrobes, disguises, outmoded moral stances. The playwright was aware of contemporary issues and has the character of the tramp shouting firstly for and then against female suffrage. The unmarried Irene has

the most understanding and perception of human nature. May not have been performed by the Lena Ashwell Players, although it was announced for a season during 1924/5.

A PAIR OF SPECTACLES adapted from the French by Sydney Grundy. First performed Garrick Theatre, London, 22 February 1890, with John Hare as Ben Goldfinch. Published in *Nineteenth Century Plays* edited by George Rowell, London, OUP – first published in *The World's Classics* 1953, reprinted 1956, 1960, 1965 and 1968. A comedy in three acts with eight men and three women in which the setting throughout is the breakfast room of Benjamin Goldfinch's London home. Goldfinch is a generous, sympathetic man, who allows his tenants to get behind on their rent and to generally play on his sympathy. He has married a young woman with whom there is genuine love. His son, Percy, by a previous marriage has a good relationship with his father – he is honest about his struggle to go into law and is still dependent on his father's support. He has a good rapport with his stepmother. Goldfinch's brother, Gregory, comes to stay from out of town, and his son Dick, Percy's friend, tries to talk to his father about his financial needs, but is constantly rebuffed and told to manage on his own. Gregory forces Goldfinch to see that his former employee is dishonest and this, combined with Goldfinch borrowing Gregory's spectacles, turns Goldfinch into a suspicious, mean character, bewildering to his family and friends. Various instances appear to confirm Gregory's approach is the only way, but eventually Goldfinch's equilibrium is restored, he returns the spectacles and Percy gets his girl and Gregory is forced to help his own son. February 1921.

PAOLO & FRANCESCA, a tragedy in four acts by Stephen Phillips. First performed at St James' Theatre, London, 6 March 1902. Published by John Lane, London, 1902, it was commissioned by George Alexander. With eight men, seven women and extras, it is set in Rimini, Italy. It is a poetic drama, with heightened language and passions, in blank verse, telling an historical/mythical love story. The play begins with Giovanni (the King) about to marry the young Francesca, brought to him under the care of his younger brother, Paolo. Paolo and Francesca fall in love. Paolo, much loved by his brother, decides to flee and then to poison himself. His plans are overheard by Giovanni and the tragic set of events that follows is inevitable. Giovanni kills the young lovers while recognising the power of their love. Phillips was well known for his poetic drama (and a friend of Ashwell's), but he had somewhat limited public appeal. November 1922.

PASSERS BY, a play in four acts by C. Haddon Chambers. First produced at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 29 March 1911, with Gerald du Maurier and Irene Vanbrugh. Published by Duckworth & Co., London, 1913. With four men, four women and a six-year-old boy, set in London, over a period of about three weeks. A moving play about the chance re-meeting, after seven years, of Peter Waverton and Margaret Summers, lovers before they were parted by Peter's scheming sister. Despite Peter's engagement to Beatrice, he and Margaret, through their child, re-discover their love and all ends well, only after various dramas (the child is taken by Burns, a passer-by who Waverton tries to make 'respectable'). A popular play of its time, with appropriate content and treatment for the Lena Ashwell Players, which re-enforces the need for human tenderness in a changing world. October 1922.

THE PASSING OF THE THIRD FLOOR BACK, 'an idle fancy' by Jerome K. Jerome. First performed at St James' Theatre, London, 1 September 1908. Originally a short story by Jerome and later made into a successful film. Published by Samuel French, London, (n.d.). With six men and six women, set throughout in the sitting room of Mrs Sharpe's boarding house in London. Wonderfully fantastical piece. The tired, miserable lives of the inhabitants of a sad boarding house are revealed, followed by a gradual change in everyone's behaviour for the better following the arrival of the mysterious 'stranger', representing goodness, kindness and honesty, who makes everyone seek out, find and practise their ideal, 'true' selves (what they are when not worn down by existence). Expressing a kind of early, personal socialism. A very popular play in its time. March 1928.

THE PELICAN by F. Tennyson Jesse & H.M. Harwood. First performed at the Ambassadors' Theatre, London, 20 October 1924. Published by Ernest Benn Ltd, London, 1926. With seven men and four women. The play begins in the autumn of 1919 and ends seventeen years later, at Bougival near Paris. A

hard hitting post war play. Wanda Heriot is under pressure from stifling parents-in-law and a changed world. She gives the impression that her child may not be her husband's, and although she gives him one last chance to claim his son, he refuses and she leaves. Seventeen years later that son, looking like his father but knowing nothing of his background, wants to go into the army. Having been declared illegitimate, he needs special papers, only available through his father. Meanwhile, Wanda has fallen in love and plans marriage in France. Once again she is called upon to make a life affecting sacrifice for her son, and she does it at the expense of her own happiness. Unsentimental, realistic drama, confronting lives changed by the Great War, especially the lives of women who were called upon to provide stability while being made aware of their new independence. December 1928.

PETER'S MOTHER by Mrs Henry de la Pasture. Licenced 22 January 1906, first performed at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 12 September 1906. Lord Chamberlain's Play Collection, British Library. A family drama in three acts with six men and five women, set in Devon, England, between 1900 and 1902. Rather a long-winded story about mothers and sons - serious intention but as ever involving the titled and rich. Peter's mother, Mary, after the death of her elderly husband, tries to find a life for herself, only to find that her son intends to keep her tied to his whims. His fiancée forces the situation and marries Peter on her terms, thereby enabling Mary to be with John, her new soulmate. February 1926.

THE PIGEON by John Galsworthy. A fantasy in three acts first performed at the Royalty Theatre, London, 30 January 1912, with Gladys Cooper and Dennis Eadie. Published in *Justice and Other Plays* by John Galsworthy, Bernhard Tauchnitz, Leipzig, 1912. With seven men, two women plus extras, set in artist Christopher Wellwyn's London studio and home. Wellwyn is generous to a fault – constantly giving his card and offers of help to all the down and outs who come begging at his door. His daughter Ann despairs but loves him and tolerates the situation. At this particular time, three hopeless cases land on his doorstep – Mrs Megan (a flowerseller), Ferrand – a Belgian drop out and Timson, a drunken old cabbie. Canon Bertley tries his best to get Mrs Megan back with her gambling husband, while Wellwyn's friends, Professor Calway and Sir Thomas Hoxton, debate the theory of what to do with these type of people. When Mrs Megan tries to commit suicide, she is brought to Wellwyn by the constable – just as Ann is trying to move the household to escape the free loaders. So, it all begins again... One of Galsworthy's social plays, trying to point out the weaknesses in the system and the need for more than talk or handouts to help the poor and dislocated. October 1926.

MR PIM PASSES BY by A.A. Milne. A comedy in three acts first performed at the New Theatre, London, 5 January 1920, with Irene Vanbrugh and Dion Boucicault. Published in *Four Plays* by A.A. Milne, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1939. With three men and four women, the play is set at Marden House (Buckinghamshire). Marriage is Milne's familiar subject - how people exist together and discover each other's needs. Mr Pim visits George to get a reference and happens to mention Olivia's first husband, a rogue who may or may not have died discredited in Australia. This raises the whole question of the status and acceptability of Olivia and George's relationship - they have never married but Olivia wants to do so while her adoptive niece wants to marry the artist Brian. The play gently explores feelings and behaviour - Mr Pim, the unlikely, unwitting catalyst, goes away having provided the opportunity to stabilise and deepen the relationships of the people he comes across. February 1924.

POSTAL ORDERS, one act farce by Roland Pertwee (performed with *Niobe*). Not seen. "An extremely funny sketch of the manners of young female postal clerks in a country district, which was very much to the point during the war, when there was a shortage of labour" (*Travelling Players*, Eleanor Elder, London, Frederick Muller Ltd., 1939, p.98). February 1922.

PRISCILLA RUNS AWAY, a four act romantic satire by Countess (Elizabeth) von Arnim. First performed Haymarket Theatre, London, 28 June 1910, directed by Norman McKinnel. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain's collection, British Library. Characters (four women, four or five men) include Princess Priscilla, the Prince of Lucerne, the Grand Duchess and the ultra-conventional 'Mrs Morrison' (a dual role for an actress), also Mrs Jones, Sir Augustus, Robin, Annalise, the Grand Duke and Fritzing. "The work is intended to be satirical, but the satire becomes unintentionally humorous in parts and is much

overdone. The play ends with a jerk, so to speak, and the finale, like everything else about it, is extraordinarily bathetical, but it is interesting as a foreign conception of the English character” (*Middlesex Chronicle* 26/2/27). “The story, briefly, concerns the Princess Priscilla, who, like most stage princesses, is the puppet who must respond to the pulling of Court strings. But when she finds that she is to be forced into marriage with the Grand Duke of Lothen Kunitz, she regards it as the last straw, and makes a bolt for freedom, which, however, is not so sweet as she had thought. As one might expect, it all ends happily” (*Streatham News* 18/2/27).
February 1927.

THE PROFESSOR'S LOVE STORY, a stylish comedy in three acts by James M. Barrie. First performed at the Comedy Theatre, London, 25 June 1894, with E.S. Willard and Bessie Hatton, transferred to the Garrick, ran for 144 performances. Revived at the Savoy Theatre, September 1916, by H.B. Irving and ran for 235 performances. Published in *The Plays of J.M. Barrie*, edited by A.E. Wilson, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1928. With eight men and five women and settings in London and Scotland. A charming, if dated, love story. A young secretary falls in love with her boss, the middle aged professor who has all the symptoms, but doesn't realise he is in love with her. He goes to his country retreat – she goes too so he can continue his work. His sister and others contrive to keep them apart, but all's well that ends well. There is a comic rustic sub-plot as to which man is right for Effie, the professor's maid. Sparkling and romantic, and popular with the Lena Ashwell Players' audience.
January and April 1928.

THE PROPOSAL by Anton Chekov. One-act comedy. “Seldom has so much comedy been packed into so small a space, and it is made all the funnier by being played in a sort of exaggerated Russian way, something after the manner of the ‘chauve souris’ [the bald mouse]” (Lena Ashwell Players' press release, quoted in *Middlesex Chronicle* 16/1/26).
January 1926

PRUNELLA (Or Love in A Dutch Garden) by Laurence Housman and Harley Granville Barker. Published in *Plays of Today, Second Volume*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1925. First performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, 23 December 1904. In three acts with eleven men and ten women. A rather serious but romantic version of the Pierrot story. Pierrot, with his band of mummies, including Scaramel, manages to woo Prunella (Pirette) away from her home (with beautiful garden and protective maiden aunts). She is conscious it is not a wise move, but convinced by Love (statue originally played by Lewis Casson) she goes – through the window down a ladder. The garden and gardeners are central to the image of love/affection and in Act III, three years later, desolation has set in, Pierrot and Prunella having parted because he could not handle marriage. Pierrot, in spite of his cold heart, loves her still and seeks her spirit in the Dutch garden, buying the house from the last surviving aunt. Prunella returns, poor, weary, desolate. They find each other and she demands his devotion to continue their life together. An effective piece, traditionally performed at Christmas time, given its pantomime elements, but it has a serious message about love and commitment.
October 1921.

THE PURSE STRINGS by Judge Parry. A ‘serious comedy’ in four acts, first performed at the Garrick Theatre, London, 28 January 1919. Lord Chamberlain's collection, British Library. “It is not an interesting story and the ethics are rather confused, but there is no harm in it.” (Lord Chamberlain's office, 11 January 1919). With three men and three women, it is a study of a woman finding and exerting her financial independence within marriage, having been kept powerless by her husband until she is forced to steal. His reaction sets off a chain of events which leaves him bankrupt and, under their marriage settlement, his wife gets his money. She then gives him a taste of his own medicine, limiting his allowance until he cannot afford his expenses and nearly goes to prison. She relents and they are reconciled. Throughout she retains affection for her husband and the women in the play are seen in a positive light by the author. Definitely a post-war play, illustrating the growing strength of women in society.
February 1924.

PYGMALION by George Bernard Shaw. A ‘romance in five acts’, first produced at His Majesty's Theatre, London, 11 April 1914, and in New York the same year. First published in 1916 and by Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1941.
December 1921 and November 1923.

QUALITY STREET, a comedy in four acts by J.M. Barrie. First performed at the Vaudeville Theatre, London, 17 September 1902, with Seymour Hicks as Valentine Brown and Ellaline Terriss as Phoebe. Ran for 459 performances, revived at the Haymarket, 11 August 1921, ran for 344 performances. Published in *The Plays of J.M. Barrie in One Volume*, edited by A.E. Wilson, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1928. With six men and nine women, the action of the play takes place over ten years. A love story extolling the virtues of consistency – Phoebe loves Valentine and thinks he will ask for her hand. Instead, he goes to war, returning ten years later to find her an ‘old school marm’. She thinks he is only taken by silly young things and masquerades as her young niece to win his heart again. She then realises this is not the way – finally true love wins but Phoebe nearly loses everything in the process.

December 1927.

RAFFLES, The Amateur Cracksmen by E.W. Hornung and Eugene Pressbrey. Opened 12 May 1906 at the Comedy Theatre, London, and on the same date at the Princess Theatre, New York. Vehicle for Gerald du Maurier, who played the role for 351 performances in London. It was revived in 1914 for 177 performances. Novel by Hornung first published London 1899, republished by Hamish Hamilton, London 1975. Play not seen. Lord Chamberlain’s Collection, British Library. In the novel, Raffles, a stylish, clever thief and ‘gentleman’, and his nervous, but devoted off-sider, Bunny, experience a number of hair raising escapades as thieves – Raffles relishing the preparation and danger as much as the reward, enjoying his double life until the final reckoning – when he may or may not have escaped drowning, swimming away from capture. Bunny as narrator, tells their story retrospectively – having spent time in jail for their final jewel theft. The escapades involving stealing jewels, and a painting (to restore it to its rightful owner). They are forced to outwit enemies, potential betrayers and physical dangers. Presumably the play was a vehicle for a debonair star actor and various incidents from the novel would have been included. Entertaining, boys’ own adventure type stuff. For the Lena Ashwell Players Godfrey Kenton in the name part was “responsible for a brilliant performance” (*Kentish Mercury* 19/3/26). March 1926.

THE RAT by David LeStrange (pseudonym for Ivor Novello and Constance Collier²). Licenced 1924. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain’s Collection, British Library. Began as a film script, after successful stage tours, made into a film. First performance in Brighton, 15 January 1924, then Prince of Wales Theatre, London, on 9 June 1924, transferring to the Garrick in September. Successful run in London, into 1925, with Novello in the leading role. An old fashioned thriller and melodrama. “A story of the Parisian underworld. The ‘Rat’, a life friend of Odile, is famed amongst the Apaches and when he is drawn into the act of the Comtesse Zelle de Chaumet and tricked by Inspector Caillard, a tense situation develops; Odile sacrifices herself for the ‘Rat’s’ sake, but ultimately matters are righted” (*West Herts & Watford Observer* 2/3/29). February 1929.

REMNANT by Dario Niccodemi and Michael Morton. First performed at the Royalty Theatre, London, 3 March 1917, with Dennis Eadie and Marie Lohr. Ran for 124 performances. Lord Chamberlain’s Collection, British Library. ‘A little romance’ in three acts with five men and three women, set in Paris. “A pretty piece of sentiment, French in its setting and French, or possibly Italian, in its manners and modes of thoughts” (Lord Chamberlain’s correspondence, March 1917). Remnant is the nickname of a young girl of the streets, merely a waif, running errands, an innocent girl - she is befriended by, and eventually loved by, Titus, a struggling engineer, but she has to run the gamut of pressures from would-be seducers and a game playing couple trying to sort out their marriage. June 1923.

THE REST CURE, a one-act play by Gertrude Jennings, first performed at the Vaudeville Theatre, London, 16 March 1914, with Norman McKinnel. Published in *Four One-Act Plays* by Gertrude Jennings, Samuel French, London, 1914. With one man and four women, it is set in the bedroom of a Nursing home, where a malingerer is taught a lesson about his selfish behaviour. Expecting everybody to wait on him, he is brought to his senses by having all ‘privileges’ taken away by a clever nurse and the other inmates, as well as by the author’s wife. April 1921.

² Peter Noble, *Ivor Novello, Man of the Theatre*, London, Falcon Press, 1951.

THE RIVALS by Richard Brinsley Sheridan. First performed at Covent Garden, London, in 1775.
March 1923.

ROBIN HOOD, a play in five acts by Alfred Noyes, written in 1908, first performed 1926, published by William Blackwood, London, 1926. With thirteen men, seven women and extras – possibly more appropriate for film treatment than stage. Written in blank verse, with songs and music, telling the traditional story, with elements of the King Arthur story. Evil Elinor and Prince John are waiting to take the throne from Richard the Lionheart. John is in love with Lady/Maid Marian. Noyes created a traditional love story with bold knights and peasants as well as the supernatural, with the characters of Thorn & Fern Whisper (King and Queen of the Forest Sprites). Robin rescues Will Scarlet from hanging and he is imprisoned in the Dark Tower. He is rescued but he and Marion are finally killed by Elinor and their spirits rise to protect the forest.
January 1927.

THE ROMANTIC AGE, a romantic comedy in three acts by A.A. Milne, first performed at the Comedy Theatre, London, 18 October 1920. Published by Samuel French, London, (n.d.). With four men, one boy and four women. Melisande (Sandy) is in love with the idea of romance; full of old fashioned romantic notions, despising ordinariness, especially in the stability and routines of marriage as represented by her parents. She rejects Bobby, who then decides he is really in love with her cousin Jane. Sandy then meets Gervase, in a fancy dress costume, he having run out of petrol near her house. They meet in the morning in a wood, in a romantic, unreal situation and declare love as Prince and Princess. When he turns up later in normal clothes, she is horrified, until he talks some sense into her and they look forward to a future together. Very light weight, amusing, post war material – trying to create an idyllic little world, making no mention of the pain of the war years. Contains some homespun philosophy about marriage, sharing and communication.
February 1925.

THE ROMANTIC YOUNG LADY by Gregorio Martinez Sierra translated by Helen and Harley Granville Barker. Written in 1918, first performed in English at the Royalty Theatre, London, for 68 performances from 13 November 1920. Published by Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1929. A play in three acts with six women and five men, set in Madrid, Spain, over a twenty-four hour period. Rosario is a young lady, who lives with her grandmother and three brothers and reads the romantic novels of the famous Luis Felipe de Cordoba. Bored with waiting for love or marriage, Rosario believes she knows how to behave independently and rails against the constraints placed on women by the society in which she lives. One evening de Cordoba's hat blows in the open window of the room where Rosario is resting in the dark. Thinking no one is home, de Cordoba climbs in the window, to retrieve his hat, only to become literally and metaphorically entangled with Rosario (her hair gets caught in his sleeve link). He is instantly attracted to her but she creates a strong pretence of being offended. They talk about his novels, but he does not disclose his true identity. He offers to help Rosario to get a job as secretary with the novelist. She goes to his house the next day for an interview – when he finally appears (after the retiring secretary has urged her to influence the ending of de Cordoba's new novel – from a cynical to romantic ending), she acts as if she is completely offended by him when she discovers his true identity. However, he pursues her and with the help of her grandmother, she is made to realise that the love and support of a man need not be offensive or unfulfilling.
February 1922, March 1923.

ROMEO AND JULIET by William Shakespeare. March 1929.

ROOKERY NOOK by Ben Travers. A farce in three acts first performed at the Aldwych Theatre, London, 30 June 1926. Published in *Five Plays* by Ben Travers, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979. With five men and six women. The action takes place in the lounge-hall of 'Rookery Nook' in a seaside town in Somerset on a summer evening and the following day. Gerald has come to stay in Rookery Nook, in advance of his new wife, who is attending to her ill mother. His bossy and suspicious sister-in-law, Gertrude, and her husband, live in the village. She has arranged the accommodation (which includes a determined daily woman, Mrs Leverett) and is anxious to interfere at every opportunity. Gerald's cousin Clive, a bachelor, is staying with Gertrude but looking for some fun. As Gerald unpacks, a young woman in pyjamas appears, claiming she has been thrown out of home by her mad German stepfather, and all the

ingredients for a frantic farce are in place. Gerald is of course innocent of any misbehaviour as he tries to obtain some clothes for the young woman, Rhoda, whose stepfather is accompanied by an apparently ferocious dog. Gerald and Clive work hard to avoid the wrath and misunderstanding of Gertrude and various other village characters – inevitably Gertrude fetches Gerald's wife, but all is resolved with no harm done, and Clive gets the spare girl, Rhoda. November 1928.

RUTHERFORD AND SON by Githa Sowerby. First performed at the Court Theatre, London, 31 January 1912, with Norman McKinnel. Published by Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1912 and in *New Woman Plays*, edited by Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner, Methuen Drama, London, 1991. Family drama in three acts with four men and four women set in pre-war Edwardian northern England. The subject of this bleak and powerful play is change and revolt – revolt against material values, against absolute parental power and female submission to dictatorial males. Rutherford, a Newcastle glass manufacturer, has a firm, unloved power over his adult children – he thwarts his son's bid for financial independence and ruins his thirty-six-year old daughter, Janet's, one chance of happiness in love. She loses her man and security but in grief asserts her independence. However, it is Rutherford's daughter-in-law, Mary, abandoned by her husband, who defeats Rutherford by striking a bargain which will see her son inherit his business, before which he will be educated and given a roof over his head while his mother is housekeeper to Rutherford. The younger generation has shown its teeth as the older generation is forced to recognise change. January 1923.

A SAFETY MATCH, a play in four acts by Ian Hay. First performed at the Strand Theatre, London, 13 January 1921. Published by Samuel French, London, 1927. With eight women and seventeen men (some doubling possible), covering a three year period. 'The Safety Match' is how Daphne initially perceives her marriage to Jack (Juggernaut) Carr. The play deals with the process of her coming to love him through incidents involving a strike at the colliery, the birth of her son and a pit accident. She has a number of irritating siblings who would try the patience of a saint – but Jack takes it all in his stride. A long and detailed play about human relationships. April 1925.

THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL by Richard Brinsley Sheridan. A comedy in five acts, with a prologue by David Garrick, first performed at Drury Lane Theatre, London in 1777. Published in *Four English Comedies*, edited by J.M. Morrell, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1950. With twelve men, four women and extras. March 1922.

THE SCHOOL MISTRESS, a farce in three acts by Arthur Wing Pinero, first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, 27 March 1886. First published by Heinemann in 1894. Published in *Plays by A. W. Pinero*, edited by George Rowell, Cambridge, CUP, 1986. With nine men and seven women, mostly set in Miss Dyott's Seminary for Young Ladies (Volumnia College), London. Miss Dyott (The Schoolmistress), having married a gentleman, is obliged for financial reasons to moonlight secretly as a singer during the school holidays. She leaves her useless husband in charge of four girls, one of whom has secretly married her sweetheart and whom the others want to help her to be with. Admiral Rankling's daughter is the newly married young lady, fearful of her father's wrath. He turns up with friends of Queckett (Dyott's husband) for a party which goes wrong – the seminary burns down and everyone spends a dreadful night at the Admiral's until all is unravelled and the women win. Contains many elements of farce – lots of rooms, doors, fog, procession of food. February and July 1929.

THE SECOND MRS TANQUERAY, a drama in four acts by Arthur Wing Pinero, first performed London in May 1893 with Mrs Patrick Campbell. First published in 1894 and in *Chief Contemporary Dramatists*, edited by Thomas H. Dickinson, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1915. Set in 1893, with seven men and four women. March 1928.

SHERLOCK HOLMES, adaptation of Doyle's novel by Conan Doyle and William Gillette. Stage version not seen. "The title role was capitally given by Mr Arthur Ewart, who was also responsible for the production. His 'Sherlock Holmes' might well have stepped straight out of the pages of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's fascinating books. Another admirable study was that of the super crook, 'Professor Moriarty', by

Mr Walter Fitzgerald, and there was also a characteristic ‘Dr Watson’ in Mr Cecil Trouncer” (*Kentish Mercury* 16/3/28). “It must be an immensely difficult task to portray a character such as Sherlock Holmes on the stage. No person with a developed intelligence is without his or her own conception of that fictitious figure, and the actor is faced with the problem of including something of each popular idea in his presentation... It is therefore highly probable that Mr Arthur Ewart’s interpretation of the title role of the play... failed to give complete satisfaction to the majority of his audience. Equally his performance was undoubtedly the most brilliant piece of individual acting this season. There was an ease, a sang froid and complete self confidence in the whole of his work that made the character a reality, a possibility, and one was deluded almost into a belief that the warped intellect of a Sherlock Holmes could exist” (*Middlesex Chronicle* 24/3/28).
March 1928.

THE SHIP by St. John G. Ervine. First performed in London by the Lena Ashwell Players, with Ashwell as Old Mrs Thurlow at the Century Theatre on 8 January 1925. It had been performed in Liverpool, Bristol and Ireland, having been first published by George Allen & Unwin, London, 1922. A three-act family drama with four men and four women, set near the ship building town of Biggport. John Thurlow has established a large and successful shipbuilding business which he wants his only son Jack to take over. Thurlow has dominated his submissive wife, but usually bows to his strong, clear thinking elderly mother who lives with them. When Jack declares he wants to leave the shipyard and be a farmer (he distrusts the influence and dependence on machines, having understood their impact on soldiers during the Great War) his father is furious and will not help. His grandmother gives him the money to start the farm with a friend who has been greatly disillusioned by the war and really sees little purpose in life. John Thurlow is building a new passenger ship designed to be the fastest to New York. He wants his son to be part of this success and to carry it on. When the family visit Jack and his friend Cornelius at their farm, Cornelius is drinking too much and John attempts to bribe him to ruin the farm or leave Jack in the lurch. When Jack overhears this, he confronts his father. Old Mrs Thurlow attempts to understand both sides of the argument. Cornelius submits to the bribe and leaves Jack to cope on his own, which he does. However, John becomes ill and is forbidden to sail on the maiden voyage of his new ship. He finally prevails upon Jack to take his place – the ship sinks and Jack is drowned – his father understanding too late the unreasonableness of his expectations and demands. The family is left shattered but old Mrs Thurlow prevails to prevent John’s suicide and to seek hope in the future.
January 1925.

SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER (or *The Mistakes of a Night*) by Oliver Goldsmith. A comedy in five acts, (with a prologue by David Garrick) first performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, London, 15 March 1773. Published in *Four English Comedies*, edited by J.M. Morrell, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1950. With six men, four women and extras.
January 1922, May 1923 and November 1928.

SHORTAGE, a light comedy in three acts by W.T. Coleby (author of *The Swayboat*). Licenced in 1920. Possibly premiered by the Lena Ashwell Players in October 1920. With six men and four women. Not seen. Lord Chamberlain’s Collection, British Library. “The plot centres around a theme which was brilliantly elaborated years ago by the late Dr Margaret Todd in her novel, *Mona Maclean*, working on the question, is it right or seemly or womanly that a woman should study and practice medicine and scientific research... is cleverly written, the dialogue is witty and epigrammatic” (*Fulham Chronicle* 29/10/20). “George Vye marries a wife who ‘simply cannot’ abandon her career as a scientist, and he is shocked to learn she is a part author of a volume which deals with certain diseases; and as she refuses to obey his behest and settle down as a staid, matronly wife... He considers he has a duty to perform, namely, to pay attention to the shortage which will inevitably arise in consequence of the waste of life in the war, he decides they must part. Divorce is the inevitable corollary and this gives rein to many cynical witticisms at the expense of the divorce laws. A cousin, ‘far removed’, Edith St Claire, promises to aid him in his desires, even to the extent of marrying him; but when the divorce is obtained, Vye finds he has been twice thrown over in one day, for he learns that Edith a few days before had married an old lover, and therefore cannot marry him. On the other hand, Penelope March had always loved Vye but this had not interfered with her good wishes for Vye’s happiness, and she completes it after many sacrifices. Vye’s friend, Ronald Lowe, acts honestly throughout and rewards Angela Vye with a good man’s love. The last act sees the clearing up of a tangled skein and the problem of shortage is satisfactorily settled apparently

for the near future” (*Era* 27/10/20). “Not a convincing play. The characters do not behave quite like reasonable beings... the author’s satire of the law and legal procedure is rather weak” (*South Western Star* 29/10/20).
October 1920.

THE SIGN ON THE DOOR, a play in a prologue and three acts by Channing Pollock, first performed at the Playhouse, London, 1 September 1921, with Gladys Cooper and Godfrey Tearle. Published by Samuel French, New York, (n.d.). A drama, set in New York, with four women and eight men, which deals in a frank and forceful way with the sins of ‘the man about Town’. Ann is caught in a compromising situation with Frank Devereaux. Five years later, she is married to Lafe Regan when Frank re-enters her life. Frank has behaved badly with the wife of a friend of Lafe’s and is now trying to seduce Lafe’s daughter, Helen (from his first marriage). Ann, attempting to protect Helen, goes to Frank’s room, followed by Lafe. Not knowing she is hidden in the room, Lafe shoots Frank, in self defence. Ann tries to take the blame. The ‘deus ex machina’ is the detective who was involved in the first incident (five years previously) and can vouch for Ann’s innocence. Restoration of family life is achieved. “The play was typically American, forcibly recalling the stock film plot of the Hollywood scenario writer. It was powerfully acted and its realism and crudity were relieved by the excellent taste with which some of the ‘strong’ scenes were played” (*Middlesex Chronicle* 27/10/28).
October 1928.

THE SILVER BOX, a drama (called ‘a comedy’ by its author) in three acts by John Galsworthy, first performed for eight matinees at the Royal Court Theatre, London, from 25 September 1906. First published in March 1909 and by Duckworth, London, 1913. With thirteen men (some doubling possible) and four women. A biting satire on justice and injustice dependant on one’s wealth and social standing. It involves the covering up of actions by the callow young Barthwick, son of an important gentleman, leading to the accusation and loss of position for the serving class Mrs Jones, over the theft of a silver cigarette box. Mrs Jones has an unemployed husband who drinks, and three children, for whom she is the provider. Young Barthwick drinks, behaves badly, but gets away with it. In the third act court room scene it is obvious there is one law for the rich and influential and another for the poor, despite platitudes uttered by Barthwick senior and his wife, who is desperate to keep out of the newspapers a situation which clearly puts their useless son in the wrong – all done at the expense of Mrs Jones. The play ends with no intimation of hope for Mrs Jones.
January 1926.

THE SILVER KING by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman. First performed at the Princess Theatre, London, 16 November 1882 with Wilson Barrett as Denver. Published by Samuel French, New York and London, 1907. A drama in five acts with fifteen men, seven women, children and extras, the action takes place over four years, in settings in and around London. A full-bodied melodrama which chronicles the fortunes of Wilfred Denver. He is ruining his life with drink and gambling, surrounded by con men, burglars and criminals. When he thinks he has killed (in a drunken rage) his former rival for his wife’s hand, he manages to escape and is then presumed dead in a train accident. He goes to the silver mines in Nevada and makes his fortune. The money he sends to his destitute wife and two children, helped by the loyal family retainer, does not reach them as they are constantly on the move to escape the taunts of being a murderer’s family. He returns to England a rich man, and begins to help his family, his identity known to the retainer but not his wife. He sets about to prove his innocence – when this is done and the real criminals caught, he can return to his family. Terrific range of characters and a tear jerker in which all is resolved and punishment is just.

THE SKIN GAME by John Galsworthy. First performed at St Martin’s Theatre, London, on 21 April 1920, and at the Bijou in New York, 20 October 1920. Published with *A Bit o’ Love* and *The Foundations*, by Duckworth and Co., London, 1920. A tragicomedy in three acts with eight men and five women plus extras. A powerful and chilling study of a cold woman’s unrelenting pursuit of a principle. Hillcrist is a country gentleman whose family come into conflict with the newly rich and land hungry Hornblower and his family, who intend to build a factory virtually in their garden. As the land sale proceeds, Hillcrist’s wife, Amy, sets about to get the dirt on the Hornblowers – she finds out the past of Chloe, Hornblower’s daughter-in-law, and with the aid of the gruesome Dawker, sets about to destroy the family. Chloe

attempts suicide and Amy wins, but the price paid is too great for her husband and daughter and the play ends with the certain knowledge that Amy has destroyed her own family life as much as the Hornblowers.
February 1924.

SMITH, a satirical comedy of manners in four acts by W. Somerset Maugham. First performed at the Comedy Theatre, London, 30 September 1909. Published in *Plays Volume II* by Heinemann, London, 1931. Set in London in 1909, with four men and four women. Thomas Freeman returns to London after eight years on a farm in Rhodesia and is horrified by the callous, empty behaviour of his sister, Rose, and her circle of friends, towards each other and towards marriage. He is seeking a wife who will cope with the rigours of the life he leads and although he proposes to a previous fiancée, she realises she cannot love him and decides to change her life by going to Australia. A baby, neglected by its mother, one of Rose's friends, dies, and her husband forbids her to see Rose again. The parasite Algy decides to move on and Rose is left alone. Meanwhile, Thomas realises that the maid, Smith, from a farming family, would make him happy and she finally accepts his proposal. Presents a scathing view of social behaviour and its consequences in the Edwardian period.
February 1923.

SOWING THE WIND, a play in four acts by Sydney Grundy. First performed at the Comedy Theatre, London, 30 September 1893, with Brandon Thomas, Cyril Maude, Sydney Brough, Winifred Emery and Annie Hughes. Published by Samuel French, London, 1901. Set in the 1830s, it is a well written, strong drama about unknown identities, love, prejudice and misguided care, with a wonderful role for a woman – the character of Rosamund, which Lena Ashwell played on tour in 1894, and for which she received good reviews. Rosamund is proud, intelligent, independent and has risen above her circumstances. She is honest, loves and is loved by Ned, the adopted son of old Brabazon, who years before was forced to part from his love, who bore a daughter (Rosamund). Watkins, the meddling friend of Brabazon nearly ruins their lives and loves, but ultimate discovery and reconciliation follows. Rosamund is not a woman of society, but a strong, attractive woman, whose mother had the same qualities once loved by Brabazon.
November 1921.

THE SPORT OF KINGS, a domestic comedy in three acts by Ian Hay. First performed Savoy Theatre, London, 8 September 1924. Published by Samuel French, London, 1926. Set in the country, over a three week period, with eight men and seven women, plus extras. Algernon and Foothill make a bet to see if they can make the hardliner, Mr Purdie, succumb to betting on horseracing. A frantic comedy of mistakes, requiring elaborate staging and fancy dress costumes as well as sound effects, it is definitely of its time, with a happy, all's well ending.
January 1928.

STOLEN FRUIT, one-act play by Lena Ashwell Players company member, Cyril Twyford. Not seen. Eva Moore was the original woman 'crook' whose Raffles-like exploits are the theme. Performed with *The Younger Generation*.
June 1923.

SWEET LAVENDER, a domestic drama in three acts by Arthur Wing Pinero. First performed at Terry's Theatre, London, 21 March 1888, with Edward Terry as Dick Phenyl. Published by William Heinemann, London, 1891. With seven men and four women, it is set in the chambers of Mr Phenyl and Mr Hale, Temple, London, springtime 1888. Clement Hale is in love with Lavender, the daughter of Dick's housekeeper. He has been adopted by banker G. Wedderburn, whose sister and niece keep a constant eye on him. Dick, fighting the demon drink, tries to help various conflicting interests. Wedderburn's bank goes bust, his niece falls for an American, Dick loses an inheritance, Lavender and her mother Ruth go into hiding, but all is resolved when it is realised that Ruth was Wedderburn's former love and Lavender, his daughter. Dick helps the bank by withdrawing his claim, Ruth and Wedderburn are re-united, Clement and Lavender get together, as do Minnie and Horace.
December 1921.

THE TAMING OF THE SHREW by William Shakespeare. January 1922 and October 1923.

THE TEMPEST by William Shakespeare. October 1925.

THE THIEF, from the French, *Le Voleur*, by Henri Bernstein, adapted by Haddon Chambers. Not seen. Premiered at St James' Theatre, London, 12 November 1907, with Irene Vanbrugh and George Alexander. First performed in USA at Lyceum Theatre, New York, 9 September 1907. A "well known play with its tense bedroom scene... thrilling work" (*Scarborough Post and Weekly Pictorial* 26/5/22). May 1922.

THE THIRD DEGREE by Charles Klein – see FIND THE WOMAN. First performed at the Hudson Theatre, New York, 1 February 1909. November 1928.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAIR, a play in three acts by Bayard Veiller. First performed at the Duke of York's, London, 16 October 1917, with Mrs Patrick Campbell. Published by Samuel French, London, 1922. Setting throughout – Italian Room in Roscoe Crosby's home in New York, over one evening. With ten men and seven women. An effective murder mystery, involving a few technical staging complexities, such as a knife set in the ceiling and special lighting, as well as a séance sequence. Edward Wales uses the occasion of a dinner party at the Crosbys to try, through a medium he has primed, to make the murderer of an old friend admit guilt. He thinks the murderer is the young fiancée of Crosby junior, whose mother turns up as the medium, much to their mutual consternation for different reasons. Wales is murdered during the séance – the truth is extracted in the third act, the murderer is Mason and all ends happily for the young lovers. November 1927.

THREE WISE FOOLS, a comedy in three acts by Austin Strong. First performed at the Comedy Theatre, London, 12 July 1919. Published by Samuel French, London, (n.d.). With eleven men (mostly older) and two women, set in New York. The lives of the three men are changed radically by the appearance of the daughter of the woman they all loved when young. She turns out to be the daughter of an escaped criminal seeking revenge on the Judge for his sentence, especially as he was innocent. The young woman, Sidney Fairchild, falls in love with Gordon, Findley's nephew. After police intervention, all ends well – Sidney can marry Gordon. Impossibly rose-coloured – the play seems untouched by the experience of war and is very escapist in its view of the world. April 1926.

TILLY OF BLOOMSBURY by Ian Hay, adapted from the author's novel, *Happy Go Lucky*. First performed at the Apollo Theatre, London, 10 July 1919. Revised for publication 1922, published by Samuel French, London, 1922. A three act romantic comedy with nine men and seven women. This was a very popular play after the war and with the Lena Ashwell Players' audiences. It gently exposes the weakness of class snobbery in the face of true love. Richard Mainwaring has fallen in love with Tilly Welwyn of Bloomsbury. His parents are horrified, especially as she tries to paint a better picture of her family life. All falls apart when the Mainwarings visit the Welwyns for tea. Tilly resolves to make a clean breast of it and admits to all that she has tried to create an unreal situation. Dick, undaunted, resolves to make her change her mind and marry him, even if it means he has to defy his family and lodge in the Welwyns' boarding house. The women in Tilly's family are the most appealing, helped by Dicky's amiable cousin, Connie. Lady Mainwaring and her daughter are shown in an unattractive light to reinforce the playwright's intention of exposing snobbery. January 1926.

TONS OF MONEY, a farce by Will Evans and Valentine (pen name for Archibald Thomas Pechey). Written in 1914 but not performed until 13 April 1922, when, after a provincial tour it opened at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London. In 1923 the play transferred to the Aldwych Theatre where it ran for 733 performances, the first of the so-called Aldwych farces. Published by Samuel French, London, 1927. With six men and four women. Allington and his wife are hopelessly in debt when news comes that his brother has died and the estate will be his. There is a problem, however: given what Allington owes, when the debts are paid he will be no better off. The lawyer advises them (overheard by the butler, Sprules), that should Allington die, the inheritance will go to George Maitland, long assumed by the family to have been killed in Mexico. Allington and his wife decide Allington should appear to die in an explosion so no body can be buried, return a few weeks later as George Maitland, and eventually marry Allington's wife so they can be rich, the creditors having no recourse to Maitland. Chaos ensues – Sprules gets his brother to pretend to be Maitland, Allington arrives as Maitland (and has to be killed off again - drowned

apparently) when his wife learns that she would inherit, not Maitland. Then the real Maitland arrives, alive – and his wife (a friend of Allington’s wife) spends the play throwing herself at each of the men she assumes to be her long lost husband. The machinations continue, concluded only by the lawyer’s advice that there is no money left anyway and the curtain falls on an exhausted group of people left as they began.
October 1928.

THE TOYMAKER OF NUREMBURG, a play in three acts by Austin Strong. First performed at the Playhouse, London, 15 March 1910. Dedicated to Cyril Maude, who played the original Toymaker. Published by Samuel French, London, 1921. Set in Nuremburg, inside and outside the Walled garden and at the Toymaker’s house. With twelve men (some doubling possible) and three women plus children and extras. A romantic story for the whole family, suitable for young audiences and warm hearted – hence its seasonal production by the Lena Ashwell Players. The son of the Toymaker falls for the boss’s daughter. He is penniless but their love is very strong. The boss demands that the toymaker responds to the fact that Teddy Bears are popular in the American market as opposed to the traditional dolls he makes. The toymaker decides to try his luck with his young son in America. The denouement is the return of the elder son who has made good and who makes it possible for everyone to live happily ever after. Presents a sentimental view of a changing world, while recognising that the traditional must give way to the new.
December 1926.

THE TRAGEDY OF NAN by John Masefield. First produced by the Pioneer Players at the New Royalty Theatre, London, 24 May 1908, directed by Harley Granville Barker, with Lillah McCarthy. First published in 1909, then in *Plays by Masefield Volume 1*, William Heinemann, London, 1937. A three-act drama with five women and eight men, it is set in the house of a small tenant farmer at Broad Oak, on the Severn in 1810. An unrelenting tragedy of loss and despair, simply told. Nan’s parents are dead – her beloved father hung for stealing a sheep. Her uncle has taken her into his home, but his wife, jealous and bitter, makes her life unbearable. His daughter, Jenny, pretends friendship with Nan but is cruel when she learns that Nan loves Dick (and he loves her), the young man whom Jenny’s mother wanted for her son-in-law. Nan and Dick declare their love as preparations are made for the Harvest Tide celebrations in the village. Nan tries to tell Dick of her family past but they are interrupted, having had time only to promise to wed. On learning this, Nan’s aunt poisons Dick against Nan and he suddenly announces to everyone that he will marry Jenny. Nan is rejected on all sides and talks of death with the old Gaffer whose wife died on this evening many years ago. When, through a visit from the Constable, Nan and all the villagers learn that her father did not kill the sheep and was wrongly accused and punished, Nan’s world crumbles. She is given fifty pounds compensation and Dick again seeks her hand. Declaring she does not want him and she will not let him treat others the same, she kills him and leaves to commit suicide – presumably drawn to the same tide as the Gaffer’s wife. It is a poetic, evocative work despite the depiction of ugliness and pain. Nan, unable to exist in such ugliness seeks peace in death.
March 1925.

TRELAWNEY OF THE WELLS by Arthur Wing Pinero. First performed at the Court Theatre, London, 20 January 1898. First published in 1899 and by William Heinemann, London, 1917. A tale of theatrical folk set in the early 1860s. In four acts with ten men and seven women, plus children and extras. Rose Trelawney is preparing to leave her career in the theatre to live, for a trial period, with the family of the man she loves, Alfred Gower, grandson to Sir William. Her theatrical ‘family’, particularly Tom Wrench, a playwright who loves her, do not want her to leave, but she is happy to prepare for her marriage and leave the stage behind. Inevitably her theatrical friends are much more interesting than the family she would marry into and Act 11 shows her boredom and eventual breaking out of the constraints. She returns to the stage, much subdued and Alfred also leaves home but they do not communicate with each other. Meanwhile her friend and fellow actress, Imogen, has plans to open a theatre and produce one of Tom’s plays. Sir William, remembering the acting of Kean, becomes a sponsor of their production. Tom has found out that Alfred is trying to be an actor, so he can be part of Rose’s life and he determines to bring the couple back together again, casting Alfred in his play opposite Rose. Sir William turns up unexpectedly to rehearsal and of course, there is a scene. However, he is eventually won over and Rose and Alfred are re-united. A play that has survived the test of time, it is evocative of theatrical life as well as being an unsentimental romance.
November 1926.

TRILBY, drama in four acts. An adaptation by Paul Potter for Herbert Beerbohm Tree, after the novel by George du Maurier. First performed at the Haymarket Theatre, 30 October 1895, with Beerbohm Tree as Svengali, Gerald du Maurier as Dodor and Dorothea Baird, Trilby. Most recently published in *Trilby and Other Plays*, The World's Classics, Oxford, NY, OUP, 1996. With eleven men and three women, set in Paris. The story of Trilby and Svengali is well known and was particularly popular during its time. Svengali uses his mesmeric powers to transform artist's model, Trilby, beloved of Little Billee, into a famous singer. She is compelled to leave the struggling young artist on the eve of their marriage and for five years Svengali holds power over her. When they all meet up again in Paris at her concert, the reunion is staged by their former landlady. The artists have achieved success while Trilby has lost all her individuality. Svengali dies of a seizure, her talent is gone, and she and Little Billee take up their romantic life again, but she is haunted by Svengali for ever. February 1921, February 1922, May 1923 and December 1926.

TRISTAN AND ISOLT by John Masefield. First performed by the Lena Ashwell Players at the Century Theatre, London, 21 February 1927, with Esme Church as Isolt. Published in *Plays Volume II* by William Heineman, London, 1937. "Mr Masefield describes the play as follows: "The play is an attempt to reconstruct the tragical story from the earliest fragments of history and legend which have come down to us about it. There is little doubt that the lovers lived and came to ends so disastrous that they became themes for poets. For some centuries the story has been so overlaid with romantic invention that the original events, and early versions of them, have been forgotten or overlooked. Possibly the early versions themselves are romantic invention, like this last version; but the tale is material for romantic invention, being the one great British tale to go all over the world as a subject for the world's poets" (From the Lena Ashwell Players' press release, *Enfield Gazette and Observer*, 25/2/27 and other local papers eg. *Ilford Recorder* 25/2/27).
February 1927.

THE TRUTH ABOUT BLAYDS by A. A. Milne. First performed at the Globe Theatre, London, on 20 December 1921, with Norman McKinnel and Irene Vanbrugh. Published in *Three Plays* by A.A. Milne, London, Chatto & Windus, 1923. In three acts with four men and four women. Set in Oliver Blayds' house in London over a period of about a week. The truth about Blayds is that on the death of old Oliver Blayds, the rest of his family confront a situation they eventually decide to suppress – for differing reasons. For many years Oliver Blayds lived the life of a successful and respected poet. Just before he dies, he tells his spinster daughter (who has given up her own life to look after him), that the poems were not his (except for an unsuccessful volume in 1863). They were the writings of his young friend who died many years before. Isobel, the daughter, wants the truth told but the rest of the family realise they would lose their status and roles, even after it is discovered the dying young poet bequeathed all to Oliver. Eventually, love prevails for Isobel (she gets the man she had to give up many years before) and they all opt for a quiet life, deciding to announce to the world that the 1863 volume was that of the dead young genius, being published by his friend Oliver Blayds as an act of good will. Quietly ironical and gently satirical.
October 1924.

TWELFTH NIGHT by William Shakespeare. January 1921, March 1922 and November 1923.

THE TYRANNY OF TEARS, a comedy in four acts by C. Haddon Chambers. Licenced in London, May 1899. First American performance at the Empire Theatre, New York, on 11 September 1899. Published in London by William Heinemann, first impression 1900, reprints 1902,04,06,09 & 12. With four men and three women, it is set in Mr Parbury's house in Hampstead Heath, London. Parbury, a writer, has married a young wife who has kept him from his friends and former pleasures through a 'tyranny' of tears – crying whenever she cannot get her own way. He has given in to her while realising it is an unacceptable situation. His efficient young secretary recognises his situation and obviously feels he could do better. An old friend of Parbury's visits and wants him to go sailing for a few days. Once again the wife prevails, but is so doing precipitates a chain of events which results in her demanding the dismissal of the secretary. He refuses, she (at considerable inconvenience to her amiable father) goes to her father's house. All is finally resolved – with the old friend and secretary getting together and the wife

promising to behave like an adult in the future. A very popular play of the time, which was made into a film, and which gently seeks a more balanced role between men and women in marriage. October 1921.

THE UNFAIR SEX, a farcical comedy in three acts by Eric Hudson, first performed at the Savoy Theatre, London, 9 September 1925, with Athene Seyler as Diana Trevor. Published by Samuel French, London, 1927. With four women and four men, it is set in the living room of Geoffrey and Diana Trevor's seashore cottage, over twenty-four hours. Uncle Henry is a bachelor and Divorce Court Judge who catches his niece, Diana, kissing Harvey (a friend of her husband's). Henry decides they must be taught a lesson and he works ruthlessly to pit the married couple against each other to the point of considering divorce. Henry's old girlfriend and her daughter are also involved – the daughter Joan is in love with Harvey and her mother is still attracted to Henry. It all works out in the end, in what was considered to be a very sophisticated play at the time. However, it now appears to be a very cruel and overwritten work.

March 1929.

THE VAGABOND KING by Louis N. Parker. Not seen. First performed at the Metropole Theatre, London, on 18 October 1897, transferring to the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 4 November 1897, with Lena Ashwell in the role of Stella Desmond. In four acts with eight men and five women. "In the name part, 'Don Pedro', Mr Alan Webb displayed a sense of the regal and a boyish enthusiasm that made his work very attractive. A forceful study of 'Donna Pia' – the ex-Queen – was given by Miss Honor Bright, and Miss Elizabeth Blake's appealing 'Stella Desmond' was in fitting contrast to the trio of unscrupulous sycophants, 'The Chevalier Moffat', 'Pandolfo' (an ex-king) and 'Princess Zea' – whose intrigues were cleverly suggested by Mr J. Hubert Leslie, Mr Terence Duff and Miss Violet Blyth Pratt respectively. A couple of typical diplomatists were the 'Marchese di Castelverano'... and 'Don Miguel' (*Kentish Mercury* 23/4/26). "A romantic drama... many people might have thought it was an impossible story, but since then there have been so many strange romances in Royal circles that the story becomes of real topical interest" (*Ilford Recorder* 19/3/26).

March 1926.

THE WALLS OF JERICHO by Alfred Sutro. First performed at the Garrick Theatre, London, 31 October 1904. Published in *Great Modern British Plays*, selected by J.W. Marriott, George G. Harrap & Co, London, 1929. A play in four acts in which "the insincerities of Mayfair are dramatically exploded by a downrighter from Down Under" (*Great Modern British Plays*, p. 363). With six men and four women. Jack Frobisher, married to Lady Alethea, is considered by many, including his wife, to be too serious and gloomy to fit into the social whirl into which he has married. With the return from Australia of his friend Hankey Bannister, Jack realises he has been suppressed and subdued by a life style he hates, and shows his true colours – firstly by helping his young brother-in-law to behave honourably and then by deciding to return to Australia with his young son and with or without his wife. She eventually understands their relationship and her feelings for him and agrees to go with him. For its time, it was a significant statement about the frivolity and futility of many society lives – using the stereotype of the honest, straight talking Australian way as a contrast and exposé of hypocrisy and social pretensions.

January 1921.

THE WARE CASE, a play by George Pleydell, dedicated to Gerald du Maurier. First performed at Wyndham's Theatre, London, 4 September 1915. Revived at Wyndham's by Du Maurier in October 1924. Published by Methuen & Co, London, 1915. A four-act Courtroom drama with eleven men and two women. This was a very popular drama of the time, which, although making no reference to the war, looks at moral disintegration following financial ruin. Sir Hubert Ware is in desperate financial straits. Lady Ware lost her child two years previously and their relationship is unhappy. Her wimpish brother, Eustace Ede has inherited her family's wealth (which Lady Ware would only inherit on his death), so she has no means, except by standing by her husband, of helping him. She says she will do this, although she loves MP and solicitor Michael Adye, who protects her against some of her husband's attempts to cash in her few assets. Eustace apparently drowns and Lady Ware inherits money to pay all Hubert's debts, including those relating to his affairs with other women. She decides to leave her husband, who is arrested for the murder of Eustace, after investigations into his death point to murder rather than accident. Lady Ware begs Adye to defend her husband, believing he is innocent. In a strong court room scene, Ware attempts to defend himself, while evidence begins to point clearly to him as the murderer for gain. Lady

Ware is called to give evidence as is a former disreputable associate of Ware, whose concocted story further implicates Ware, as does his signet ring found in the lake at the scene of the drowning. However, Ware is declared not guilty and returns home. Only then does he break down and admit his guilt, immediately committing suicide as the play ends. March 1927.

THE WEAKER SEX, a comedy in three acts by Arthur Wing Pinero, First performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, 16 March 1894, with Mr and Mrs Kendal playing Ira Lee and Lady Vivash. Published by Walter H. Baker, Boston, USA, 1894. Set in London in the early 1890s, with nine men and seven women. An early play looking at women's issues – the vote versus personal circumstances against a background of social change and societal pressures. A mother and daughter find they love the same man, who exits from their lives rather than split their bond.

WHAT EVERY WOMAN KNOWS by J.M. Barrie. First performed at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, 3 September 1908, with Gerald du Maurier, Sydney Valentine and Lillah McCarthy. It ran for 384 performances. When revived in May 1923, it ran for 285 performances. Published in *The Plays of J.M. Barrie in One Volume*, edited by A. E. Wilson, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1928. A four-act play with five men and four women, set in Scotland and London. Maggie Wylie/Shand's predicament is based on the 'behind every strong man is an even stronger woman' situation. She is offered, by her brothers, as the obligation the ambitious, young John Shand must take on in exchange for the use of the family's library for his studies. When he gets into parliament he marries her as arranged but Maggie knows she is not beautiful and there is no passion in their relationship. He fails to understand, particularly as she does not assert herself or appear to be well informed about the political issues of the day (including women's rights), that in helping with the typing of his speeches, she contributes a great deal to his success – adding to these speeches, the passion and purpose lacking from their personal lives, thereby ensuring his progression and success in politics. Inevitably he falls for the pretty, rather silly Sybil and Maggie risks all (with some help from the Comtesse who recognises where the strength lies) to make him realise the strength of her love and commitment. Sybil fails the test of time with John and there is an awkward scene at the end of the play where Maggie has to work very hard to sustain John's self-esteem until he comprehends the situation. It makes for very effective drama – Maggie is uncompromising but wonderfully sensitive and careful: 'what every woman knows' she must do to hold on to the things she most values in herself and her husband. October 1925.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN by Henry Francis Maltby. A 'piece of extravagance' in three acts, first performed by Southend Repertory Company at the Ambassadors Theatre, Southend on Sea, 23 February 1926, and at the Savoy Theatre, London, 10 June 1926, with Mrs Pat Campbell and Lillian Braithwaite. Published by *The Stage*, London, 1927, With five men and four women, set sometime in the future, near Brighton. Fortunes are reversed and the previously landed gentry are living in hovels on their former estates, ill treated by the nouveaux riches who now employ their children as servants. The deposed, contrary to their successors, retain their dignity and respectability and emerge the stronger; youthful identities and experiences having been remembered. Ursula gets her man and Lady Strong-in-th'arm gets to go back to her former home on her terms, with attempts on all sides to 'improve' speech, taste and manners. November 1928.

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS by R.C. Carton. Not seen. First performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, 23 May 1899, with Dion Boucicault and Lena Ashwell. A comedy in three acts with seven men and three women. "It is the story of a woman's ingenious wit used to save her sister-in-law, and incidentally her brother, from what would be a first-class scandal" (*West Herts and Watford Observer* 22/11/24). November 1924.

THE WHITEHEADED BOY by Lennox Robinson. First performed at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 13 December 1916, published in the anthology, *My Best Play*, Faber & Faber, London, 1936. With seven women and five men, set in the living room of Mrs Geoghegan's house in Ballycolman, where preparations are underway for the return from Dublin (where he has just failed his medical exams for the third time) of Denis – his mother's pride and joy, for whom the other children's futures and loves have

been sacrificed. Brother George decides enough is enough and that his last gesture of help will be a fare for Denis to go to Canada to try his luck. There follows a deal of to-ing and fro-ing to save face and stave off the demands of the father of Denis' betrothed. Meanwhile, Denis secretly marries Delia and they decide they will no longer respond to his family's demands to make good on their terms. Despite this, Denis still gets all the money and the others lose the chances that momentarily were within their grasp.

October 1926.

WIDOWER'S HOUSES, a play by George Bernard Shaw in three acts. Published by Archibald Constable & Co, London 1906. First performed privately by J.T. Grein's Independent Theatre Club in London on 9 December 1892. It is set in England and Germany during the 1880s, with five men and two women. Deals with the impact on a young couple's relationship of her father's exploitation of the poor with bad housing, with Shaw lamenting his conclusion that economic necessity should win over scruples.

November 1922.

WIFE TO A FAMOUS MAN by Martinez Sierra, translated by Helen and Harley Granville Barker. Not seen. Written in 1914, first performed in London in 1924. It tells of "an estrangement between the wife and the husband who has been worshipped and feted, and their reconciliation" (*West Herts & Watford Observer* 14/2/25). "'Whoever gives the most has the most to lose.' This is the moral of this play... Jose Maria is a conceited airman who has become famous since winning a great air race. He falls victim to the charms of a beautiful actress with whom he goes away after a 'scene' with his wife. The actress leaves him and he wants to return to [his wife] Marianna and the children. The only way he can do it is by pretending he has met with an accident. With his head bandaged, she is compassionate, and although she finds he is a fraud, allows him to stay, but first of all makes it clear that she does not intend sharing him with any other woman" (*Enfield Gazette and Observer* 30/1/25).

February 1925.

A WINTER'S TALE by William Shakespeare.

January 1925.

THE WITCH, a drama in four acts translated by John Masefield from the Norwegian play by H. Wiers-Jenssen. Published by Samuel French, New York, also Little Brown & Co 1917 and Brentano's Inc., 1926. Wiers-Jenssen was stage director of the Oslo and National Theatres, then at the Bergen Theatre where he researched old Bergen lore, and set this play. First performed in America at the Greenwich Village Theatre, New York, 18 November 1926. Set in Bergen in 1574, with ten men and five women plus extras. "It presents a sixteenth century picture of Norwegian life in its most austere mood. Heresy hunting, witch burning, bigotry, hatred, superstition, illicit love, and remorse dominate it, and allow of next to no relief. It is... stern and wild, with a vengeance... the story is of a beautiful young woman, the second wife of a well meaning but elderly priest. She is starved of human love until her husband's son by his first wife appears, when passion awakens within her and communicates itself to the Hamlet-like youth, who is governed by the same rigorous rules as his father. The wife learns that her marriage was the price paid to the priest for withholding a denunciation of her mother as a witch. The husband expires under the shock of finding that his wife desires his death, and at the close, charged with witchcraft, and under the test of touching the dead body, the woman becomes demented, and confesses, with eldritch laughter, to killing her husband and seducing his son by Satanic means" (*Leeds Mercury* 20/4/26).

March 1926.

WITNESS FOR THE DEFENCE by Alfred Edward Woodley Mason. First performed at the St James' Theatre, London, 1 February 1911, with George Alexander and Sydney Valentine. Published by Samuel French, London, 1913. A drama in four acts with eight men and two women, set in India and London, over a period of more than two years. A tense drama which concentrates mainly on the position of Stella Ballantyne, a short time after she has been acquitted of her husband's murder in India. The first act shows the lead up to her drunken, brutish husband's death, and the visit of Stella's former fiancé, a now famous lawyer, Henry Thresk, to the tent in which they live. Two years later, Stella is acquitted on late evidence presented by Thresk, who knows Stella has killed her husband, but provides evidence of a possible outside attacker. Stella faces a further 'trial' when she returns to her former home and falls in love with Dick Hazelwood. His uncle is suspicious, and persuades Dick's father to invite Thresk to give his

evidence again prior to Hazelwood allowing his son to marry. When Stella and Thresk are alone, he forces her to agree to tell Dick the truth as he sees it, even though Dick and Stella have already married secretly. Stella, who tells Thresk she did not intend to kill her husband but to kill herself, says if Dick rejects her now, she will commit suicide – adding tension to their relationship, which Thresk had hoped to revive. Ultimately, Dick, who has not been insensitive to his wife's situation, stands by his wife and the play ends with the understanding that they will remain friends with Thresk who has precipitated a greater support for Stella in her new family circumstances.
April 1924.

THE WOMAN IN THE CASE by Clyde Fitch. Not seen. First performed at Herald Square Theatre, New York, 31 January 1905. Drama with three women and four men. “[A] woman's play [that] resolves itself into a duel of wits between a loyal trusting wife on the one hand and a callous vengeful vampire on the other. When the husband of Margaret Rolfe is rudely dragged from the idyllic influence of newly wedded bliss and clapped into gaol on a charge of murdering his best friend, the wife, with her confidence in her husband unshaken, seizes the only opportunity of obtaining evidence which will clear the accused man. She goes to live in the same flat as the woman who holds the secret and by cultivating her friendship she manages to obtain the desired information. The climax comes in the third act when, in an intensely dramatic scene, Claire Forster, while under the influence of drink, reveals the fact that there was no murder at all, but that it was a case of suicide” (*Bath & Wilts Chronicle* 20/6/22). February to June 1922.

A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE by Oscar Wilde. First performed Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London, 19 April 1893, with Mr Tree and Julia Nielson. Published in *Five Plays* by Oscar Wilde, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1954. A ‘play of modern life’ in four acts with eight men and seven women.
March 1928.

WOMAN TO WOMAN by Michael Morton. First performed at the Globe Theatre, London, 8 September 1921. Lord Chamberlain's collection, British Library. A drama in three acts with three women, four men, and a boy. A French dancer (Delorys) had an affair with an Englishman (David) during the war and when he visits her again she has a five-year-old son. He desperately wants to have the child; Delorys, fearing for her long term health agrees to give up her son to his father but David's wife refuses to accept the child. David and Delorys then plan to return to Paris with their son and the wife relents. There are a number of strong, poignant scenes exploring the motives and reactions of the two women, especially when Delorys negotiates with the wife, ‘woman to woman’. The final scene of the play shows Delorys in France twenty years later, finally meeting her son after the death of his father and (unknown to him) adopted mother. His ‘mother’ has suggested he seek out Delorys as a good friend. The play ends with the potential for Delorys, while retaining her secret, to experience a strong relationship with the son she gave up.
October 1923.

YOU NEVER CAN TELL, a four-act comedy by George Bernard Shaw, 1897. First performed by the Stage Society at the Royalty Theatre, London, on 26 November 1899, then a season at the Strand from 2 May 1900. Published in *Plays Pleasant* (first published 1898), Penguin, Hamondsworth, 1946.
November 1921 and October 1923.

THE YOUNGER GENERATION, ‘a comedy for parents’ by Stanley Houghton, first performed at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, 21 November 1910, and at the Haymarket, London, 19 November 1912. Published by Samuel French, London, 1910. In three acts with four women and seven men, set throughout in a family dining room. A daughter and two sons want independence and freedom from their strict parental environment. The influence of a visiting uncle makes some changes possible, while their grandmother represents a dying breed as the parents are forced to become more flexible and enable their children to find opportunities to be themselves. A moralistic story, about the age-old generation gap.
February 1923.

THE YOUNG IDEA, a three-act comedy by Noel Coward. First performed at the Savoy Theatre, London, 1 February 1923. Published in *Great Modern British Plays*, selected by J.W. Marriott, George G. Harrap, London, 1929. Set in English and Italian country houses, with seven men and seven women. The

machinations, over the period of a month, as two young people work to bring their divorced parents (George and Jennifer) together again after some fourteen years apart, during which their father's second wife, Cicely runs off with someone else, and their mother almost marries a new suitor. While the parents resist for some time, they eventually agree to try again. A comedy of manners, with Coward gently satirising social behaviour and marriage - as well as the conventionality of young people. December 1925.

THE YOUNG PERSON IN PINK, a comedy in three acts by Gertrude E. Jennings, first performed at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London, 10 February 1920, transferred to the Haymarket, 29 March 1920. Published by Samuel French, London, 1920. With twelve women and two men and set in fashionable London. A highly improbable comedy about Lady Leonara (the young lady in pink) who loses her memory on a train from Brighton. She is of aristocratic birth but cannot remember this when she falls in love with Lord Stevenage. He is being pursued by the conniving older Lady Tonbridge and Mrs Badger, who wants his money. All is resolved and the young lady in pink gets her man. It is an extremely escapist work, with, surprisingly for Jennings, no real engagement with post-war women's issues except reference to degradation through poverty and drinking. April 1923.

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Playscript Collections – See Appendix Six for complete publication details of plays performed by the Lena Ashwell Players. Many of the plays included in this appendix are available from:

The British Library
 Donald MacPherson Collection of 20th century British Drama, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW
 Former library of the British Drama League in New South Wales, now in the research section, Fisher Library, Sydney University
 Author's own collection