The Artist, The Activist, and the Celebrity: A Historical Study of the Relationship Between British Theatre Celebrities and Social Change

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been presented to any other academic institution outside of the University of Essex, which is submitted for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This has been composed by myself, and is my research.

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Abstract

If there is one aspect of society which seems to have a firm grasp on the interests of the public, it is celebrities. Celebrities are everywhere, they are in entertainment, the media, the government, etc… Celebrity itself, seems to govern the very interest of public society. Since the celebrity actor in particular seem to have the attention of all aspects concerning publicity, they are essentially mirrors for social change. This thesis explores the role of British stage celebrities in relation to activism from 1900 to 1979, arguing that these figures serve not only as cultural icons but also as agents of societal change.

Focusing on the intersection of celebrity, performance, and political engagement, this study traces how prominent actors used their public platforms to comment on, participate in, and influence key social and political movements in twentieth-century Britain. Through detailed case studies, it examines how stage actors navigated the tensions between public image and political conviction, and how their activism was both enabled and constrained by the media, commercial markets, and cultural institutions that constructed their celebrity. Through an exploration of how celebrity activism transformed and reflected the overall changes of British society in the early to late-twentieth century this thesis' examines how activism and social protest encapsulates the transformations to Britain throughout this period.

This research contends that celebrity and the stage celebrity are not merely a fixed identity and entertainer, but a social, cultural and institutional product. Individuals shaped by evolving historical contexts. As such, the celebrity-activist emerges as a significant figure in understanding how performance intersects with power, visibility, and protest. By examining the shifting cultural, political, and economic landscapes that shaped the careers

and causes of British stage celebrities, this thesis offers a nuanced account of how individuals became symbolic representatives of broader societal transformations.[1]

[1] Key Words: Theatre/Drama and Performance, Theatre History, Celebrity, Activism, Social Change

COVID-19 Impact Statement

During the writing of this thesis there were disruptions from COVID-19. During the first year of my PhD programme, lockdown was still in effect, therefore it was impossible to travel to any archive locations. As my thesis is primarily based on historical evidence, this cased a disruption to obtaining what I require for my research. Should the archives been available a significant amount of primary sources would have been more available and presented in my research. For instance, archival material from the V&A was needed, but the archives were not open to the public.

Upon working on my thesis, I also tested positive for COVID-19 twice, which had an impact on the time it took to complete my work. Had I not tested positive, I would have had more time for my writing and research.

Due to the impact of COVID-19, along with other health factors, I was granted an extension for the submission of my work. Due to the disruptions, I was able to gain new insight to the direction of my research and narrow down my subject making it much more viable to the contribution of similar works.

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Introduction

Celebrity and activism have become intertwined, reflecting the influential role celebrities play in fostering public engagement with social causes. This thesis investigates how the profound social and cultural changes in twentieth-century Britain reshaped the role of celebrity activists among British stage performers. The fame of celebrities exemplifies the intersection of celebrity status and activism, while it also reflects broader cultural understandings of the role of celebrities in British society, a phenomenon this thesis explores in depth within the context of British stage actors between 1900 and 1978. The twentieth century saw a profound change in the role of celebrity, with actresses like Ellen Terry at the beginning of the century negotiating their role under both the pressure of late Victorian culture and the new social transformations of the Edwardian era. This thesis concludes its period of study just before Margaret Thatcher's rise to power in 1979, examining a case study exemplifying the generational divide over the role of the celebrity activist among members of British Actors' Equity. For many, the 1980s marked a new era characterized by anti-union sentiment and a focus on individualism, epitomized by Thatcher's assertion that 'there is no such thing as society'(1987). This dramatic shift, coupled with the emergence of the digital age, fundamentally transformed the nature of celebrity activism. By keeping the scope of the thesis from the beginning of the century to the highly activist centred period of the 1970s, this thesis is a study of both Britain's adjustment to a period of great social change in the twentieth century, as well as an investigation of transformations to the role of the celebrity in British social life over the period.

This thesis is not concerned with fame, but instead examines the economic and social influences British theatre celebrities have on British society. It investigates how these social influences are reflected vicariously through British actors' celebrity status. It fills the gap in theatre studies research recognized by Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody, where,

> Much of the scholarship done by theatre historians in the area has been concerned with fame (the nature of the exceptional life) rather than with celebrity (a concept which focuses attention on the interplay between individuals and institutions, markets and media).[2]

Through a historiographic combination of primary sources and archival material, an examination into the relationship between British stage actors, celebrity culture, and activism will be conducted. This thesis contends that although celebrity is a social label assigned to actors, when these individuals leverage their celebrity status for activism, their actions become a mirror of the influence broader social change has on society. This thesis asks: How has British society and culture changed the meaning of the celebrity activist for British stage actors and actresses?

This work explores transformations of celebrity and the celebrity activist stage actors on the British stage from 1900 when Dame Ellen Terry, who dominated British theatre in the latter part of the ninetieth century,[3] was an avid supporter and activist pertaining to the women's suffrage movement,[4] to 1978 when British stage, film, television, and radio actor Marius Goring and his allies won a court battle against British Actors' Equity designed to

[2] Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). 1.
[3] Russ McDonald, *Look to the Lady: Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, and Judi Dench on the Shakespearean Stage* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2005). 16
[4] Katharine Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation," in *Gender and Politcs in the Age of Letter-Writing, 1750-2000* (Routledge, 2017), 201–11. 201

block political activists within the union from altering the rules on how the union should be operated.[5] Each chapter examines a case study of historic British theatre celebrities to interrogate the complex relationship to activism and social change that many celebrities had during the time period. The celebrities who will be studied are as follows: 1. Dame Ellen Terry, a mid-to-late Victorian celebrity stage actress who became an activist for the women's suffrage movement.[6] 2. Moira Shearer, a ballet dancer, who obtained celebrity status through her role in the film *The Red Shoes* and, subsequently, as a leader of the Scottish Arts Council and the Arts Council of Great Britain.[7] 3. Sir John Gielgud, a celebrity actor who was widely known for his Shakespearean stage performances and film roles. As we will explore in the thesis, Gielgud also gained infamous notoriety when he was arrested for 'persistently importuning men for immoral purposes' in Chelsea.[8] 4. Lastly, as mentioned above, the thesis explores British celebrity actors Marius Goring, Laurence Olivier, and others who took the union British Actors' Equity, alongside Vanessa and Colin Redgrave and their allies, to court in an effort to keep political attitudes from changing the rules of the union.[9] These celebrities influenced and reflected the social changes of their time through their involvement in activism in complex ways. They have played an immense role through their involvement in activities that have shaped the course of British theatre, and their activism is a direct reflection of the profound changes in society and the government occurring in Britain at the time. Celebrity is certainly a force that shapes society, and celebrity culture

[5] "Equity Has Power to Change Its Rules by Referendum," *The Times*, April 14, 1978.
[6] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 201-202
[7] "Moria Shearer (Lady Kenndy; Moira Shearer King) 1926-2006," scottish-places. January 2024.
[8] Glenys Roberts, "How a Moment of Madness by Britain's Greatest Actor Drove Him to the Brink of Suicide- and Forever Changed Attitudes to Sex," *The Daily Mail*, March 20, 2008.
[9] Tom Vallance, "Obituary: Marius Goring," *The Independent*, October 1, 1998.

only adds to this. When these forces combine with activism, they both shape and are shaped by society, an analysis of this combination as at the core of this thesis.

Celebrity: A Definition

Since this thesis is focused on the meaning of celebrity and its influence on British stage culture, one must ask how one defines the term 'celebrity'. For the purpose of this thesis, celebrity will be seen as a reflection of who Robert Stock defines as, 'a person whose name, image, lifestyle and opinions carry cultural and economic worth'.[10] Marketing scholars Simon Stewart and David Giles define celebrity as, 'Operating within and relating to the social fields that celebrities occupy and move between.'[11] Therefore, being branded as a celebrity entails a unique form of influence that enables them to be associated with various marketing and media constructs. The celebrity then becomes a commercial commodity utilised by the individual to make a profit (either for themselves or for other institutions and initiatives).

Celebrities, and celebrity performers in particular, are individuals readily recognised by the public and are therefore seen with an almost ethereal quality. Chris Rojek further expands on this nature with:

> Although god-like qualities are often attributed to celebrities, the modern meaning of the term *celebrity* actually derives from the fall of the gods, and the rise of democratic governments and secular societies. This is no accident.[12]

These methods then control the celebrity, including any and all forms of activism the celebrity may or may not choose to participate in.

[10] Robert Stock, *Celebrity Translation in British Theatre* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020). 3. Redmond, *Celebrity and the Media*. 5

[11] Simon Stewart and David Giles, "Celebrity Status and the Attribution of Value," *European Journal of Cultural Studies2* 23, no. 1 (2019): 3–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419861618.

[12] Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2001). 9

In leveraging their platforms for activism, celebrities not only spotlight crucial issues but also inspire collective action. Their endorsements can amplify voices from marginalised communities, bringing attention to causes that might otherwise be overlooked. According to David Marshall:

> Celebrities operated as a system of transferring value in a culture – they were entities that have been allowed to move into the highest echelons of the political, economic and cultural elite. Their movement ultimately served as an ideological legitimation source that helped define the contemporary as open and accessible and, in some cases, democratic and meritocratic.[13]

The unique blend of personal influence and widespread reach enables them to mobilise resources efficiently, launch fundraising campaigns, and collaborate with organisations dedicated to social justice. This symbolic relationship between celebrity and activism emphasizes their potential to drive legislative and societal transformations, making them pivotal agents in the quest for equitable change. Therefore, the celebrity activist's movement is indicative of social change.

Since the rise of celebrity status is closely linked to economic gain and cultural capital, it is also intertwined with societal economic and social issues. This is illustrated by British stage actor Laurence Olivier's career, which transformed alongside Britain's societal changes during the interwar, World War II, and post-war periods.[14] Olivier worked hard to become a focus of the British entertainment industry, being central to the development of British cinema in the inter-war period, a focal point for British propaganda during the war,

[13] Marshall.David, *The Celebrity Persona Pandemic* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016). 5
[14] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 1

and strategically transformed his persona stay relevant in the post-war period by embracing playwrights of the new wave (and marrying one of their stars). He also became a key figure in the development of the National Theatre in the 1960s and an active member of the British Actors' Equity. In his own way, Olivier was the embodiment of a celebrity who lived by what society wanted, and used his celebrity status to influence the industry's transformation throughout his lifetime. Leveraging his prominence, Olivier intertwined his professional achievements with his personal influence, creating a unique blend that elevated his status in the industry and across society.

Although the celebrity actors and actresses studied in this thesis have seen their personas rise and fall in the collective memory of Britain in the early twenty-first century, their imprint remains, despite the diminishing collective consciousness of future generations. Investigating how these British stage celebrities negotiated their role in celebrity culture is also an investigation of a changing Britain.

Celebrity Culture and Celebrity Branding

A critical aspect underpinning this thesis is the theoretical lens of celebrity culture. Celebrity is a powerful force that is capable of fully embodying the social and economic forces of marketing and the media consumed by society. As Olivier Driessen argues, celebrity status 'Gives those who have done it discursive power or a voice that cannot be ignored, and it is supposed to function as a great token of success.'[15] The implications of such power reflect Britain's social climate, and celebrity influence at different periods in history can provide insight into how that power has evolved and continues to evolve.

[15] Driessens, "The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture."

The importance of celebrity to branding has gathered attention from researchers in marketing and business strategy. To reach the public, brands, industries, or movements use celebrities as capitalist instruments designed to capture the public's attention. Chris Rojek identifies three existing frameworks for analysing celebrity. One of these frameworks is structuralism, which focuses on economic factors, and its adherents assert that celebrity is an instrument through which capitalism seeks to subdue and exploit the masses.[16] [17] The power that celebrities hold stems from the functions of capitalism and is intrinsically linked to prevailing social norms, as celebrities serve as channels through which these standards are enacted and reinforced. This suggests that the celebrity is a fluid instrument that can be used to socially occupy and, at times, even manipulate the masses.

The term British stage celebrity refers to an actor or actress who performs on the British stage and whose public identity is less defined by social class and more by how they are perceived by the public. Luckhurst and Moody interpret a British Stage celebrity as, 'a concept which focuses attention on the interplay between individuals and institutions, markets and media.'[18] Since celebrity is such a broad term that not only includes actors, but also directors, designers, producers,[19] and anyone else who carries the social title of celebrity, the primary focus of this thesis will be actors. The individuals are the actors themselves, while the institutions refer to external systems that enable actors to achieve the level of fame associated with celebrity status. These institutions work alongside markets that then profit from the celebrity. This may also be exploited by certain activist causes, where the market for a particular activist cause that a celebrity is promoting also profits from their

[16] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 2
[17] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 5
[18] Luckhurst and Moody. 1
[19] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 4

celebrity status. Jackie Raphael and Celia Lam describe this association between activism and celebrity as a connection which, 'often occurs in public view through the scrutiny of the media.'[20] With the title of celebrity comes a responsibility to be a public figure, and with that responsibility comes a certain amount of power.

The power of the celebrity creates a certain amount of cultural capital that can be used to promote other institutions; however, the public scrutiny placed upon a celebrity also leaves them vulnerable to attack, where their reputation may be tarnished, depending on their actions and influence upon the public sphere. Theatre studies scholar Claire Cochrane refers to a 'mapping process' as a space of power that produces other, less tangible resources with material effects.[21] Raphael and Lam articulate the 'space of power' as a platform where 'celebrities encourage media interest if it draws attention to their causes and publicises issues.'[22] With the media's encouragement, however, come limitations to the artist's work within their creative medium. Cochrane argues that,

> Knowledge influence, access to important and/or exclusive networks have tended to be located in the dominant centres of power and wealth…which extends across national spaces, infiltrates the periphery and is capable of suppressing and limiting creativity.[23]

The more the actor becomes known for their celebrity activism, the more it may diminish their work as an actor. If an actor is involved in activism, their sense of responsibility is

[20] Jackie Raphael and Celia Lam, "Introduction: Becoming Brands," in *Becoming Brands: Celebrity. Actvism and Politics* (Waterhill Publishing, 2017), 5–7. 5
[21] Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge Universtiy Press, 2011). 5
[22] Raphael and Lam, "Introduction: Becoming Brands." 5
[23] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 14

doubled between their primary performance work and their work as a celebrity activist. Raphael and Lam define this conflicting duality as:

> The publicity associated with creativity involvement in activism can also function as a double edged sword, working to subsume the cause into the celebrity's broader public persona rather than focusing attention on the issue.[24]

The actor is the creative artist, while the media and marketing confer the title of 'celebrity' and, through the power and responsibility associated with that status, often the persona of the celebrity activist emerges.

The celebrity depends on the institution to construct the image they present, and once they have this image, or 'brand', they can utilise it to represent the cause they are either advocating for or being asked to advocate for.[25] Therefore, the causes they fight for become a representation of who they *are* in the public sphere.

The celebrities' public personas are ultimately representations of culture. Their public persona, like their activist causes, becomes a representation of what is on society's mind at the time. Therefore, they become a manifestation of cultural values and social change of a given time period. According to Rojek;

> Celebrities are cultural fabrications. Their impact on the public may appear to be intimate and spontaneous. In fact, celebrities are carefully mediated through what might be termed chains of attraction. No celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage – manage celebrity in the eyes of the public.[26]

[24] Raphael and Lam, "Introduction: Becoming Brands." 5
[25] Raphael and Lam, "Introduction: Becoming Brands." 5
[26] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 10

These cultural fabrications are those that gather the profit. However good a certain actor may be, once the actor has achieved celebrity status, they belong to the cultural intermediaries. It is then that they have the 'nature of the exceptional life.'[27]

Celebrity Activism

With the rise of capitalism and mass marketing over the twentieth century, celebrities became increasingly used as instruments of economic growth for institutions and industries. This transformation put pressure on individual celebrities to move beyond the capitalist forces that define them and, instead, advocate for political or social causes to demonstrate their importance and societal worth. Kokil Jain, Isha Sharma, and Abhisek Behl argue that:

> In the past, celebrities were commonly perceived as people who are known to the masses. Their popularity and fame were attributed to their achievements in different areas, such as sports, entertainment, or business. Gradually though, the role of celebrities has evolved from merely being individuals who are famous. Now celebrities from across the world strive to position themselves as moral actors by engaging in activism.[28]

An exploration of the role that celebrity influence and activism have on social fields, and how celebrity has been branded as a tool to ensure that the masses comply, can be historically traced to find how celebrity has evolved to move the masses in the past and into the present day.

There is a gap between the celebrity actor as a cultural fabrication and the celebrity actor as an individual. Luckhurst and Moody address this as well with, 'in the last decade,

[27] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 10
[28] Kokil Jain, Isha Sharma, and Abhishek Behl, "Voice of the Stars - Exploring the Outcomes of Online Celebrity Activism," *Journal of Stratigic Marketing*, 2021.

cultural critics have begun to pay particular attention to the persuasive presence of celebrity in contemporary society.'[29] While the celebrity actor is seen as a persuasive presence, the celebrity activist is seen as one who is not only a cultural fabrication for marketing but also a persuasive sounding board for charity organizations. Raphael and Lam further explain this with, 'the advertising industry relies heavily on celebrities for endorsements, while more and more celebrities are becoming involved with charities to benefit both their own celebrity persona and brand, as well as for altruistic purposes. This means that celebrity and charity brands are often reliant on each other, and the two must be bridged to communicate effectively with audiences.[30] Therefore, the persuasive presence of celebrity in society doesn't just apply to contemporary British theatre but to that of its past.

According to Rojek, once a celebrity becomes a celebrity, their persona becomes more than an individual's, transforming into a representative of the broader culture of the times. Celebrities may use their cultural capital to advocate for causes they believe in or to further their careers in the industry, but in return for these privileges, they are moulded and shaped into what the public socially desires them to be.

Throughout the twentieth century, one of those moulds was the activist. The actor may ideally be split into two categories: the social actor and the stage actor, but in both of these categories, they may become involved in activism and be branded as a celebrity activist, regardless of the category they fall into. Through their transformation from an individual to a celebrity, the celebrity becomes a vessel for the wider society's needs and concerns through an act of celebrification. As Driessens defines it, 'celebrification comprises the changes at the individual level, or, more precisely, the process by which ordinary people

[29] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 2
[30] Raphael and Lam, "Introduction: Becoming Brands." 5

or public figures are transformed into celebrities.'[31] It is when these figures become celebrities that they may become activists, advocating for political causes or deliberately using their celebrity status to further their political beliefs. However, because of the public scrutiny on their activities in social life and on the stage or screen, many times the celebrity actor is inadvertently drawn into activism through their activities (whether they are economic, social, or cultural causes). P. David Marshall suggests that, 'the celebrity is a key figure in the contemporary attention economy in their capacity to bring the world's attention to particular causes, struggles and issues.'[32]

Given the impact of brand culture on actors, this thesis will focus on the stage actor as a social actor, investigating how the celebrity actor's activities on stage and in society reflect the broader public sphere. Driessen argues that to act as a celebrity is to go beyond the actions of an individual into something larger than themselves. As he defines it; 'notwithstanding, the paradoxical nature of celebrities as both ordinary and extraordinary, they are still distanced from the ordinary.'[33] Given the nature of a celebrity's extraordinary status, the celebrity activist is also distanced from the ordinary activist. Through this transformation, 'the branded celebrity is also used in philanthropic and political causes.'[34] According to Marshall, the celebrity becomes, through this process, a larger-than-life platform for the cause. Therefore, they can, by their celebrity status, offer legitimacy to a cause and give a cause power beyond what an 'ordinary' activist can do, because of their

[31] Olivier Driessens, "The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture," *International Journal of Cultrual Studies* 16, no. 6 (2012): 641–57, https://doi.org/10.1177.
[32] Marshall, David, "The Bridge of the Human Brand," in *Becoming Brands: Celebrity. Actvism and Politics* (Waterhill Publishing, 2017). 1
[33] Driessens, "The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture."
[34] P.David, "The Bridge of the Human Brand." 1

extraordinary status.[35] For this reason, the celebrity activist is a subject worth exploring in a study of the cultural values of an era.

Celebrity Activism Frameworks

To further understand the effect celebrity activism has on British theatre, an investigation into the influence of celebrity activism frameworks is necessary. Through the historic case studies, the thesis will provide a comprehensive understanding of how structuralism and post-structuralism offer valuable insights into the construction and manipulation of celebrity identities. The final case study of this thesis investigates post-structuralism in relation to British stage celebrities. Post-structuralism centres upon a critique of subjectivism's emphasis on the individual.[3637] Post-structuralism argues that meanings and interpretations are inherently unstable and shaped by various external factors such as language, power dynamics, and historical context. Post-structuralism will be explored through an interrogation of Marius Goring and other British celebrity actors' case against the British Actors' Equity in 1970s Britain. In the context of British stage celebrities, post-structuralism will be explored through an interrogation of Marius Goring and other British celebrity actors' case against British Actors' Equity in 1970s Britain. Goring's legal battle with the union highlighted the clash between individual rights and collective authority, reflecting broader post-structuralist themes. This case exemplifies how celebrity identities are constructed and contested within the frameworks of language, performance, and power relations. By examining the dynamics of this case, the study aims to illustrate how post-structuralist theories can be applied to understand the complexities of celebrity culture and the impact

[35] P.David. 1
[36] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 4
[37] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 29

of institutional structures on personal agency in the performing arts through the political volatility of 1960s and 1970s Britain.

By expanding upon these case studies, the thesis will provide a comprehensive understanding of how structuralism and post-structuralism offer valuable insights into the construction and manipulation of celebrity identities. Through the exploration of case studies on British stage celebrities, John Gielgud, Ellen Terry, Moira Shearer, Marius Goring, and others, the research will illuminate the broader implications of celebrity culture, the negotiation of professional identities, and the impact of institutional structures on personal agency in the performing arts. All of these factors can be identified and examined through an analysis of the British stage and the celebrity activists associated with it. Through a lens of structuralism and post-structuralism and celebrity culture, not only is this thesis able to investigate the qualities of the individual British celebrities under study, but use them as a lens to shine a spotlight on the social and economic changes occurring in Britain through the twentieth century, and illustrate how these changes impacted the celebrities relationship to those changes through their role as symbol, advocates, and activists for the nation. To Rojek, the theatre remains an important laboratory in the evolution of the rhetorical, didactic, sextual and comedic repertory of the 'public farce.''[38] [39] Arguing that theatre has been an important catalyst for the evolution of the impact which British theatre celebrities have on their audiences. Rojek contends that British theatre is essential to the development of contemporary definitions of celebrity. As he argues, 'the origins of celebrity can be located in the history of the British stage.'[40] For instance, Dame Ellen Terry's activism and involvement with the women's suffrage movement was vital due to her power as a well-

[38] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 3
[39] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 5
[40] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 5

recognised celebrity figure in British society at the time. When Terry campaigned for women's suffrage, the suffrage campaign benefited greatly from her presence as a celebrity figure who attracted attention to the movement.

When an actor attains a level of fame that grants them the status of a celebrity, they are compelled to shape and present themselves according to a model of how one should be and be perceived.[41] To conform to this model, celebrities must follow specific social standards, which are largely shaped by social marketing and media. Once this model is established, the celebrity can leverage their status to engage in forms of activism. However, researching this point requires the celebrity to be recognised within pre-existing frameworks. These frameworks reflect different theoretical lenses, such as subjectivism, structuralism, and post-structuralism. According to Rojek, subjectivism in particular, emphasises the perceived intrinsic qualities of the celebrity – such as aura and charisma – that contribute to their public image.[42] The examination of John Gielgud in 1950s Britain particularly draws on the concept of subjectivism to examine Gielgud's celebrity status. By looking at how, in spite of himself, Gielgud's celebrity status and personality became vehicles for change through an investigation of the challenges facing homosexuality in 1950s Britain during a period of growing activism against the 1956 Sexual Offences Act and the Wolfenden Committee Report of 1957. Gielgud's case study in this thesis will illustrate the use of subjectivism in relation to celebrities' symbolic power as activist figures, sometimes without their consent.

While subjectivism may illustrate the attraction of celebrity, structuralism explores its economic factors and asserts that the celebrity is an instrument through which capitalism

[41] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 27
[42] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 29

has set out to subdue and exploit the public.[43] The use of structuralism will be explored when researching Ellen Terry as a case study for social change in Britain during the women's suffrage movement, along with an investigation of Moira Shearer as a case study for Britain's desire after World War Two to use British celebrities to represent themselves to the world through a growing reliance on soft power.

Ellen Terry, a renowned actress of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, played a significant role in the women's suffrage movement in Britain. Her public persona and celebrity influence enabled her to challenge societal norms and advocate for women's rights. Through the lens of structuralism, Terry's involvement in the suffrage movement can be analysed in terms of how her celebrity status was utilised to advance social change. By examining her performances, public speeches, and personal correspondence, the study aims to uncover how Terry's celebrity served both as a tool for empowerment and as a means of navigating the complex power dynamics of the time.

Similarly, Moira Shearer, a prominent ballerina and actress in post-war Britain, serves as an intriguing case study for understanding how celebrity was leveraged to protect British national values on the global stage. In the aftermath of the war, Britain sought to reassert its influence through cultural diplomacy, using figures like Shearer to embody the nation's ideals and aspirations. Structuralist analysis of Shearer's career, including her iconic role in the film *The Red Shoes,* reveals how her image was crafted and promoted to serve national interests. This examination will delve into the intersection of celebrity, politics, and cultural identity, highlighting the significance of soft power in shaping public perception and international relations.

[43] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 4Rojek, *Celebrity*. 29

The final case study of this thesis investigates post-structuralism in relation to British stage celebrities. Centring on post-structural theory's foundational understanding of how meaning is inherently unstable and shaped by various external factors such as language, power dynamics, and historical context, this chapter interrogates Marius Goring and other British celebrity actors' case against British Actors' Equity in 1970s Britain as an illustration of the fundamental generational shift of the role of celebrities beyond the stage. Goring's legal battle with the union highlighted the generational clash between individual rights and collective authority, reflecting broader post-structuralist themes. By examining the dynamics of this case, the study aims to illustrate how post-structuralist theories can be applied to understand the complexities of celebrity culture and the impact of institutional structures on personal agency in the performing arts through the political instability of 1960s and 1970s Britain.

Methodology

This thesis employs a rigorous historiographical methodology to investigate British theatre celebrity activists and their impact upon societal transformations in the United Kingdom between 1900 and 1978, arguing that there must be an exploration of the image that a celebrity is, in order to explore society and social change as a whole. The approach necessitates a comprehensive literature review to define the transformation of the role of celebrity in twentieth-century British history across key periods. Through a historiographic lens, this thesis examines how social change in Britain reshaped the concept of celebrity activism, specifically as it pertains to British stage actors and actresses. By positioning celebrity activism as an outward, societal force that ultimately brands the actor or actress, then an implication of the celebrity activist in society must be addressed. This inference of the celebrity activist scrutinizes historical British celebrities, asking how their societal

branding influenced public perception and how their impact translates to the role of British celebrity activist in the twenty-first century.

As Claire Cochrane argues, 'theatre historians are traditionally drawn to the dynamic events and heroes of their field of historical interest,'[44] make a study of stage celebrities inevitable in many ways. This thesis investigates British theatre celebrities from 1900 to 1978 through this lens, exploring a few of the self-styled 'heroes' of the golden age of the British stage and highlighting how their societal branding has evolved in response to social and economic transformations of the twentieth century.

Given the focus on British theatre celebrity activism, this thesis adopts a historiographical methodology as proposed by Michael J. Galgano, recognising that history is an ever-evolving subject, underscoring the importance of theory in exploring evidence. As Galgano notes, theory helps historians consider new types of evidence in innovative ways. For instance, interpretations of Laurence Olivier vary significantly depending on the period examined – whether during his youth, immediately after his death, or years later. This variability highlights the necessity of testing theories against evidence rather than forcing evidence to conform to theory. Galgano asserts that, 'having a sense of historiography can help the reader understand why interpretations, methodology, and scholarly approaches have evolved,'[45] is central to this thesis. Analysing figures such as Laurence Oliver and John Gielgud through a historiographical perspective reveals how their portrayals over time reflect British social values. The questions historians have asked and the approaches – both theoretical and methodological – they have employed have varied greatly over time.[46] Evaluating the transformations in approach to British celebrities through this lens allows the

[44] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 72
[45] Galgano, Arndt, and Hyser, *Doing History:Research and Writing in the Digital Age*. 8
[46] Galgano, Arndt, and Hyser. 6

researcher to identify biases, both from the subjects' period and from the researcher, and to weigh the evidence accordingly.

Historiography and the Archives

This historiographical methodology encompasses the interpretation of secondary sources, primary academic material, autobiographies, and biographies, alongside primary sources from archives. This approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of British theatre celebrities as reflections of societal norms and changes. Perspectives from literature review, academic journals, and dissertations provide critical evidence of social norms and changes over time.

Gilbert Garraghan's three main historical methodologies provide additional guidance. His heuristic approach involved hands-on and interactive research, utilizing archival materials such as newspapers, letters, and reviews to support an understanding of past social changes. Garraghan emphasized that:

> The events of history are no longer realities, though they once were. All that survives of them is the impression they made on observers, which impression the observers themselves, or other persons relying directly on the reports of observers, fixed in writing or in some other medium of record.[47]

Evidence of primary sources acquired from the British Library, the National Archives, the British Film Institute, the Garrick Club, the National Archives of Scotland and the House of Lords will be used as evidence to draw upon.

Garraghan's approach entails appraising materials from specific viewpoints, drawing on both primary and secondary sources. Combining secondary sources on the suffrage

[47] GilbertJ. Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method*, 1946. 5

movement with primary sources from the period, which help define the notion of British theatre celebrities in their time, paints a more nuanced picture of the actor, the activist, and other identities, such as gender and sexual orientation. The authenticity, analysis, integrity, and credibility of these sources will all be taken into account. This method is crucial for chapters on celebrity activism and its reflection in movements such as suffrage and gay liberation, incorporating gender and sexual orientation identities into the analysis of celebrity culture and activism in this period of study.

Garraghan's synthesis and exposition approach, or interpretation of sources, further enriches this thesis. Otherwise known as the interpretation of sources. Garraghan emphasises the use of verbal, technical, logical, psychological, and factual interpretation in analysing the historical period through the combination of primary and secondary sources in the critique of the evidence. Garraghan emphasises that this is also a way for the primary sources[48] to speak for themselves. By employing verbal, technical, logical, psychological, and factual interpretation, the researcher interprets both primary and secondary sources in relation to the topic. The sociologist Anthony Giddens affirms this with, 'The reflective project of the self generates programmes of actualization and mastery.'[49] Giddens ' perspective on the reflective project of the self-reinforces the exploration of how celebrities mirror social issues through historical evidence. In other words, by researching and interpreting the multiple meanings of celebrity, one must research and interpret the multiple meanings found in historical evidence.

Biographical Methodology

[48] Garraghan. 35

[49] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity:Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, 12th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1991). 9

A Synthesis and Exposition approach, otherwise known as the interpretation of sources, will be taken. The historiographical methodology encompasses the interpretation of secondary sources, primarily from scholarship, autobiographies, and biographies, which are consulted alongside primary sources from archival documents and historical print culture. The approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of British theatre celebrities as reflections of societal norms and changes. The varied sources will provide insight by offering the historian a unique perspective on a particular event, issue, or trend during a time period, or by providing a description of everyday life in a particular historical era.[50]

As this thesis delves further into the study of British celebrities' involvement in activism, it is imperative to consider the significance of autobiographies and biographies. These narrative forms provide an essential lens for understanding the individual journeys, motivations, and impacts of prominent figures within the context of their cultural and historical environments. Due to the subject matter of this thesis, the use of biography will be explored as it pertains to the historiographic imprint of the celebrity actors chosen. Since the performers being researched were celebrity actors, the importance of biography as a form of historical research is evident. Luckhurst and Moody refer to certain aspects of research as, 'A significant lens because it reveals the ways in which particular celebrities have emerged as Britain's culture and identity.'[51] Since biographies provide a lens for understanding how particular celebrities have emerged as symbols of British culture and identity, they will be used for research purposes. By examining the detailed accounts of their lives, we can uncover the nuances of their public personas and how they have navigated their dual roles

[50] Galgano, Arndt, and Hyser, *Doing History:Research and Writing in the Digital Age*.6
[51] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*.

as entertainers and activists. These biographical texts offer invaluable insights into the personal experiences and societal influences that have shaped their advocacy work.

Furthermore, biographies and autobiographies allow us to trace the evolution of celebrity activism over time, enriching our understanding of contemporary movements. They reveal the challenges and triumphs faced by these individuals, offering a deeper appreciation of their contributions to social and political causes. This historical perspective is crucial for recognising patterns and shifts in celebrity activism, as well as for identifying the enduring qualities that make certain figures stand out as influential advocates. Cultural studies scholar, Linda Anderson, defends the use of autobiography in scholarship as it is, 'An important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction.'[52] If the models of communication are historic operations that may be useful to examine under the rubric of performance, and if autobiography is a division between fact and fiction, then autobiography and biography are useful sources.

In conclusion, the study of biographies and autobiographies is indispensable for a comprehensive analysis of British celebrity activists. By integrating these narratives with an understanding of new media dynamics, we can gain a holistic view of the complex interplay between celebrity culture, activism, and societal change. This approach underscores the importance of both historical and contemporary perspectives in fostering a more engaged and informed society, capable of effecting meaningful change.

For this reason, part of this thesis explores the social influence on celebrity activists, defined as female, queer, or both, through a historiographic and biographic lens. According

[52] Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (Routledge, 2001). 1

to the dramatist and playwright Micheline Wandor, 'gender is one of the fundamental imperatives in the imaginative creation of the world on stage.'[53] To truly understand British female celebrity actresses, an exploration of how female celebrity activists serve as a societal reflection in the face of social change will be conducted. The function of gender is vitally important, particularly in regard to gender-based activism, such as the women's suffrage movement. Since two of the case studies will be dedicated to the female celebrity actress, it is important to acknowledge the role that female celebrity actresses have in regards to their way of reflecting societal change. As Wandor continues:

> The imperative of gender is something which has scarcely figured at all the critical analysis and evolution of plays. And yet the function of gender has been of vital importance since the very beginning of theatre.[54]

As British society progresses, women become more frequent on British stages, and begin playing more important roles on stage, and as celebrity activists, it is important to explore the influence on society in the midst of social transformation.

These same principles apply to queer British celebrities, however, like female celebrity actresses, queer. British actors should not be grouped together as a single unit, but rather explored as individuals and how certain individuals reflect social change at a particular time in the past and how that correlates with social change in the present. Theatre scholar Dan Rebellato follows this with:

> While we should be cautious about accepting any essential link between homosexuality and the theatre, both of which are far too historically mercurial ever

[53] Michlelene Wandor, *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post War British Drama* (Suffolk: Richard Clay Ltd., 1987). Iv
[54] Wandor. xiii

> to be yoked together like this, the theatre did seem to be a beacon for gay men. Its habits and mannerisms offered a density of signs and structure through which to experience and explore an identity.[55]

Queer celebrity activism has an important role because, for so long, being queer was not only a social taboo, but was illegal in Britain. As Britain progressed, societal and political change made it possible for queer artists to represent themselves more and more, making their involvement in activism to push for change; a crucial matter that should be addressed.

When observing historical British theatre celebrities, an awareness of certain perspectives must be taken into account, not just that of the biographer, but also from literature reviews, academic journals, and dissertations, which provide critical evidence of social norms and changes over time. These sources are imperative because they are the evidence that entails cultural transformations throughout the decades, or what Garraghan would refer to as, 'human things that have happened are accordingly the material with which history as a record details.'[56] All the while, an awareness of one's own interpretation of not only the time period itself, but the interpretation of the individual who is being researched, must be considered. For instance, if Sir John Gielgud is being explored, then it is necessary to observe the different variations of how he is a reflection of society as an actor, celebrity, director, and a homosexual. To research his varying personas and investigate how society reflects social norms and changes back to Gielgud. Therefore, this thesis explores how certain social, economic, and political markets, as well as the media, shaped him into

[55] Dan Rebellato, *1956 And All That*, First (London: Routledge, 1999). 161
[56] Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method*. 4

the celebrity figure he became. It will also examine the controversy surrounding Gielgud, in which, upon breaking social norms, his celebrity status became both a blessing and a curse.

Consequently, this thesis adopts a rigorous historiographical methodology, utilizing heuristic, criticism, and synthesis approaches to explore British theatre celebrity activists. The methodology provides a robust framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between celebrity branding, societal norms and social change.

Celebrity and Cultural Theory

This work explores how the concept of celebrity evolved throughout the twentieth century for British stage performers and their connection to activism, highlighting the social and political effects on British society and culture. This thesis asks: How have British society and culture changed the meaning of the celebrity activist for British stage actors and actresses? This thesis argues that, upon achieving celebrity status, celebrity and activism become external social forces imposed on the actor or actress, requiring them to adapt to social changes.

The investigation delves into both the role of the celebrity and the celebrity activist, assessing how their public personas influence and are influenced by societal norms and expectations. This includes an exploration of how celebrities leverage their status to become activists and the various ways they engage with social and political movements. The study also considers the responsibilities and pressures celebrities face as they navigate their dual roles, and how their activism shapes public perception and policy. By analysing case studies of prominent British stage actors and actresses, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between celebrity, activism, and societal change. This thesis also investigates why and how celebrity and celebrity activism matter to British society. Film scholar Sean Redmond argues for the importance of celebrity culture,

'because it exists to centre the way we communicate with one another in the modern world.'[57] Hence, when a celebrity is labelled as an activist, they serve as a crucial conduit between the public and the cause they champion. This connection can demystify elements of social change, making them more accessible to the general populace.

By investigating the multifaceted roles of celebrity activists, this study will demonstrate how their public personas both shape and are shaped by societal norms and expectations. It will delve into how celebrities leverage their fame to champion social and political causes and how they engage with various movements. Additionally, this research will consider the unique pressures and responsibilities these individuals face as they balance their celebrity status with their activism.

By examining key case studies of prominent British stage actors and actresses, this thesis will provide a comprehensive analysis of the symbolic relationship among celebrity, activism, and societal transformation. It will illuminate how celebrities can influence public perception, drive policy change, and contribute to the broader discourse on social justice and equity. This study aims to underscore the importance of celebrity activism in fostering a more engaged and informed society, capable of effecting meaningful change. David Marshall defines celebrities as 'human brands,' who sometimes make complex issues personified and perhaps, through the channel, understandable.'[58] An exploration of this bridge, and how the public perceived celebrities, will be conducted through this study, offering an interrogation of how the British theatre-going public used celebrity culture to communicate with one another about their concerns of social change in a particular period of time, and how that communication with the British public changed throughout the decades.

[57] Sean Redmond, *Celebrity and the Media* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). 3
[58] Marshall.David, "The Bridge of the Human Brand." 3

The interaction between British theatre celebrities and the public is vital to researching societal change because it reveals how the public perceives both celebrities and the society they live in. Redmond explains, 'the notion of celebrity, of who might be a celebrity, and of the issues, concerns, and pleasures that it raises are readily accessible to everyday conversation.'[59] Thus, an exploration into British print culture media and their reflection on societal values will be addressed. Through an investigation of what was being printed in British theatre magazines, and what was being written in newspapers, or other public media, between 1900 and 1978, it is crucial to draw light on the impact a changing Britain had on the British public. Any form of activism in society that the celebrity was keenly involved in would have been present within conversations, newspapers, and magazines. Andrew F. Cooper and Joseph F. Turcotte argue that celebrity culture grew alongside new media. 'The early twenty-first century has been a time of unprecedented growth for communication and media industries.'[60] The mass developments of media and the ways in which information was publicly shared and consumed created a wealth of information. The advent of new media has offered an insightful platform for exploring the social implications of celebrity and celebrity activism. Celebrity, as a construct, permeated various facets of media and cultural life. It is not confined to the entertainment industry alone; celebrities can be found in politics, academia, and even within the corporate world of big business and technology companies. Wherever an individual can attract significant public attention and embody the desired aspirations and anxieties of contemporary society, the phenomenon of celebrity emerges.

[59] Redmond, *Celebrity and the Media*. 3

[60] AndrewF Cooper and JosephF Turcotte, "Celebrity Diplomats as Mobilizers? Celebrities and Activism in a Hypermediated Time," in *Media, Mobilization and Human Rights: Meditating Suffering* (Zed Books, 2012), 181–205. 181

The mirroring effect makes the concept of celebrity highly complex, encompassing numerous debates and dilemmas. The public's fascination with celebrity often reflects broader societal values and trends, making it a powerful lens through which to examine social change. For instance, the role of celebrity scholars and their influence on public discourse underscores the blend of charisma and policy influence.[61] By extending this examination, we can explore how new media platforms have amplified the reach and impact of celebrity activism. Social media, particularly, has enabled celebrities to engage with their audiences in real time, providing an unfiltered avenue for advocacy and mobilization. This direct interaction can demystify complex social issues, making them more accessible and relatable to the general public.

This effect aligns with what philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas would refer to as 'the public sphere' where, 'Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicise their opinions freely.'[62] Therefore, when the public feels that something is relatable, they can further investigate and address the matter. The celebrity and the activist are the ones who have the power to make an issue relatable to the public.

There is a fine line between the actor and the artist, between the actor/artist who is branded the celebrity, and the actor/artist/celebrity who is then branded the activist when action is taken in the name of activism.[63] Redmond further explains this with:

[61] Redmond, *Celebrity and the Media*. 4
[62] Jürgen Habermas, *On Society and Politics: A Reader*, ed. Seidman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). 231
[63] The celebrity and the activist being defined by outside influences.

> In academic terms, the term celebrity is used to define a person whose name, image, lifestyle and opinion carry cultural and economic worth, and who are the first and foremost idealised popular media construction.[64]

The activism the celebrity engages in is just as important as the name, image, lifestyle, and opinions of British theatre celebrities, as well as the economic, social, and cultural value of those opinions. Marshall refers to the tie of the branded celebrity and activism as the 'industrialised agency because of the link to the commodity structure and its further alignment with the reconfiguration of the individual into a strategic public entity and identity that can be used – and deployed by the other – for particular goals and outcomes.[65] One example of this would be the former celebrity actor Alan Rickman, who was a highly developed celebrity star persona, acting in both Shakespearean and modern stage productions. Rickman directed a play about an American activist who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza because of the political climate.[66] By speaking out on a political issue, Rickman enabled the markets and the media to profit from his statement. Rickman would later use social media as a platform for his activism. This illustrates the continued use of new media by celebrity activists in the twenty-first century, while aligning with Habermas's views on the public sphere. Additionally, the evolving landscape of digital communication has transformed how celebrities craft and maintain their public personas.

The strategic use of platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube enables contemporary celebrities to navigate their dual roles as entertainers and activists, balancing

[64] Redmond, *Celebrity and the Media*. 5
[65] Marshall,David, "The Bridge of the Human Brand." 3. Marshall, David, "Commodifying the Celebtiy - Self: The Peculiar Emergence, Formation and Value of 'Industrial' Agency in the Contemporary Attention Economy." (Barcelona: Centre for Media and Celebrity Studies, 2016).
[66] Julian Borger, "Rickman Slams 'censorship' of Play about US Gaza Activist," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2006.

personal branding with social responsibility, just as the celebrity activists under study used new media in their own time. This dynamic relationship between celebrities and new media has given rise to a new form of participatory culture throughout the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, where fans and followers become active participants in advocacy campaigns, further blurring the lines between celebrity and activism.

In conclusion, the intricate relationship between celebrity and new media offers a rich field of study, shedding light on how public figures can influence societal norms, drive policy change, and contribute to social justice movements. By understanding the multifaceted nature of celebrity in the digital age, we can better appreciate its potential to foster a more informed and engaged society.

Memory Studies

There is an underlying theme regarding memory which runs through this thesis which allows the research to go beyond the archive and observe the memories of the stage celebrities of the past as they are reflected in the present day. In order to pursue a performance, it does not mean that the archive should be abandoned, but spending time on the streets is equally important. While there are certain aspects regarding the memory of the actor, what is found within the performance is the memory of the presentation, or a sense of something which has been seen before which is the memory of certain recycled materials which have been in past productions.[67] While newer generations may not be aware of names such as Peggy Ashcroft or John Gielgud, the memory of the British theatre celebrities still impacts the contemporary British theatre. When the present reflects the past, an echoing of the past is

[67] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, 2001. 5

always equivalent to the present. In the opinion of academic author and scholar Marvin Carlson, 'the richness and the density of the operations of theatre in general at the site of memory, both personal and cultural.[68] Not only, is there a richness and a density at the sire of memory which comes from the past, but the behaviours by the way which the characters present themselves is something which performance studies scholar Joseph Roach believes to be a restored behaviour of a twice-based behaviours. While a performance by John Gielgud may be forgotten, the behaviour within the performance must be reinvented a second time because it cannot happen the same way twice, because as a collective human memory is a process that depends crucially on forgetting.[69] Even when characters are continually reprised on stage, what is reprised cannot be exact to the original, however, the memory of the performance, the character and the awareness of a certain past role is important because as the celebrity on and off stage is a reflection of society at a certain time, the memory is also a reflection of the present.

While echoing social change is not a new construct, this research is necessary because the echoes of the past built the foundation of present social constructs, and in order to better interpret these social constructs, a study of their foundation is absolutely necessary. In Carlson's opinion, 'This complex recycling of old elements, far from being a disadvantage, is an absolutely essential part of the reception process.'[70] However, the evolution of celebrity being that echo for social change is a concept which has shifted over the course of history. The evocation of the memories of past actors have conditioned the process of theatrical composition and, even more important, of theatrical reception in

[68] Carlson. 5
[69] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*. 2
[70] Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. 5

theatrical cultures around the world and across the centuries[71] this notion of the memory of past actors is apparent within any old theatre across the UK.

Regardless, if audiences members recognise any of the former celebrities who have graced the stage, the memory of their past performances continue to resonate with the theatre. When discussing the great British stage celebrity actors, there is a certain memory associated with their name, and while the memory of the name may have diminished over the years, the performances which they have acted in have not. This way the theatre of the past can still adhere to a present audience. Carlson theorises that:

> We are able to read new works whether they be plays, paintings, musical compositions, or, for that matter, new signifying structures that make no claim to artistic expression at all, only because we recognise within them elements that have been recycled from other structures of experience that we have experienced earlier.[72]

In the same way, memory is associated with theatre, celebrity which is a reflection of social change in a construct which has been consistent with society.

Within this memory, there is the existence of the social identity that was the actor who performed the role. For example, the 2024 National Theatre production of *The Motive and the Cue* told the story of the celebrity actors Richard Burton and John Gielgud rehearsal of the 1964 New York City production of *Hamlet*. Some of the audience members may have recognised the names of John Gielgud and Richard Burton, whereas, others may not. In the production, there were two actors playing actors, who were portraying a production which has been on stage multiple times. This is an example of recycling as described by Carlson.

[71] Carlson. 3
[72] Carlson. 4

Which he would later refer to as an, 'application of memory to experience.'[73] Having two present actors perform two past actors in a modern production is a reflection of current social changes through a play that reflects on a crisis of social change in the past. Throughout this thesis, Joseph Roach's theory of memory and cultural representation will be explored. A form of surrogation or transmitting cultural memory will be applied. For instance, when discussing the ballet dancer Margot Fonteyn and her role as Aurora in The Sleeping Beauty. When she performed in 1948, Britain was in the process of attempting to reproduce and re-create itself, and Fonteyn did just that through a performance which had been performed over and over again.

Much research has been done in regards to historic British theatre celebrities, but when biography and autobiography become involved, a different form of history is present, because autobiographies are performative texts themselves with an intention of creating a drama about the author.[74] Therefore, a connection between the memory of the celebrity being a catalyst for social change and the memory of the performance and social change on stage can be explored through biography by the way pf a historiographic lens.

Post-War Britain: An Evolving Nation

The mid- to late twentieth century in Britain was marked by significant volatility across its cultural, social, and economic spheres. This caused upheaval and transformations to all areas of British society. After World War II, the rise in the United States' power as an economic, social, and cultural force was one of the greatest threats to Britain's sense of national pride. The devastation of the Second World War left Britain and the rest of Europe in need of rebuilding their political, economic, and social structures. The restructuring of

[73] Carlson. 5
[74] Kyllönen, "Representations of Success, Failure and Death in Celebrity Culture." 10

their infrastructure would last until the early 21st century in many of the countries that took part in the war, including Britain. The United States, by contrast, was able to rise as a world power during this period largely because the country's structures were unaffected by the war, except for the destruction of its military base in the South Pacific. This shift posed a threat to the previously dominant nations, including Britain, which was under immense pressure to reclaim its former glory. Much of this burden fell on British performers and celebrities who were expected to help rediscover and showcase Britain's greatness.

Before the war, Britain once had power and global dominance through its global influence, as well as its military and political influence throughout the world due to its colonial reach. However, after the war, the British Empire began to decline rapidly, in tandem with the collapse of its military and economic control over other nations worldwide. The rapid decline of the empire after the war led to a downturn in industrial power, resulting in significant changes in society and demographics that affected theatre production and attendance. Britain's industrial progress also helped shape its theatre industry. The theatre, once a symbol of Britain's global dominance, now had to adapt to these new circumstances. As Britain endeavoured to navigate these complexities, the performing arts and celebrity culture played crucial roles in maintaining the nation's cultural prominence.[75] Celebrities leveraged their platforms to address significant issues, inspire public discourse, and foster critical engagement, highlighting their potential to drive social change and systemic reform. As the British Empire declined, a new kind of American Empire rose. The impact of America's dominance on new forms of culture particularly influenced the film, music, and theatre industries. For many British celebrities during this period, their cultural capital increased by

[75] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 6

taking advantage of America's global cultural dominance. British celebrity performers could illustrate, through their involvement in the American film industry, for example, that their superior acting abilities offer a counter-narrative to represent Britain abroad. Just as the Beatles were able to catapult to fame through a 'British Invasion' of the American music industry. Subsequently, British celebrity actors, Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Alec Guinness, and many others, used their British classical training in Shakespearean productions to illustrate their expertise in the industry. Shakespeare productions, namely *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Hamlet*, therefore became not only classical staging's alongside the films of George Bernard Shaw, Shakespeare, and other playwrights' work, but also cultural commodities of Britain's continuing influence and cultural superiority abroad.[76] Other art forms would also be used to illustrate Britain's dominance in persuasion. The British ballet dancer Margot Fonteyn would give a stunning performance of *The Sleeping Beauty* when the Sadlers' Wells Ballet Company (which would later become the Royal Ballet Company) went on tour in New York, which became celebrated as a sign of British excellence in classical dance due to its. Superiority in classical training. In this way, Britain became associated with artistic prowess, tradition, and artistry. These celebrity performers would attempt to prove to the world that Britain was still a strong empire of ideas, culture, and tradition, if not of land and political power. Claire Cochrane would describe this type of performance as a, 'legitimate product which included the plays of the British of European classical dramatic canon and new plays.'[77] Despite the anxieties that were felt after World War II, British celebrities were able to play an important part in containing Britain's influence as a world power throughout decades of economic and political upheaval from the late

[76] Rebellato, *1956 And All That*. 61
[77] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 6

1940s through the 1970s. In the 21st century, British celebrity stage performers still hold an important place in securing Britain's global influence, which illustrates the importance of the British stage celebrity to the nation's economic, social, and cultural institutions, and an important part in the country's survival as a world power through the many radical changes impacting Britain in the post-war period.

Activists, Audiences, and Publics

The impact that British stage celebrities had on the changing atmosphere of the British stage along with their influence on the broader world of British society, culture and activism. The post-war generation was interested in representing Britain, but not from the same perspective as the older, pre-war generation had felt necessary. The pre-war generation wanted to represent Britain as a nation still a dominant and conquering world power, whereas the younger generation wanted to represent Britain as a global power that contributed to other world powers. Post-war British theatre paved the way for a new wave of dramatists making their debut on British stages, while the dance world would become a global market. These new dramatists were able to speak for their generation, who had been silenced by the war. Now this generation was ambitious, adamant, and angry, and they were channelling this frustration onto the British stage.

Along with this new generation came a new wave of activism, amidst the fear that certain social change brought about by American influence had changed British attitudes around social issues. As an example, when the United States experienced the Lavender Scare – a period of heightened security and persecution of homosexuals due to unfounded fears of Soviet infiltration – its impact reverberated in the United Kingdom. The U.K., being an ally of the U.S., sought to adopt similar propaganda tactics and enforce queer actors such as John Gielgud, to maintain silence out of fear of prosecution. But although many queer actors

chose to remain silent, there was still a strong desire to be represented. This desire found an outlet through activism on the British stage, enabling queer artists to portray their identities and reflect for others like themselves in the audience the evolving socio-political landscape of a changing Britain.

This thesis pays particular attention to the impact of the playgoing public and its impact on British theatre celebrity activists. There is a certain social phenomenon that occurs when the public is in the presence of a celebrity. Luckhurst and Moody describe this as, 'the experience of seeing an actor in the flesh.'[78] Celebrities are a fundamental part of advertisement, and what makes celebrities appealing is having that advertising made manifest on stage, because to perform means to bring forth, to make manifest, and transmit.[79] Therefore, if a performance with a celebrity is happening, and the audience members who are influenced by the celebrity through the use of the media are the ones who translate the performance.

It is through translation that the celebrity is able to make a public name for themselves. This is the act of translation within celebrity culture, which this thesis is interested in, and it questions the audience's opinion of the production's value, depending on whether the celebrity is present. The same question directly applies to the value of the issue the celebrity is advocating for, because for the celebrity to gain recognition for it, they must attract public attention. Theatre scholar Joanne Robinson validated this statement with:

[78] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*.
[79] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*. 124

> Theatrical and social culture must surely affect the spectators expectations, and this contribution and the reaction to the performative collaboration that is the interaction between the celebrity and the performer and the audience.[80]

Therefore, it is important to explore the connections between the celebrity and British theatre culture, and the overall effect these connections have on the ever-changing social construct in Britain.

Chapter Breakdown

This thesis categorizes the celebrity activist into three distinct types: the anti-artist, the celebrity activist, and the anti-activist. The final chapter focuses on the clash between anti-activists and celebrity activists in the courtroom, highlighting their struggle over whether celebrity status entitles them to engage in activism during periods of political instability in the nation. An ongoing theme that continually runs through this thesis is a phrase that Raphael and Lam would refer to as 'a double-edged sword.'[81] This double-edged sword works to incorporate the cause into the celebrity's overall public persona instead of the issue itself. While there is much truth to this, this thesis argues the opposite. The double-edged sword often harms the celebrity's public image, prevents the celebrity from fully discussing their opinions on the issue due to external factors, or leads the celebrity to be seen as much more of a public annoyance, with the attention on the issue lacking focus.

Though not consecutive, the chapters in this thesis will centre on particular case studies from different decades spanning the period 1900 to 1970. Through this study, each period builds a picture of the evolution of both activism in British society and the evolution of Britain's stage celebrities and their role in political life. As Garraghan argues, 'The past can

[80] Joanne Robinson, "Mapping Performace Culture: Locating the Spectator in Theatre History," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 31, no. 1 (2004): 3–17, https://doi.org/10.7227.
[81] Raphael and Lam, "Introduction: Becoming Brands." 5

be, and is in fact, viewed from varying angles of interest, as one generation succeeds another.[82] An exploration of the various ways in which celebrities echo aspects of the social changes of Britain throughout the twentieth century will be analysed through this historiographic lens and utilizing the different methodologies mentioned.

Chapter one examines how celebrities were used during the immediate aftermath of World War II, to become a symbol of Britain's resilience in the midst of economic and political decline. When the ballet dancer Margot Fonteyn gave an outstanding performance of *The Sleeping Beauty* in New York, Britain used the performing arts as a vehicle to further its cultural legitimacy as a world power. During this period, much of the arts were what Joseph Roach would describe as, 'The dramaturgy of doubling in a role governing the functions of cultural transmission in the service of institutional memory.'[83] The theatre industry used Shakespeare and the persona of the classically trained actor, in particular, to further their role of dominance in the field of acting. The celebrity actor Laurence Olivier proudly displayed these strengths when he directed *Henry V* in 1944 and *Hamlet* in 1948. But Britain's strengths did not lie solely in the memories of a glorious past; it also represented itself through the rise of the British film industry. The films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger conveyed themes and messages from Britain to the rest of the world. *The Red Shoes* in particular, emphasised the importance of 'Art,' by portraying a heroine who would pay the ultimate sacrifice to ballet, and die for the sake of art.[84] This may be extreme, but after World War II, Britain relied heavily on the arts to represent itself as both a nation that, amongst itself, could withstand the horrors of the war and one that could still offer global significance.

[82] Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method*. 5
[83] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*. 1-2
[84] Pamela Hutchinson, *The Red Shoes* (BFI, 2023). 40-41

Margot Fonteyn would become an international celebrity amongst the ballet community during this period. However, when one of Fonteyn's rivals, the ballet dancer Moira Shearer, became a film celebrity through her role in *The Red Shoes*, Shearer's fame as a dancer was overshadowed by Fonteyn's, leaving her embarrassed about her participation in the film. Shearer would carry this shame with her for the rest of her life, and would later retire from dancing and acting, living a much quieter life with her husband and children. Fonteyn, however, would continue to dance well into her forties and fifties, representing Britain through her work as a world-class ballerina. Fonteyn and Shearer both embodied the celebrity status which Sean Redmond would describe as:

> Stars and celebrities are always representational constructs: their representations connected to and dissected by notions of possessive individualism, social class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity; and through commodity and consumer relationships. Celebrities are both ideologies and forms of a consumerist dream.[85]

Fonteyn chose to continue to chase the consumerist dream for a long time, making her entire career an image, whereas Shearer, by contrast, chose to retire and give up her celebrity status.

In Chapter Two, the celebrity activist is examined through the study of the British stage actress Dame Ellen Terry and her involvement in the Women's Suffrage movement. Terry, who was already branded a celebrity, became involved in activism, which became part of her social identity. Celebrities like Terry offer people an appealing persona that they are often positioned to identify with, an attribute especially valued in female celebrities during the early twentieth century. Celebrities often serve as prominent figures who represent

[85] Sean Redmond, *Celebrity* (Routledge, 2019). 75

idealized social identities that align with cultural and economic desires. They invite public consumption, allowing fans to engage with and adopt the ideologies the celebrity embodies to shape their own identities.[86] Terry, a celebrity and women's suffrage activist, inadvertently assumed an identity that made her a candidate to speak on behalf of the movement. Terry, who was also able to interject her own opinions which went against some of the movement's strategies, at one point saying, 'of course you all know I'm a suffragette, but I don't believe in all of their militancy.[87] What is particularly notable about Terry voicing her opinions on suffrage is that she wasn't addressing a British audience, but an Australian one. By leveraging her status as a celebrity activist, Terry was able to express her public views while navigating the double-edged sword of public scrutiny, using the platform to draw attention to issues that she found problematic with the Suffragettes. By 1914, a suffragette was often associated with the most extreme acts of violence against property and people; therefore, by being able to interject her own voice through her celebrity status, Terry represented a voice of women's suffrage in Britain that was not associated with extremism.

Terry was indeed an unconventional figure, and these aspects were soon associated with her identity. This chapter explores Terry as a prime example of how representation and identity are articulated together as a part of the same cultural meaning. She encapsulated how celebrity and stardom produce representations and identities in the same registers of meaning. Representations, shape identities, and identities, in turn, are embedded within representation – both functioning as interlocking points in the circuit of celebrity culture.[88]

[86] Redmond. 75
[87] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 201-202; Joy Melville, *Ellen and Edy: Biography of Ellen Terry and Her Daughter Edith Craig, 1847-1947* (Thorsons, 1987). 222-223
[88] Redmond, *Celebrity*. 75

Terry was a representative of British culture, which was a significant part of her identity as an actress, and became both a celebrity and an activist who embodied this representation. According to Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, 'a star cannot become a crucial decision-maker (and remain a star), this does not mean that s/he is without political significance.'[89] While Terry may not have been one to make political decisions regarding women's suffrage, this did not mean she was unable to have a voice or embody the identity of a celebrity activist.

Chapter Three centres around celebrities who deliberately chose not to engage in activism. This chapter focuses on 1950s Britain and the fight for rights of an issue discussed primarily in silence during a period of criminal prosecution of homosexuality. Nowhere is this silence more evident than in theatre history, which has consigned this period to the dark ages of gay theatre, a time when the law and self-oppression conspired to keep homosexuality firmly closeted, hidden away from the public gaze.[90] This chapter focuses on queer Britain and the controversy around the celebrity stage actor Sir John Gielgud, who, on the night of the 20th of October 1953, was arrested in a public lavatory in Chelsea, and was later charged on account of 'persistently importuning male persons for immoral purposes.'[91] In 1953, Britain's homosexuals were forced to live a life secret from the law due to the social and political climate, with Home Secretary David Maxwell-Fyfe engaging in a witch-hunt looking for homosexuals.[92] Gielgud was no exception, and until the incident, had remained discreet about his private life. Due to the publicity surrounding the incident, it would have been impossible for Gielgud to maintain his reputation as a celebrity and continue his career

[89] Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars* (London: British Film Institution, 1979). 7
[90] Rebellato, *1956 And All That*. 155
[91] Jonathan Croall, *Gielgud A Theatrical Life 1904-2000* (London: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2000). 382
[92] Croall. 382

as an actor and director, as well as being an advocate for reforming the laws regarding homosexuality in Britain. The publicity was so intense surrounding Gielgud's court case, that it led to a call to change the laws around homosexuality. Gielgud, had unknowingly sparked a movement for reform, and four years later, the Wolfenden Report recommended a change in the law, although it took another ten years for it to be implemented.[93] Therefore, there were calls for change, unfortunately, change would not happen for a very long time.

Despite the hostile climate towards Gielgud and other homosexuals, this case study illustrates a form of queer activism and representation of British queer performers through indirect and often secret activism. Playwrights such as Noël Coward would sneak gay characters into plays, masking the character so as to not expose them to a heterosexual audience, but a homosexual audience would have seen past the masking and understood what the play was conveying. This method of masking was something that playwrights chose as a way to mediate between gay and straight members of their audience.[94] Out of this, a coding style evolved that was used across various queer communities. Gielgud's exit from his role as a silent theatre activist into a largely reluctant activist in the courts will be examined in this chapter on how celebrity status may move one to become an activist in spite of themselves.

Chapter four explored the conflicting views in a time of growing political and social unrest in 1960s and 1970s Britain, amongst the stage celebrity community over the role of activism within the entertainment industry. This chapter explored Britain during the 1970s and the growth of a new generation emerging intent on fighting for social change and challenging the old ways of society. As a case study, this chapter focuses on a 1976 court of

[93] Croall. 386
[94] John Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexulaity in Modern Drama (Between Men-Between Women: Lesbian & Gay Studies)* (Columbia University Press, 1992). xiv-xii

appeal case, which was granted between the British Actors' Equity Association, with the appellant, being the British celebrity stage, television, radio, and film actor Marius Goring, and other members of the British Actors' Equity, including Laurence Olivier. The case centres upon the meaning of the true construction of the rules of the British Actors' Equity Association regarding political activism.[95]

A case study examining a theatre industry union court case on the societal changes in 1970s Britain, and how the Equity court case reflected conflicting social perspectives on these changes. During this event, celebrities went beyond the norms of social branding and regulatory standards to fight for their belief in the role of the celebrity, either remaining in their artistic sphere or entering the public sphere as a celebrity activist. While the defendant, celebrity actor Corin Redgrave, and his associates sought to have Equity adopt a more politically leftist approach, the appellant Marius Goring and others in the union who shared similar views sought to prevent members of the union from using Equity to further their own political causes.

This chapter examines how the political, economic, and social landscape in 1970s Britain fostered conditions that gave rise to the debate over the role of celebrity in British theatre. It examines the power that unions held over the economy, how entitlement and authority were presented within unions across the U.K., and the effects of unionized power within Equity on its members. When the power of unions rivalled the power of celebrity, actors and celebrity activist actors. An exploration of how this clash of powers was resolved through the power of the House of Lords was established.

[95] Otherwise known as Equity

In conclusion, without a doubt, there is a certain aspect of celebrity activists that seems to magnetize the public, but this magnetism is not just a phenomenon confined to a twenty-first-century audience. For years, audiences have been drawn to celebrities. This thesis explores the relationship between the term' celebrity' and the reflections it evokes on social, economic, and political change. As Rojek contends,

> The increasing importance of the public face in everyday life is a consequence of the rise of public society, a society that cultivates personal style as the antidote for formal democratic equality.[96]

This thesis argues that it is the society of the time that dictates who the celebrity is and the lens through which the celebrity is seen, and therefore, a study of the celebrity is a study of culture.

[96] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 9

CHAPTER ONE

Celebrity as Activist for the Nation: Moira Shearer & Margot Fonteyn

In 1948, the British Sadler's Wells ballet company arrived in New York to perform *The Sleeping Beauty* with their star dancer, Margot Fonteyn, in the leading role. On opening night, fellow dancer Robert Helpmann noticed Fonteyn's anxiety. In response to Helpmann's concerns, Fonteyn reassured him, stating, 'I'm not nervous for me, I'm nervous for the reputation of the British ballet.'[1] This brief exchange captures the weight of cultural responsibility Fonteyn bore – not merely as a performer, but as a symbol of Britain's post-war artistic identity. In Britain, Margot Fonteyn was already a celebrated ballet dancer, a role model for emerging dancers, and a celebrity icon. Her New York debut, however, marked a significant movement in her trajectory, highlighting the immense pressure that was expected of Fonteyn to deliver a celebrated performance for the nation. It marked a transformation of her from an individual dancer to an international celebrity inseparable from national representation. Fonteyn was not simply dancing; she was embodying Britain on the world stage.

This chapter explores how both Margot Fonteyn and Moira Shearer functioned as cultural activists, not through overt political action, but through their roles as public figures whose celebrity was mobilised in the service of national identity. One of the central arguments of this thesis is that artists are constructed as different forms of celebrity through the mediation of social institutions. Fonteyn's celebrity was forged on stage and through state-backed cultural initiatives, while Shearer, whose fame was cultivated through cinema,

[1] Patricia Foy, "The Margot Fonteyn Story" (United Kingdom: RM Associates, 1989).

came to represent a more modern, media-driven image of British artistic excellence. Her later appointments to the Arts Council – an institution shaped and at times renamed under governmental pressure – underscore how closely entwined celebrity, culture, and national politics had become in post-war Britain.

As Chris Rojek argues, 'the fact that media representation is the basis of celebrity is at the heart of both the question of the mysterious tenacity of celebrity power and peculiar fragility of celebrity presence.'[2] This chapter investigates the intersection between media representation, institutional endorsement, and public influence, asking how Fonteyn and Shearer – emerging as international celebrities from different artistic spheres – came to represent Britain's cultural aspirations and anxieties. By tracing their trajectories from performers to the national.

Sadler's Wells Ballet Company: Performing the Nation

The Sadler's Wells Ballet Company was instrumental in producing some of Britain's most renowned dancers. Yet, it was only in the aftermath of the Second World War that the company emerged as a symbol of British cultural identity on the world stage. During the war, the Royal Opera House had been repurposed as a dance hall, and it was not until the autumn of 1945 that plans were announced for the return of opera and ballet performers in the following year. In the post-war climate, a renewed sense of patriotism permeated the nation, and Covent Garden was designed as the home of Britain's resident ballet and opera companies. Sadler's Wells was appointed as the resident ballet company, and the Royal Opera House was set to reopen with a landmark production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, featuring Margot Fonteyn and Robert Helpmann in the leading roles.

[2] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 16

This moment marked a significant cultural achievement for Britain, signalling not only the revival of the arts but also the nation's resilience. Despite the destruction and hardship endured during the war, Britain demonstrated that its artistic traditions remained vibrant. It was through the Sadler's Wells that figures such as Fonteyn and Shearer emerged – not only as artists, but cultural ambassadors for a nation redefining itself through art.

Margot Fonteyn

Fonteyn was not just a representative of British ballet, but of what Britain had to offer the world. Fonteyn's role as a prima ballerina of Sadler's Wells[3] abroad was seen by many in the UL as an important illustration to the world of artistic talent which Britain had to offer. The opportunity to dance in New York in 1948, just four years after the end of World War II, and in America, the country, which was now a rising global powerhouse, meant more to Fonteyn, Sadler's Wells, and Britain than simply dancing *The Sleeping Beauty.*

In regard to post-war British identity, such reflections can be found in a 1989 interview with Fonteyn. In the interview, Fonteyn reflected on dancing in the Olivier Messel production of The Sleeping Beauty, and spoke about a time when she was nervous about going on stage in New York:

> When we danced for the first time in America in October 1949 at the Old Metropolitan Opera House in New York, and that certainly is an occasion never to be forgotten. As for me personally, I mean, I was just terrified. I had this long attack of stage fright which lasted for three month, and journalists who tried to interview me in New York when we arrived there found me absolutely mute. I was so frightened; I couldn't say anything. I was so sure of failure, I thought this is going to be terrible

[3] The Sadler's Wells company later became the Royal Ballet

> and I'm going to let down the whole company and Ninette de Valois[4] and it's going to be a ghastly thing. I was just convinced that this was going to happen, it was just awful.[5]

While Fonteyn was the ballerina who was to represent Britain at that moment, she was also representing ballet dancers themselves. It was during this period that Fonteyn became the most famous dancer in Britain, and in many ways, Fonteyn was the very embodiment of Britain's cultural capital.

While Fonteyn danced *The Sleeping Beauty* in New York, the dancer Robert Helpmann remarked on the audience's reaction to Fonteyn's appearance as:

> I watched her make her first entrance and I've never heard such applause in my life, it was like a gun, a huge gun. And when she came to the famous Rose Adagio where the princess balances on the hand of all the princes, and when she came to the third prince, she caught such a miraculous balance that she didn't even take his hand, she just smiled at him. Well, I thought the audience would explode.[6]

Fonteyn may have left her mark on American audiences through her role in The Sleeping Beauty, and she would remain a celebrity synonymous with ballet for the rest of her life.

As far as ballet is concerned, many of her critics felt that Fonteyn was good, but not a ballet prodigy or an exquisite genius. Luck, it seems, has favoured her to be in the right place at the right time. Fonteyn's timing could not have been more precise, as her rise to fame came when Britain needed her the most. Meredith Daneman describes Fonteyn's representation as, 'she rode the passionate wave of wartime patriotism that produced it.'[7]

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[4] Ninette de Valois was the founder of the Royal Ballet
[5] Foy, "The Margot Fonteyn Story."
[6] Foy.
[7] Meredith Daneman, *Margot Fonteyn* (Penguin Books, 2004). 7

Daneman further observes that Fonteyn's artistry embodied 'simplicity and tenderness',[8] which reinforces the national narrative of resilience and unity in post-war Britain. These qualities, central to Fonteyn's public image, reflected Britain's idealised self-image as a nation rebuilding through grace and discipline. Post-war Britain was struggling with its very identity in a vastly changing social, economic, and political climate. Britain needed a famous homegrown ballerina to dance The Sleeping Beauty, not just as a ballet, but as a staunch statement of British post-war identity that underscored Britain's great artistic legacy.[9] The war was over, and so was Britain's dominant reign over the world. Now, America, a new global contender, had risen and diminished from the war. Britain was desperate to demonstrate its continuing importance in global cultural dominance to prove to the world that it had not been completely defeated as a world power. At that moment, much of the responsibility for being this representative fell on the shoulders of Margot Fonteyn and other cultural celebrities like her.

Furthermore, more than just a representative of the nation, Fonteyn also became important as a representative of British ballet's significance on the international stage. The magazine *Ballet Today* called such work 'Their biggest challenge,' and claimed that British ballet was 'as good as most other productions seen here[10] for many years.'[11] Fonteyn had to be one to represent the iron discipline that it takes to master a piece of art, while also showing her virtuosity could compete with dancers from other key nations such as Russia and the U.S. in a growing Cold War culture war of the post-war era.[12] Fonteyn became the

[8] Daneman. 7
[9] Kristen Tambling, "The Ballet That Woke up Post-War Britain," *Apollo*, 2023.
[10] With the Sadler's Wells
[11] "Ballet Today: Editorial Comment." *Ballet Today*. 1947
[12] Daneman, *Margot Fonteyn*. 7

embodiment of Britain's reputation for true art to the world, one who performed a representation of true art and true character.

This desire for a collective identity often emerges from specific local conditions[13] or as a response to shared national trauma. In this context, Margot Fonteyn came to embody not only the symbolic figure of collective unity but also an active participant within it. As a British ballerina whose career spanned the Second World War and its aftermath, Fonteyn shared in the collective wartime experience of the British public. Her performances resonated with a sense of shared endurance and post-war recovery, offering a form of cultural cohesion that transcended political affiliation. Fonteyn was a reflection of the values and aspirations of the everyday public, rather than breaking them apart.[14] Despite her celebrity status, she was perceived as being on the same level as any other British individual who went about their daily affairs and faced the same national struggles. This sense of identification with the public made her role as an international cultural ambassador particularly significant. The burden of representing Britain to the world through the arts carried with it a profound sense of responsibility, and Fonteyn was acutely aware of the pressure to succeed not just for herself, but for the nation she symbolised. Through her artistry, Fonteyn embodied a unique combination of three different elements: the character she portrayed, the identity of the virtuosic dancer, and the spirit of Britain itself. While many other dancers performed alongside Fonteyn, or competed with her for the role, what set Fonteyn apart was the precision of her timing and the expressive quality of her movement, both of which elevated her beyond mere technical excellence and aligned her more closely with the cultural movement she represented. The dancer Beryl Grey was said to have,

[13] Peter Leese, *Britain Since 1945: Aspects of Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). 1
[14] Leese. 1-2

'greater control without losing her spontaneity;' her Rose Adagio in The Sleeping Beauty was viewed as one of, 'rapturous happiness which was both exciting and oddly moving.'[15] Whereas Fonteyn was said of her interpretation of the ballet to have, 'heightened the effect of her interpretation in every way; her attack is sharper, her response quieter, and her whole performance is illuminated by real 'aristocracy of movement.'[16] Fonteyn became the dominant principle dance at a time when Britain was looking for someone to represent the nation in its search for cultural legitimacy and international recognition. An article in Ballet Today emphasised Fonteyn's supremacy as, 'We have many promising dancers at Sadler's Wells, but perhaps never before has it been so obvious that we have one, and only one, prima ballerina.'[17] Regardless of the roles she performed or the countries she visited, Fonteyn remained unmistakably Britain's ballet celebrity – an international symbol of British cultural identity on the global stage.

Fonteyn may have left a significant impression on American audiences, particularly through her performance in *The Sleeping Beauty*, and she remained a prominent figure in the world of dance. Over time, her dominance within the genre began to eclipse her broader role as a symbol of British national identity; her celebrity became increasingly confined to the realm of baller rather than extending across other artistic domains. This shift occurred against the backdrop of growing international competition – not only among dancers but among nations vying for cultural influence. Fonteyn's stature inspired a generation of emerging dancers, many of whom aspired to achieve a similar level of celebrity. Among them was Moira Shearer, who would go on to gain international recognition and also serve

[15] Mary Clarke, "The Sleeping Beauty Again," *Ballet Today1*, July 1947.
[16] Clarke.
[17] Clarke.

as a representative of British artistic excellence, though in a markedly different way than Fonteyn.

Moira Shearer

In 1979, the critic and dance writer Barbara Newman travelled to Edinburgh, Scotland, to interview the actress Moira Shearer.[18] Shearer was one of the lead dancers with Sadler's Wells before achieving international fame when she played the leading role in the film *The Red Shoes*, which was based on the fame and fate of a famous ballet dancer. One would assume that Shearer would be ecstatic about taking on such a role; however, the dancer had very different ideas about how she established her status in the industry and did not want to be a part of the film in any way, stating that the film was, 'the last thing I wanted to do.'[19] Through the notoriety of The Red Shoes, created in part by its importance to the burgeoning post-war British film industry, Shearer quickly rose to fame, and, like many of her competitors, she too sought the celebrity status of Margot Fonteyn in the field of dance. As a rising dancer within the Sadler's Wells company, when Shearer played the principal role in *The Sleeping Beauty*, she was said to have:

> A considerably greater technical command of the role, which may now be said to be fully within her capabilities. She is light, swift, and precise, and takes a genuine pleasure in her dancing, while the most difficult adage she turns to favour and to prettiness… her personality is well suited.[20]

While Shearer's ambition was to rise within the Sadler's Wells company to compete in prominence as a principle dancer to rival Margot Fonteyn, but the managers of the Sadler's Wells, however, thought she would be the best choice to represent the company in Powell

[18] Barbara Newman, "Moira Shearer in The Red Shoes," in *Dancewatch*, 2023. 89
[19] Newman. 96
[20] Clarke, "The Sleeping Beauty Again."

and Pressburger's new film, *The Red Shoes*, to help the company reach a new audience through the cinema. Concerned that moving into film, and the amount of time away from the stage, would diminish her ability to develop her position as a principal dancer within the company, Shearer resisted this, manoeuvring the company to reach a larger audience. In the face of her opposition to playing the part, the director of the Sadler's Wells told Shearer, 'For goodness sake, do it.'[21] As Shearer feared, the lengthy filming schedule did indeed diminish her ability to continue to work as a prominent dancer, and this decision to perform a celebrity dancer in a film about the importance of dance did impact the rest of Shearer's career, while at the same time, establishing her as an international celebrity figure that lasted well beyond other dancers in the company. While Shearer aspired to the stage fame that Fonteyn had attained, her own celebrity emerged, primarily through film, at a time when ballet was perceived as declining in popular appeal. An article from *Ballet Today* described the changing values of the public towards dance in a time when the rise of the media was emphasising celebrity personalities rather than artistry; 'Too often we are left with the impression that the star performers are applauded for their personalities rather than for their dancing.'[22] Unwittingly, Shearer came to embody the broader public's cultural desires, aligning more closely with societal expectations than with the artistic vision upheld by Sadler's Wells. Prior to her role in *The Red Shoes*, Shearer was an ambitious dancer making progress in her career, with leading roles in major productions. When the director of The Red Shoes approached Shearer, Michael Powell, Shearer did not comply for a whole year, finding the role overwhelming; moreover, she did not like the story or the script, and

[21] Newman, "Moira Shearer in The Red Shoes." 96
[22] Ernest Fraser, "Is Ballet Really Popular?," *Ballet Today*, 1946.

when she realised that Powell knew very little about ballet,[23] that only validated her resistance to the part. As Shearer described, her resistance was a fear of the broader ramifications of moving into a different medium and establishing herself as a film celebrity that went beyond the sphere of dance:

> Oddly enough, of all the people it was Ninette de Valois who finally said, 'For goodness sake, do it. Get it off your chest and ours, because I can't stand this man endlessly round bothering us any longer. Why don't you just do it and then it's done.' And I said, 'Yes, but then what? Can I come straight back to the company again and go in as if nothing had happened? Maybe you will then not want me back.' She said, 'Of course you come straight back.' Which is what I did; I did all the work for six months…and then I went back at Covent Garden again, and I was with them until 1952.[24]

Shearer was determined to get out of the film studios and continue her work on stage. At 21, she had already been dancing leading roles with the company and seemed confident that her career would continue to be successful. Thus, the idea of pausing her ballet career for another project appeared unwise to Shearer, who reportedly dismissed The Red Shoes as a 'sugary movie.'[25] She was unwilling to relinquish her position in the world of dance for a venture in the film industry.

Shearer would later reconsider her initial dismissal of *The Red Shoes*. When director Michael Powell returned a year later, having failed to find another suitable lead, he had secured the dancers. Léonide Massine and Robert Helpmann, both of whom Shearer knew

[23] Brian McFarlane, "Interview with Moira Shearer," in *An Autobiogrpahy of British Cinema* (Methuen Publishing Limited, 1997), 532–35. 532
[24] Newman, "Moira Shearer in The Red Shoes." 96
[25] McFarlane, "Interview with Moira Shearer." 532

well.[26] Under considerable pressure from Sadler's Wells to accept, finally agreed to take the role. Unknown to Shearer at the time, Ninette de Valois had supported Shearer's involvement in the film primarily as a means of generating publicity in the United States ahead of the Sadler's Wells dance company's first coast-to-coast tour.[27] At this stage, Shearer had not fully grasped the scale of her emerging celebrity status, nor the extent to which she would come to represent Britain on the international stage as a film star. *The Red Shoes* would ultimately serve not only as a vehicle for her personal fame but as a symbol of British cultural ambition and resilience.

The Influence of Ballet and Britain's Global Reputation in the Post-war Era

In the wake of World War II, Britain sought more than mere participation in the shifting global order; it aimed to reaffirm its status as a world leader. Amidst the rapid emergence of new global powers, Britain was determined to assert its continued relevance and position itself as a vital force within the evolving international landscape.[28] Due to the aftermath of World War II, Britain was not only left in a state of ruin on the surface, but its entire identity as a people had been uprooted. There was a sense of longing not only for belonging to a unified collective on a global scale, but also for a unified nation itself.

Although Britain had been undefeated in the war and had great national pride in its role as a key nation that defeated the Axis powers, the nation was left in a state of profound physical, economic, and psychological ruin on the brink of the 1950s. Despite the devastation and long path to economic and physical recovery, Britain continued to assert its cultural presence on the global stage, particularly through the performing arts (dance,

[26] McFarlane. 532
[27] McFarlane. 532
[28] Rose, Sonya, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford University Press, 2003). 14

theatre, and classical music) and in the rising film industry. *The Red Shoes* exemplified this strategy by using ballet in a cinematic context to convey themes of sacrifice and artistic devotion (both in dance and musical composition). The main theme of Britain 'dying for the sake of art' was a brilliant tactic of British resilience and artistic integrity, as is told by a review from *The Daily Herald*, which described the film's message to the nation, 'This is a triumph of British screen artistry. Ballet's make-believe world is the excuse for miraculous epic adventures of design, movement, and colour.'[29] While *The Red Shoes* is distinct from traditional wartime narratives, it embodies the sense that Britain had not been defeated, and encapsulates the post-war determination to demonstrate the nation's continuing importance, because the production's focus on artistic excellence and virtuosity of its central characters (a genius and uncompromising director, a sacrificial ballet dancer, a protégé composer) and their negotiation of the all-encompassing importance of artistic quality and integrity, could be read as proof of Britain's power and worth as a producer of cultural excellence to the wider world.

The Red Shoes occupies a unique position at the intersection of popular and elite art, embodying both cultural prestige and mass appeal. While theatre or literature might similarly reflect national identity and values, film offers a distinct advantage. It serves as both artistic expression and historical record. As a medium, film captures the performative movement while preserving the social and cultural attitudes of its time – its aesthetics, moral frameworks, artistic ambitions, and commercial strategies. In this way, *The Red Shoes* becomes more than a narrative about ballet; it is a document of Britain's post-war cultural identity, fusing the ephemeral beauty of live performance with the permanence of cinema.

[29] Robert Ackerman, "The Red Shoes," *Women*, July 23, 2006

The film's synthesis of ballet and film allows for a metaphorical rendering of artistic endurance and national resistance. Ballet, traditionally experienced only in the moment, gains permanence through film, enabling repeated viewings and allowing future audiences to witness a cultural movement shaped by social transformation. Despite Britain's post-war devastation, institutions like Sadler's Wells played a critical role in projecting a renewed image of British creativity and strength, while *The Red Shoes* served as a striking example of that cultural resurgence.

When an actor becomes so immersed in a role within the prevailing social realities beyond the screen, they often transition into a celebrity brand. Moira Shearer was, first and foremost, a dancer with aspirations to become a renowned figure in the world of ballet, not as an actress on the screen. Yet, regardless of the medium, she lived a life defined by intense discipline. As Barbara Newman observes:

> [Ballet is] the kingdom of discipline: every dancer is the same…on the stage, however, every dancer is unique…individual artistry flows from innumerable influences and an infamy of choices.[30]

While Shearer sought to maintain a distinction between the stage and screen, in both contexts she remained an instrument of artistic and cultural expression.

The Red Shoes is a film steeped in metaphor, capturing the cultural and psychological changes impacting Britain after the Second World War. The film critic Pamela Hutchinson explains:

> No artist believes in escapism. And we secretly believe that no audience does…if wartime propaganda asked the audience what sacrifices they would make for the

[30] Barbara Newman, *Striking a Balance: Dancers Talk about Dancing* (Elm Tree Books, 1982). i

> war effort, *The Red Shoes* forces the viewer to consider what agonies of body and spirit they would undergo to create a lasting beauty.[31]

As described in this chapter, the notion of dying for art, though extreme and 'sugary' as Shearer believed, echoes Britain's own post-war condition: a nation marked by loss, upheaval, and dissolution of empire, now compelled to reassert itself through cultural expression and artistic legacy.

The themes of entrapment and the absence of personal escape are prevalent throughout post-war British society, and this sense of claustrophobia is mirrored in both The Red Shoes and Shearer's own celebrity status. Shearer recounts that:

> The ballet is an intensely selfish career, and if you're going to do it absolutely one-hundred percent, as you must, it's a twenty-four hour a day business and everything else takes second place.[32]

Shearer was unquestionably dedicated to ballet, and a desire for recognition and fame within the industry fuelled her ambition. Yet, she also longed for a domestic life, later acknowledging, 'if you're going to be married successfully and have children, this is just not possible. Your marriage is going to go to pieces or else your work's going to go to pieces.'[33] Torn between personal ambition and societal expectations, Shearer experimented with other artistic forms – including acting in theatre – in search of a more sustainable balance, but these ventures did not yield the satisfaction she hoped for.[34]

Ultimately, Shearer decided to retire from performance and devote herself to family life. However, her withdrawal from the stage did not signal a retreat from cultural life. She

[31] Hutchinson, *The Red Shoes*. 40-41
[32] Newman, "Moira Shearer in The Red Shoes." 110-111
[33] Newman.110-111
[34] Newman. 110-111

remained a dedicated supporter of the arts, and through her earlier work across dance, film, and stage, she had already contributed significantly to Britain's post-war cultural identity. In doing so, Shearer, like Fonteyn, became a figure through which the complexities of national representation, gendered ambition, and post-war recovery were both negotiated and performed.

Moira Shearer: An Activist for the Arts

Although both Shearer and Fonteyn achieved celebrity status, the nature of their celebrity could not be more different. Fonteyn's fame was rooted in her work as a prima ballerina, and her identity was closely aligned with the traditions of classical dance. By contrast, Shearer gained recognition not as a dancer, but as an actor portraying a dancer within a fictional cinematic narrative – most notably in *The Red Shoes*. In essence, she became a celebrity through her portrayal of the prima ballerina, Victoria Page, rather than through her own work as a Sadler's Wells dancer. Her celebrity was thus shaped by a dull performance: one grounded in the discipline of ballet, the other in the constructed personality of a film character that extended beyond the stage. Chris Rojek refers to these characters as, 'although they are imaginary figures involved in fictionalized narrative, they exert tangible and, in some cases, long-term influences over real social relationships and cultural functions.'[35] One such cultural function was the Arts Council of Great Britain, on which Shearer would later serve – a position that further exemplified the intersection of celebrity, national identity, and institutional cultural policy in post-war Britain. Shearer's work with the Arts Council would transform her use of celebrity status away from that of an activist for the

[35] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 26

British nation to the wider world, to an activist for artists to the British nation, illustrating the move of celebrity from the global to the local.

Shearer would continue to act in a few more films, work in radio, and give lectures on dance. Later, as she attempted to shape her own sphere of influence in the arts world beyond her position as a performer, she would eventually serve on the Arts Council of Scotland from 1971 to 1983 and on the Arts Council of Great Britain from 1973 to 1975.[36] When Britain was eager to represent itself to the world through the arts, the Arts Council also grew in importance in the post-war era. It became a vital institution for providing government subsidies to arts projects and financial support for artists. As Shearer resisted her international fame as a film icon, she would continue to dedicate the rest of her life to the performing arts and find a voice in the development of British and Scottish arts policy well into the latter half of the century. Shearer's involvement with the Arts Council is particularly important because of the organisation's endeavour to grow the British performing arts and safeguard artistic practice beyond commercial enterprise with government subsidy, but it would also have a great amount of influence on the type of artistic practice funded by the government.

Shearer's post-performance commitment to the Arts Council of Great Britain and Scotland reflects an engagement with a highly structured institution whose internal dynamics played a pivotal role in shaping post-war British cultural policy. Richard Witts characterises the Arts Council as:

[36] "Moria Shearer (Lady Kenndy; Moira Shearer King) 1926-2006."Scottish-places. January 2024.

> An administrative body with four different evolutionary levels beginning with the structure, the individual within the structure, the relationship of the individuals within the structure and the insiders involved.[37]

These interconnected levels reveal the Council's dual role as both a bureaucratic entity and a cultural force, responding to the needs of British performing artists in a rapidly changing society following the Second World War.

In this context, the Arts Council emerged as a symbol of national reconstruction, its structure enabled social and artistic renewal, providing a framework within which individual artists could participate in the broader rebuilding of British identity. As the Council's twenty-ninth annual report noted:

> The council has always helped the co-operation of the artistic professions in doing its work. This help is generously given through service on the Advisory Panels, and also on specialist committees, enquiries and special meetings. Some idea of its range and quality are shown by the lists of Panel and Committee members who served last year.[38]

This statement reflects not only institutional pride but a form of cultural capital that elevated the Council's visibility and legitimacy. In line with what Rojek describes as:

> Orthodox Subjectivism which maintains that the reasons why audiences are intensely affected by the particular gait of celebrity, the form of face, the manner of reacting and speaking are manners of unique chemistry. That is, they cannot be rationally explained. Since what confers celebrity status on someone is ultimately regarded to be a mystery, appreciation is privileged over analysis. One should, so to speak let

[37] Richard Witts, *Artist Unknown: An Alternative History of the Arts Council* (Warner Books, 1998). 2
[38] "The Arts Council of Great Britain: Twenty-Ninth Annual Report and Accounts 1973-1974," 1974.

> celebrities 'speak for themselves,' and marvel, not meddle. And the reason for their fame.'[39]

The Council's promotion of celebrity participation capitalised on the perceived mystique of artistic fame – valuing the ineffable charisma of celebrated figures over analytical scrutiny, encouraging the public to 'marvel, bot meddle.'[40]

For Shearer, the Arts Council offered a new platform from which to shape cultural discourse. No longer defined solely by performance, she sought to assert her voice within the evolving cultural administration, finding ways to contribute to the nation's artistic direction after retiring from ballet. Ultimately, Shearer wanted to speak for herself and carve her own sphere of influence, and she would eventually find a way in her later life, one that allowed her to let go of the celebrity status that was forced upon her, to find one from her own initiative.

Within the structure of the Arts Council, both artists and administrators played crucial roles, as John Maynard Keynes, a founding figure of the Council, once observed.

> Artists depend on the world they live in and the spirit of the age. There is no reason to suppose that less native genius is born into the world in the ages empty of achievement that those in brief periods when nearly all we most value has been brought to birth.[41]

The Council's layered administration – rooted in collaboration across levels of artistic and bureaucratic involvement – presented a compelling model for cultural renewal and served as an appealing institutional space for artists like Shearer seeking to engage with national

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[39] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 30
[40] Rojek. 30
[41] JohnMaynard Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes," in *Anthonologie Kulturpolitik: Einführende Beiträge Zu Geschichte, Funktionen Und Diskursen Der Kulturpolitikforschung* (Schriften sum Kultur - und Museumsmmanagement, 2019), 203–9. 204

identity beyond the stage. An administration built from various levels, dedicated to artists, appears remarkably appealing to other artists.

Breaking down the connections further, Shearer's belief that the ballet industry was 'incredibly narrow' reveals a personal critique of the art form's limitations is conveying broader or emotional truths. This perspective aligns with Keynes's view that artists must adapt to the 'spirit of the age.'[42] Keynes argued that new artistic expressions emerge when artists are given the freedom to interact with contemporary and traditional forms. Shearer's critique of ballet's limitations underlines her shift toward seeking influence in other artistic mediums, such as film and arts policy, which allowed her to explore and shape the broader cultural landscape.

The Arts Council's emphasis on balancing artistic innovation with the limits of financial subsidy and government intervention highlights a tension between creativity and economic practicality. As a former artist and public figure, Shearer's insider knowledge of the arts likely informed her ability to navigate these challenges. Her experience as both a dancer and film celebrity uniquely positioned her to advocate for policies that balanced artistic integrity with accessibility to further influence the development of the British cultural industries in the late twentieth century.

The Arts Council of Great Britain positioned itself primarily as a body concerned with the finance and administration of government-subsidised creative practice, maintaining that decisions about artistic trends were for the responsibility of the artists themselves, and it would foster an arm 's-length approach to government funding. Therefore, if the artist wanted to perform on a specific platform, it would be the Arts Council's decision whether

[42] Keynes. 204

that action was worth funding.[43] However, while artistic direction was ostensibly left to the practitioners, the Council retained authority over which projects would receive funding and determined how public resources should be distributed. In this regard, the Council functioned as both a gatekeeper and a facilitator – balancing artistic innovation with financial pragmatism. Its role was to assess how many funds could be distributed among each artistic platform, whether particular performances, exhibitions, or initiatives merited public investment, and what to expect.

Moira Shearer's appointment to the Arts Council was significant, not only because of her celebrity status but also because of her extensive experience across multiple artistic platforms. As someone who understood the practical demands of performance – both creative and logistical – Shearer brought invaluable insight into the real costs and conditions required to produce high-quality work. Her presence enabled the Council to make more informed decisions about resource allocation and to more effectively support artists whose work contributed meaningfully to Britain's cultural life. Shearer's services on the Council also reflect the evolving role of the institution by the 1970s. Nearly three decades after the end of the Second World War, British society had changed dramatically. The immediate post-war years were defined by national reconstruction, economic hardship, and the urgent need to reimagine Britain's global identity. By contrast, Britain of the 1970s faced a new set of challenges: deindustrialisation, rising inflation, political unrest, and the increasing fragmentation of national identity. As historian Peter Leese describes this change as, 'the notion of Britishness'[44] in 1945 being the notion of 'core' and 'periphery' which developed to encompass 'four nations,' and eventually produced a 'multi-cultural' model. To the

[43] "The Arts Council of Great Britain: Twenty-Seventh Annual Report and Accounts 1971-1972" (London). 11-12. Read more in the Appendix 1

[44] Leese, *Britain Since 1945: Aspects of Identity*. 2-3

alternative definitions in the 1970s being that of the more inclusive school or 'British' of 'four nations,' history, which is a significant moment as it conceded with the final collapse of Britain's imperial past, and the rise of 'peripheral' nationalist dissent where instead of collaboration for values, there was now division and competition amongst the four nations and with one another.[45]

This internal competition is evident within an Arts Council policy regarding artists where there is a clear division between 'most of the Report dealing with finance and administration,'[46] and 'artistic trends being a matter for the artists,'[47] implying a structural disjunction between bureaucratic control and creative freedom. There is much irony in this polarity in the 1970s at a time when Britain was becoming increasingly fragmented and competitive, with citizens – and artists – competing for limited recourses and recognition. There was also competition within the Arts Council as Keynes indicates that:

> The work of the B.B.C and the Arts Council can react backwards and forwards on one another to the great advantages of both. It is the purpose of the Arts Council to feed these newly-aroused and widely diffused desires.[48]

Furthermore, competition for the bare necessitates to live ruled in favour of the arts. The post-war housing crisis and economic strain, which had reached a crisis point in the 1970s, cast doubt on the role of the arts for national recovery. Keynes adds to this with:

> But for success we shall have to solve what will be our biggest problem, the shortage – in most parts of Britain, the complete absence – of adequate and sustainable building…Houses for the householder have to come first.[49]

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[45] Leese. 2-3
[46] "The Arts Council of Great Britain: Twenty-Seventh Annual Report and Accounts 1971-1972." 11
[47] The Arts Council of Great Britain: Twernty-Seventh Annual Report and Accounts 1971-1972. 11
[48] Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes." 205
[49] Keynes. 205

With Britain being in the stage of economic, social, and political turmoil, there seemed to be no room for the Arts, nor a way for the Arts to represent Britain. As opportunities for artists narrowed, competition intensified – not only between individuals but also between artistic disciplines and cultural agendas. In this context, Shearer's voice within the Arts Council offered a rare convergence of artistic, understanding, and administrative insight, helping to ensure that the arts could still play a vital role in representing and reshaping post-imperial Britain. The Council was well aware of the effect which the performing arts had on Britain's representation to the world recognised the nation's reliance on the creative contributions of individual artists – playwrights, composers, choreographers, designers, directors, actors, and musicians – to sustain and project its artistic legacy. But there was also the cost to consider. Opera, ballet, theatre, and concerts with large orchestras were very expensive, and the money needed to stage such events could not come from box-office prices.[50]

Given her first-hand experience of the time, labour, and financial investment required to mount such productions, Moira Shearer was uniquely knowledgeable to advise the Council on the merit of both the economic and artistic qualities of these ventures. She understood not only the resources necessary for high-calibre performance, but also the broader value of investing in the arts as a means of national representation. The Council frequently relied on the Music and Arts Festivals for revenue to supplement the funds it provides to support artistic institutions and small companies' productions.[51] Moreover, the best way to secure income for these festivals was to collaborate with the Arts Council's regional offices across Britain. Shearer's involvement in both the Scottish Arts Council and

[50] "The Arts Council of Great Britain: Twenty-Seventh Annual Report and Accounts 1971-1972." 12
[51] The Arts Council of Great Britain: Twenty-Seventh Annual Report and Accounts 1971-1972. 12

the Arts Council of Great Britain gave her a valuable dual perspective, enabling her to offer guidance on where and how to secure such revenue.

By integrating Chris Rojek's framework with John Maynard Keynes's cultural philosophy, Shearer's career highlights a critical shift: her celebrity status was not static but evolved in response to societal changes. Her role on the Arts Council, as Witts describes, exemplifies the integration of structured administrative bodies into the artistic process.[52] In this context, Shearer's transition from stage performer to cultural policymaker reflects a significant trajectory – from artistic production to cultural governance. The Arts Council's mission to 'recognise quality when it shows itself'[53] parallels Shearer's journey from being a celebrity performer to a nationally recognised public figure aligned with national cultural development and social responsibility. Moira Shearer was known for her strong convictions on a wide range of subjects. According to Shearer's godson Richard Calcocoressi, Shearer had 'strong views on politics and other subjects, and occasionally confided that she hadn't really wanted to be a dancer, that the discipline and commitment ruled out any other kind of life.[54] The rigorous discipline and total commitment required by ballet, she admitted, had precluded the possibility of pursuing any other path. These forthright opinions, combined with her deep experience in the performing arts, made her an asset to the Arts Council, particularly in its efforts to allocate funding with insight into the practical realities of production.

Following her retirement from dance, Shearer continued to engage critically with the art form. She wrote a book reflecting the controversial figure George Balanchine, known for

[52] Witts, *Artist Unknown: An Alternative History of the Arts Council*. 4
[53] "The Arts Council of Great Britain: Twenty-Seventh Annual Report and Accounts 1971-1972." 12
[54] "Moira Shearer Appeals," *Buckinghamshire Examiner*, February 3, 1960, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/moira-shearer-6110000.html.

his authoritarian methods in ballet rehearsals and choreography. Although Shearer may have stepped away from a dancing career, she remained deeply committed to ballet and the broader UK arts landscape.

Shearer also used her public platform to advocate for humanitarian causes. In one notable instance, Shearer appealed to an audience at the Cockpit theatre in London for food, medical care and education for individuals living in refugee camps.[55] Such moments reveal how Shearer's strong opinions and sense of moral responsibility allowed her to redefine her celebrity beyond the artistic domain. Her activism marked a turning point in her public identity, enabling her to move beyond the discomfort she associated with *The Red Shoes* – a film she once felt had defined her too narrowly. In asserting herself through writing, advocacy, and arts administration, Shearer reclaimed agency over a life that, in her youth, had been shaped by the expectations and demands of others. This assertion of autonomy is emblematic of broader cultural shifts in Britain during Shearer's lifetime.

During the Second World War, Britain was part of the Allied forces. In the post-war era, Britain became an ally of America and other European countries involved in the Cold War. Despite these broader political alliances, as a nation, Britain gradually moved from a position of unified identity to one of internal fragmentation, becoming increasingly divisive in the latter half of the twentieth century. By the 1970s, when Shearer was serving on both the Scottish Arts Council and the Arts Council of Great Britain, this cultural and political fragmentation had become increasingly pronounced. While Shearer may have initially desired the celebrity status Margot Fonteyn had, her career followed a very different trajectory. Unlike Fonteyn, whose fame remained firmly rooted in the world of ballet,

[55] "Moira Shearer Appeals," *Buckinghamshire Examiner*, March 11, 1960.

Shearer's engagement with cinema and subsequent diversification into authorship, advocacy, and arts governance gave her greater flexibility to shape her public life. Her multifaceted career reflects not only personal agency but also the broader evolution of British identity in the second half of the twentieth century: from collective representation to individual assertion, from rigid tradition to adaptive modernity.

Through *The Red Shoes*, Moira Shearer achieved a form of celebrity status distinct from that of Margot Fonteyn. While Fonteyn came to symbolise the pinnacle of British performing arts both in Britain and internationally. Shearer's fame – propelled by *The Red Shoes* – was far more influential, reaching a broader and more diverse international audience. Unlike Fonteyn's career, which remained firmly rooted in the discipline of ballet, Shearer's retirement from the stage did not diminish her public profile. On the contrary, Shearer's retirement from dancing opened more avenues previously inaccessible to her within the rigid structures of the ballet world. Freed from the physical and institutional constraints of the dance world, Shearer believed that she was able to pursue a broader life, balancing her public persona with private fulfilment. As Shearer mentioned in an interview with Brian McFarlane, 'I've always found my marriage and my children infinitely more than any career.[56] Shearer may have regretted her role in The Red Shoes for the rest of her life, but the film enabled her to expand her talents far beyond the realm of the ballet stage and studio.

Shearer's celebrity status gave her access to different places and opportunities; it enabled her to expand her creative identity beyond ballet, opening up opportunities in writing, broadcasting, and arts administration. But what Shearer's celebrity status ultimately

[56] McFarlane, "Interview with Moira Shearer." 535

did was strip her of her identity as an artist. While dancing, she identified as an artist, but upon becoming a film celebrity, she increasingly became a product of public consumption. This transformation, while offering visibility and influence, also displaced her artistic identity, requiring her to renegotiate her place within cultural production. Yet, it was precisely this recognition that allowed Shearer to reclaim agency. Shearer expanded her activities to a wide range of cultural projects, from working for the B.B.C to lecturing about other dancers, writing books, and, importantly, serving on the Arts Council in both Scotland and the U.K. as a whole. This shift in identity led to Shearer ultimately finding her voice as a public advocate, allowing her to truly become an activist of the nation.

Where Fonteyn represented Britain primarily through ballet, Shearer became a cultural figure through her filmic presence and the celebrity it conferred. The contrast between the celebrity dancer and the film celebrity illustrates the elasticity of celebrity itself – how it may be adapted across different cultural fields. The distinction between the film celebrity and the celebrity dancer means that celebrity can be moulded to fit multiple categories. A celebrity can transmit value from one culture to another, thereby influencing social, political, and economic aspects that may be beneficial to that culture. In David Marshall's opinion, 'celebrities operated as a system of transferring value in a culture, they were entities that have been allowed to move into the highest echelons of the political, economic and cultural elite.'[57] In this sense, Shearer's journey reflects more than a personal evolution; it highlights how celebrity can mediate and translate cultural capital across contexts. From an ambitious dancer seeking recognition for her artistic skill, Shearer became

[57] Marshall, David. *The Celebrity Persona Pandemic*. 2

a figure of national significance – her on-screen presence transforming her into a conduit of cultural value and identity in post-war Britain.

At the conclusion of The Red Shoes, the character of Vicky becomes emblematic of the conflicting societal pressures. Torn between two forces of the most important men in her life: one urging her to prioritise her art, and another advocating for her personal life and the value of love and marriage to her sense of self. The tension between these conflicting desires within the character tears her apart – she is no longer a fully autonomous individual but a vessel through which others' desires are projected. She is the embodiment of what Peter Leese describes as, 'reconsideration of the connection between the past and the present, between individual and locality.'[58] In this way, Shearer's role in *The Red Shoes* becomes symbolic of a broader cultural transformation: where once sacrifice was expected in the name of national war efforts, the post-war moment redirected that sacrifice toward the arts. Shearer, like Fonteyn, would take on the burden of becoming the celebrity individual who represented the collective identity of Great Britain on the world stage.

Although Shearer resented her film celebrity, she nonetheless participated in the circulation of cultural value in post-war Britain. Her transition into cinema allowed ballet to reach a wider, more diverse audience than it ever could have through stage performance alone. While Fonteyn was celebrated for her classical purity and technical brilliance, Shearer's fame was amplified by the emotional accessibility of film. moreover, while *The Red Shoes* may have made ballet look very appealing on screen, the film itself ensnared the audience with a technicolour dream-like world where ballet seems to flow effortlessly across the screen. Despite this broad cultural impact, Shearer's hope for British artistic recognition

[58] Leese, *Britain Since 1945: Aspects of Identity*. 4

was broader and more widespread than Fonteyn's, but she wanted to be recognized as a great dancer, not a film star.

After completing The Red Shoes, Shearer was still able to dance the lead roles she wanted, but she also became alienated from her peers and remained embarrassed by *The Red Shoes* for the rest of her life.[59] This transformation also mirrored the narrative of *The Red Shoes* itself: just as Vicki is consumed by the shores that force her to dance endlessly, Shearer was consumed by a public image she could no longer control. Ballet, though still respected, was rapidly becoming eclipsed by the popularity and accessibility of cinema.

Fonteyn, by contrast, emerged as a national symbol at precisely the moment when Britain most needed her image. Dancing in the immediate aftermath of World War II, she personified a vision of cultural endurance and grace that Britain sought to project internationally. Her debut in New York was met with rapturous acclaim and served as a powerful moment of cultural diplomacy. *The Western Morning News* describes Fonteyn's debut in New York as being met with rapturous acclaim and serving as a powerful moment of cultural diplomacy. *The Western Morning News* describes Fonteyn's debut in New York as one where the crowd 'rose to acclaim with tremendous enthusiasm.'[60] The outcome was a tremendous success for Britain's international reputation. Unlike Shearer, Fonteyn's fame was deeply rooted in her stage presence and unwavering identification with ballet. Her entire public persona rested on the constancy of her artistic devotion, and she would later increase her fame by not retiring until she was 60, which was very unusual for a ballet dancer. In her own way, she became a feminist icon in the 1970s due to her longevity.

[59] Hutchinson, *The Red Shoes*. 72
[60] "Sadler's Wells Ballet Debut Acclaimed," *Western Morning News*, 1949.

Like Shearer, there were other ambitious dancers competing for fame within the Sadler's Wells ballet company in the 1940s, Beryl Grey and Shelia Fleming.[61] Both were just as competitive as Shearer was, but they were shaped by shifting social conditions and evolving notions of identity. Beryl Grey remarked that:

> As a dancer [you] have to give more than a technical performance. You've got to say something. And there is a tremendous amount of emotional energy that you've got to store up…You've got to have something within you to give out.[62]

Yet, even such expressive capacity did not guarantee celebrity status. The distinction between celebrity and individual is a matter of celebrification, or what Chris Rojek would describe as:

> Purposes that ordinary identity formation and general forms of social interaction are patterned and influenced by their styles, embodied attitude, and controversial flow developed through celebrity culture. Celebrities simultaneously embody social types and provide role models.[63]

According to Rojek, celebrity stems from a broader process of 'celebrification,' wherein individuals come to embody social archetypes and cultural ideals. Unlike Fonteyn, whose fame stemmed from being in the right place at the right time, dancers like Grey and Shearer had to navigate more complex and competitive terrain. This means that while Grey and Lascelles had enormous talent, they did not transcend their role as successful dancers to become celebrities. Unlike Fonteyn, whose fame stemmed from being presented as the key symbol of the British nation for the company during an important period of Sadler's Wells,

[61] Otherwise known by her stage name Anne Lascelles.
[62] Newman, *Striking a Balance: Dancers Talk about Dancing*. 127
[63] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 16

and the British nation's push for cultural legitimacy in the post-war era, dancers like Grey and Shearer had to navigate more complex and competitive terrains.

> Fonteyn was the embodiment of the stage celebrity. Daneman describes her as:
>
> Even if you had never seen her dance before, at some deep level you recognised her, she was like something you'd already imagined, come true. Great performers tend to possesses this quality, this ability to take you with them, to get you automatically on their side.[64]

Fonteyn's presence alone was larger than life, and her position increased in fame as she continued in the profession longer than any other dancer before her. Fonteyn danced at a time when Britain needed her presence the most. While Shearer and other dancers tried to obtain the same celebrity status that Fonteyn had, or if they thought that if they were good enough, or if their technique was top tier, then they would have a chance at obtaining celebrity status. The truth was that Shearer and other dancers may have been better dancers than Fonteyn, but Fonteyn, unlike her competitors, was able to position herself on the international stage at a key moment in the post-war era. She arrived at Britain's prima ballerina at the most crucial time, and by the time Shearer and other dancers had arrived, the window of opportunity had already closed. Therefore, they were simply seen as good dancers, but not able to achieve the legendary status of Margot Fonteyn who became the British ballerina of the twentieth century.

Shearer's eventual second film collaboration with Michael Powell, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, offered another opportunity to blend dance and cinema. Unlike *The Red Shoes*, which presented a psychologically dramatic narrative, Hoffmann was more expressionistic

[64] Daneman, *Margot Fonteyn*. 2

and surreal. Its vignettes could be read as metaphors for post-war British class divisions and cultural disillusionment. Despite the film's aesthetic richness, its abstract style did not resonate with audiences as The Red Shoes did, further highlighting the uneasy relationship between Shearer's personal artistic goals and her public celebrity image. The contrasting reception of *The Red Shoes* and *The Tales of Hoffmann* highlights the tension between Shearer's personal artistic goals and her public image as a film star. This tension underlines the broader challenges faced by British artists as they navigated the transition from traditional to modern cultural mediums.

Shearer's transition from dancer to cultural commentator and advocate reflected broader changes in post- war British society. As she moved into writing, broadcasting, and serving on the Arts Council, she increasingly used her platform to shape the cultural discourse rather than simply perform within it. Her remark that ballet was, 'incredibly narrow' later in life signalled a re-evaluation not only of her own career, but of traditional art forms within a rapidly changing society. Her path diverged sharply from Fonteyn's, whose identity remained inextricably tied to the ballet stage. While Fonteyn represented stability and tradition, Shearer came to embody versatility, adaptation, and the tensions of modern celebrity.

The contrast between Fonteyn and Shearer's path as celebrities also speaks to larger questions about media and representation. As David Marshall notes, celebrities within a 'presentational cultural regime'[65] in which art and nationhood were tied through discipline and tradition. Shearer, however, functioned within the emerging media landscape of film,

[65] Marshall, David, "Commodifying the Celebtiy - Self: The Peculiar Emergence, Formation and Value of 'Industrial' Agency in the Contemporary Attention Economy." 74

radio, and print fields that allowed her greater personal agency, but also subjected her to broader public scrutiny.

Conclusion

The careers of Margot Fonteyn and Moira Shearer illustrate two distinct modes of post-war British celebrity, shaped by both personal ambition and historical circumstance. Fonteyn's ascent to international fame was anchored in her ability to represent British cultural refinement and resilience through ballet at a critical national juncture. Her identity remained rooted in classical tradition, and her celebrity status depended on her continued performance within a single, codified art form. Shearer, in contrast, emerged as a symbol of modernity, caught between the rigid demands of ballet and the expansive – but often constraining – realm of film celebrity. Though she longed for recognition as a serious dancer, Shearer's versatility enabled her to navigate multiple cultural platforms, from cinema to arts governance.

Their differing trajectories reveal how post-war Britain negotiated its identity through cultural figures, each of whom served as both artist and symbol. Fonteyn's unwavering association with ballet embodied national continuity; Shearer's reluctant embrace of film and media reflected Britain's shift toward a more complex, media-saturated cultural reality. Together, they demonstrate how celebrity could be both a tool of national representation and a site of personal conflict – where artistic identity, public expectation, and cultural value converged in the making of modern British cultural history. The Arts Council's use of the red shoes and what is going on with this triangle between the film's effect on British society, Moira Shearer's celebrity status, and the effect this had on her involvement in the Arts Council. Basically, we have Moira Shearer, who starred in The Red Shoes, but initially, she did not want to be in the film. It was only under the influence of Ninette de Valois and the fact

that Robert Helpmann and Leonide Massine, whom she knew, were also in the film. De Valois wanted Shearer in the film so that Sadler's Wells could gain notoriety, achieve worldwide fame, and tour in America, which they did. It was through the film that Shearer would achieve celebrity status as a film star, not as a ballerina stage celebrity, which was what she initially wanted. It was this film star status that Shearer did not want and was embarrassed by, but it was this fame that would enable her to become a valuable asset to the Arts Council. Since she had previous experience in various areas of performing arts, dance, film, radio, and stage acting, her versatility was what enabled her to expand her career. For instance, she was not only a dancer but also an avid stage performer, performing at the Bristol Old Vic, the Edinburgh Festival, and the Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh. The experience she would have gained also includes working in radio, appearing on BBC programs, and briefly working as a radio announcer. She was the subject of a BBC Radio Portrait and a discussion on BBC Radio 3's The Essay focused on The Red Shoes. Due to such versatility, she would have had a vast amount of insider knowledge about the performing arts industry, and she would have been a great asset to the Arts Council because she would have helped them know where exactly funds were going, how they were going to be utilised, and where the funds would be best utilised.

Chapter 2

Celebrity as the Activist: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage

In 1914, Dame Ellen Terry, one of Britain's most celebrated stage actresses, made a striking declaration about her reluctance to vote. At a time when women were still denied the right to vote, and in spite of decades of campaigning, protesting and advocating, Terry proclaimed that, 'Folks want me to vote – I won't – a dangerous thing to do without knowledge…in my heart I am a good democrat – but oh, I see this way and that way – and a wobbler like that does mischief.'[1] This statement, delivered at a time when the suffrage movement was at its peak and only two years before British women gained limited voting rights, underscores the complexities of Terry's engagement with the suffrage movement. It reflects her reluctance to fully identify with the militant suffragettes who were central to public discourse, despite the active and influential role her daughter, Edith Craig, played in the movement.

This chapter examines the intersection of celebrity and activism, analysing the dynamics that emerge when a public figure is positioned as an activist. It further investigates how celebrity status is subsequently shaped to conform to prevailing social norms and expectations. Terry's position reflects the broader tensions between celebrity activism and public perception. As David Marshall observes, 'Celebrity is a very public form of discourse about the dimensions of what is public and what is private, and ultimately, what is intimate.'[2] Marshall's argument is particularly relevant to Terry's case. Her celebrity status magnified public scrutiny of her opinions, creating a tension between her private concerns as a mother and her public responsibility as a cultural icon. This tension likely contributed to

[1] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 202
[2] Marshall, David, *Celebrity And Power: Fame and Contemporary Culture*, 1997. 3

her reluctance to publicly align with militant suffragettes, one that might have risked alienating her audience. When Ellen Terry's daughter, the feminist theatre director and costume designer, Edith Craig, passionately advocated for both passage and militant suffrage groups, Terry maintained a more cautious stance, wary of the risks associated with such extreme forms of activism. By exploring the relationship Terry had with Edith, along with the connection between the private and public personas of both mother and daughter, the following illustrates the complex relationship the actress had with the suffrage movement, and her complex, contradictory relationship to both women's suffrage and celebrity activism.

This chapter unravels these tensions by exploring the interwoven aspects of Terry's relationship to activism, the influence of her daughter, Edith Craig, Terry's own public and private views on the suffrage movement, and the broader implications of social change for her celebrity status.

To better understand Terry's connection and concern with activism, an exploration of the activities of Women's Suffrage in early twentieth-century Britain illustrates how the actress's ambivalence towards the movement was indicative of the increasingly violent and radical acts of feminist activists to engage the public with their cause. At this time, Emily Wilding Davison flung herself to death under the King's horse in the Derby of 1913, while other activists engaged with increasingly violent forms of political protest.[3] These radical displays of activism were concerning for Terry's reputation, as her association with individuals who engaged in and supported such dangerous activities affected her celebrity image. The extremity of militant tactics, such as Davidson's tragic death, may have further

[3] van Wingerdan,Sophia, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain 1866-1928* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999). xxii

distanced Terry from the suffrage movement's radical wing. As a celebrated public figure, Terry's disapproval of such measures suggests an adherence to societal norms that valued decorum over disruption, reflecting the challenges celebrities faced when aligning themselves with controversial causes.

Not all activists who participated in the women's suffrage movement supported such extremism. There were many who, like Terry, were passionate about obtaining the vote, but did not like the idea of using violence to gain the attention of government officials. Many held propaganda meetings, sold pro-suffrage literature, performed in plays advocating for the cause, gave lectures, and sought to educate the community about the importance of women's suffrage.[4]

Yet, there was still frustration amongst activists who felt ignored by Parliament, as Sophia A. Van Wingerdam explains, 'Many early suffragists,[5] in fact, believed the vote would be given to them quickly and painlessly. Yet, both Parliament and the courts soon made it clear that women were not to be enfranchised without a struggle.'[6] Many women did not engage in dangerous behaviour but would frequently make their opinions known. Georgiana M. Solomon wrote a passionate letter to the London Evening Standard, demanding, 'You shall forthwith introduce a Bill to give equal franchise to duly qualified men and women.'[7] Nevertheless, the battle for the right to vote went on for much longer than many had anticipated. Between 1905 and 1914, the suffragettes adopted militancy as their principal tactic in the campaign to secure the right to vote.[8] Extreme groups such as the WSPU were

[4] Karen Harker, "Leading Ladies: The Actresses Who Fought for Women's Suffrage," Gale.com, 2018.
[5] This chapter makes a clear distinction between the Suffragists who would campaign using peaceful methods, and the Suffragettes who were much more radical in their views. "Women and the Vote,."
[6] van Wingerdan, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain 1866-1928*. xxiii
[7] Georgiana M Solomon, "Mrs. Saul Solomon and the Premier," *The London Evening Standard*, March 4, 1912.
[8] van Wingerdan, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain 1866-1928*. xxiii

founded, and once traditional suffragists were now associated with the suffragettes, who were utilizing criminal methods to gain recognition.[9] By the time Ellen Terry publicly announced her opinion on the suffrage movement, the suffragettes were a fully militant organization.

Terry's lukewarm stance may be illuminated by Katherine Cockin's analysis of her correspondence, which suggests that, 'Ellen Terry's letters provide evidence of an ambivalent attitude towards the suffrage movement…Perhaps, Terry was too busy being independent herself to campaign for others to achieve the same.'[10] While Terry valued women's rights and independence, her personal focus on her career and disdain for the military prevented her from fully endorsing the suffragette cause. Her statement, 'Where are the women of whom and for you write who are free? Can they be pointed out, or named by name?'[11] underlines her scepticism about the broader efficiency of suffragette activism, particularly its more extreme forms.

Terry's expressed agitation in her writing reflects not only material concern but also generational tension regarding her opinion of the suffrage movement. While Edith's activism[12] embraced the controversial tactics of the WSPU, Terry's stance aligns more closely with the earlier, non-militant suffragists. This division underlines a broader debate within the movement about the most effective means to achieve social change and highlights the generational complexities within activist families.

[9] van Wingerdan. xxiii
[10] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 202
[11] "*The Freewoman*," 1911.
[12]Due to Edith's involvement in militant groups such as the WSPU, she would have embraced the suffragette ideologies as opposed to the suffragists who advocated for the vote, but without the militancy.

While her daughter's involvement with suffrage was widely known, Terry's own stance remained cautious and ambiguous, reflecting her awareness of how public figures were scrutinised. This reticence likely stemmed from her understanding of the reputational risks associated with militant activism, which often elicited backlash from conservative elements of British society. Terry's reluctance to engage with militant suffragettes, whom she referred to as 'fools,'[13] illustrates her alignment with non-militant approaches to activism, emphasising dialogue over confrontation.

Terry was undoubtedly caught between being a celebrity actress and being a private individual involved with the Suffrage movement. Terry's celebrity status relied heavily on her audience, and she had to be very aware of the social actions she took. Terry's relationship with the press was one she had known all her life, and, as much as she may have liked being in the public eye, it was necessary to maintain her positive public image. Declan Lewis Hughes further elaborates on the connection between celebrities and the public with, 'celebrities needed the intermediaries of the media.'[14] Because Terry was a public figure, she had to be careful with whom she advocated; aligning herself with groups that employed militant tactics could have jeopardised her career as a celebrated actress.

Terr was a member of the Actresses' Franchise League, which was a group of working women in the theatre who advocated for women's suffrage.[15] However, Terry still had equivocal views on the suffragettes as evidenced in her clarifying commentary on her role as a suffragette. She emphasised, 'Of course you all know I'm a suffragette. Of course I am, and so is my daughter Edith Craig…I'm an ardent suffragette, but I don't believe in all their

[13] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 202
[14] Declan Lewis Huges, "Late-Victorian Celebrity Culture: The Interaction of Celebrity, Media and Consumers" (Lancaster University, 2020). 10
[15] Harker, "Leading Ladies: The Actresses Who Fought for Women's Suffrage."

militancy.'[16] Terry openly stated that she supported the suffragettes but knew that being involved in an organization that used harmful, militant tactics could hurt her image. Therefore, she made an effort to distance herself from extremist measures.

Actresses Franchise League (AFL) and Women's Suffrage

In 1908, the Actresses Franchise League (AFL) was officially launched,[17] and by 1914 they had grown to 900 members because of the fact that they retained an independent stance between the groups who were more peaceful and the ones who were more militant, and they used actresses to get the word out about the vote.[18] Terry was an ageing actress by this time, but due to her celebrity status, she was a great asset to the AFL, which featured celebrities and members of high society to position themselves as the more 'professional' of the suffrage groups. Socially, the AFL was viewed as one of the more glamourous of the suffrage movements primarily because its members were seen as more attractive, beautiful, and popular. Having members who were seen in higher regard was viewed as important to counteract the negative stereotype in the popular media that suffragettes were masculine, unattractive, and 'unnatural' women.[19] An article from *The Referee* remarked that, 'Ironically, the very newspapers which regularly denounced the suffragettes. As 'cranks,' invariably gushing over actresses as 'charming franchises.'[20] Although Terry was an ageing celebrity actress, she still represented glamour and beauty and was seen by the public as a sympathetic activist, which was important to the AFL cause. Paradoxically, British society didn't seem to mind when an actress advocated for votes for women, but it was harsh, and

[16] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 201-202. Melville, *Ellen and Edy: Biography of Ellen Terry and Her Daughter Edith Craig, 1847-1947*. 222-223
[17] *The Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who* (London, 1913).
[18] Rebecca Dawson, "The Actresses Franchise League," Glasgow Women's Library, 2014.
[19] Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (London, 1978). 195
[20] "*The Referee*," 1910.

even violent, to other suffrage campaigners, even going as far as to throw stones at them. Actresses, such as Ellen Terry, however, could afford to serve such a cause because they were approved by the public eye.[21]

Both Terry and Craig were members of the AFL, which was perhaps the most successful of all professional women's organizations in drawing popular attention and sympathy to the cause of women's suffrage.[22] The AFL considered itself neutral, pursuing a variety of aims intended to educate members of the theatrical profession about the necessity of female enfranchisement and participation in suffrage demonstrations, while also raising funds through stage plays and entertainment.[23] Like Terry, other actresses in the AFL were legitimate theatre actresses and did not work in music halls (which were perceived as lower-class and less 'respectable' parts of the entertainment industry). Being careful about their reputations, they too were unwilling to jeopardise their careers by becoming involved with militant organisations.[24] Terry was an avid member of the AFL and advocated for their goal of educating other members of the theatrical profession, and participating in fundraising programs.[25] These measures of propaganda within plays advocating for women's suffrage to obtain recognition for the cause were particularly an area of the movement that Terry supported.

Terry, as a celebrity, presented an opportunity for suffrage members to further represent themselves as attractive, feminine figures like her. Biographer Marguerite Steen explains that, ' Ellen Terry, who appeared in the playlet, was a reluctant feminist, prodded

[21] Claire Hirschfield, "The Actresses' Franchise League and the Campaign for Women's Sufferage 1908-1914," *Theatre Research International* 10, no. 2 (1985): 129–53. 130
[22] Hirschfield. 130
[23] Hirschfield. 119-130
[24] Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in Edwardian Theatre* (Little, Brown Book Club, 2013). 141
[25] Hirschfield, "The Actresses' Franchise League and the Campaign for Women's Sufferage 1908-1914." 119-130

into taking a public role by her daughter Edith Craig.'[26] But her popularity was an asset that the AFL was eager to exploit.[27] By situating Terry's experiences within the broader context of the suffrage movement, this chapter aims to shed light on the complexities of celebrity activism during a pivotal period in British history. While Terry's influence was undeniable, her ambivalence highlights the challenges faced by public figures who sought to navigate the demands of both private convictions and public expectations. Through an exploration of her relationship with Edith Craig, her opinions on militant tactics, and her public role as a cultural icon, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how celebrity status intersects with social change.

While the AFL's reliance on theatrical propaganda allowed it to appeal to broader audiences without resorting to militancy. However, this approach also risked being perceived as performance rather than actually a movement designed to force change. By contrast, the WSPU's confrontational tactics, though controversial, demanded immediate attention and legislative action from the government and the public. Terry's alignment with the AFL reflects her cautious approach to activism – one that prioritised public approval, but may have lacked the urgency and impact of more radical efforts.

Hirschfield's observation that AFL members sought to balance public approval with controversial activism reflects Terry's ambivalence toward militant suffrage tactics exemplifies the tension between celebrity activism and societal expectations. As a public figure, Terry's resonance with militancy was shaped by her awareness of the reputational risks and by her understanding of how celebrity activists often navigate a fine line between advocacy and public acceptance. Being a stage actress and a celebrity was Terry's way of life,

[26] Marguerite Steen, *A Pride of Terrys* (London, 1962). 305
[27] Hirschfield, "The Actresses' Franchise League and the Campaign for Women's Sufferage 1908-1914." 133

and naturally, she was suited to become the exploited celebrity that the AFL desired, having appeared in pro-suffragette plays such as Cicely Hamilton's *A Pageant of Great Women*.[28] Terry had the power to use her celebrity status to help assist with the suffrage movement, and many of the members were happy to have a celebrity involved. While Terry used her talents to perform roles for the AFL< her daughter, Edith, would be the primary reason for Terry's connections with the suffrage movement and the AFL.

Women's Suffrage Movements and Militancy

Between 1911 and 1914, the women's suffrage movement took a more violent turn, and by then even many of the peaceful suffragist groups had evolved into militant activists, alongside their now-extremist suffragette counterparts. These suffragettes had formed unions such as The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), whose motto was 'Deeds Not Words.'[29] The founder of the WSPU, Emmeline Pankhurst, favoured confrontational tactics and would resort to occasional violence against property to attract notice to the cause.[30] The WSPU members were certainly not quiet about their actions; they had enough of trying to wait for a law to be passed that would grant women the right to vote, and they were willing to go to any length to make sure that would happen. The militants posed questions at political meetings and would gather outside the House of Parliament. When they realised that they were gaining attention through their actions, they began to engage in greater forms of violence, employing arson and other criminal tactics such as pouring ink into letter boxes, smashing windows, participating in hunger strikes, and chaining themselves to railings.[31]

[28] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 202
[29] van Wingerdan, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain 1866-1928*. xxiii
[30] Hirschfield, "The Actresses' Franchise League and the Campaign for Women's Sufferage 1908-1914." 129
[31] van Wingerdan, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain 1866-1928*. xxiii-xxiv, 1

As mentioned in this chapter, while many women participated in the WSPU's radical actions, other groups of women, like Terry, were passionate about women's suffrage but did not advocate the use of violent tactics to achieve their cause. Groups such as the Women's Freedom League (WFL) were passionate about securing the vote but opposed the WSPU's tactics. This group preferred the writing of letters as a form of lobbying; their motto, in contrast to the WSPU, was 'Words Not Deeds.'[32] However, this group was not without its own extremists. Members of the WFL also participated in illegal actions by sending themselves as human letters and setting fire to post boxes.[33] The WFL may have been less extreme than the WSPU, but their actions still left a black mark on them, and as a public figure, being associated with violent activist groups could be troublesome for Terry's career.

The extremist brush also tainted Terry's associations with the AFL. The WFL's claim of neutrality, as Hirschfield notes, allowed it to collaborate with both radical and conservative suffrage groups. However, this strange ambivalence may have diluted its political message, leaving figures like Terry caught between a public support for enfranchisement and the stigma associated with militant tactics. This tension highlights the challenges celebrities faced when aligning with social causes – particularly those as polarizing as women's suffrage.

Suffrage groups engaged diligently in advocacy, employing controversial methods of extra-parliamentary pressure, including mass meetings and petitions. However, despite securing a longstanding majority of Members of Parliament committed to the principle of women's suffrage, they faced continual setbacks when the issue was brought before the House of Commons for debate and voting.[34] This period was marked by significant societal

[32] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 201
[33] Cockin. 201
[34] van Wingerdan, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain 1866-1928*. 1

pressures for change, within which figures such as Terry, who represented Britain on international stages, and Edith Craig, who played pivotal roles.

Ellen Terry and Edith Craig

The relationship between Ellen Terry and Edith Craig was often strained. Both Terry and Craig were very stubborn and expressed their opinions of one another very openly. As an avid member of the WSPU and willing to use extreme tactics to secure the vote, Craig was deeply engaged in political activism and eager to involve Terry in her efforts. The dynamic between Craig and Terry was characterized not only by tension but also by concern regarding Craig's political engagements.

While her daughter became increasingly radical, Terry's hesitancy to embrace militant tactics while advocating for women's suffrage is evident in her correspondence. A letter in which she expressed frustration over Edith's involvement with the movement, declared:

> Edy, I believe, comes to her cottage on Tuesday next – God knows I'll be glad to see her – although doubtless she will discourse now upon no subject but Women's Suffrage. Pardon the blot, but Women's Suffrage agitates me always and makes me sling the ink about.[35]

Terry's unease reveals not only her concerns for her daughter, but also her discomfort with the confrontational methods employed by groups like the WSPU, who seemed increasingly violent. Many of the militant suffragettes involved in extreme tactics in the name of activism, such as hunger strikes, and Terry was concerned for the well-being of Edith.

[35] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 206

Craig remained steadfast in seeking Terry's support for her incentives, and while Terry acknowledged and endorsed Craig's dedication to the cause, she harboured reservations about the more radical militant factions within the movement. Craig was adamant that the use of theatre to further the suffragette cause was essential. She founded a feminist avant-garde theatre society called the Pioneer Players, designed to promote change by influencing public opinion through dramatic representations of the plight of women.[36] Working alongside the AFL, the Pioneer Players would create a campaign to bring about change. By employing professional and amateur actresses, they sought to collaborate rather than compete and refused to distinguish between high and low art in pursuit of the vote.[37] They charged members an annual subscription, produced plays written by women, and actively engaged with arguments for women's suffrage and other social reforms.[38] Like many other societies and dramatic federations, the Pioneer Players faced significant challenges, particularly financial difficulties. To navigate these struggles, they frequently formed alliances with other organizations, participated in federations, and dispatched representatives to conferences to explore strategies for managing expenses efficiently. The Pioneer Players also wanted to move away from melodramatic social dramas, which were part of the nineteenth-century theatrical tradition, and to focus more on exploring the work of foreign dramatists and experimenting with new theatrical forms.[39] Ellen Terry, despite her agitation over Craig's extremist viewpoint, supported the endeavour. Terry was the president

[36] Eleanor Stewart, "The Suffrage Pageant Play: Making and Performing Women's History in Cicely Hamilton's A Pageant of Great Women (1909) and Christopher St. John's The First Actress (1911)," *OpenEdition Journals* 62, no. 1 (2019): 73–97.
[37] Stewart.
[38] Katharine Cockin, "The Pioneer Players: Politics and the Art of Theatre," University of Essex, 2011.
[39] Seán Moran, "Edith Craig (1869-1947)," *Beyond Philology* 10 (2013): 157–80. 139

of the Pioneer Players and her work in pro-suffrage plays further helped the company gain more coverage to educate the public about women's suffrage.

Although Terry was a celebrity actress, Craig was one with celebrity status amongst the suffragettes, particularly the militants. At 42, and an established mid-career actress, 1911 was the perfect year for Edith Craig to found the Pioneer Players.[40] Therefore, the opportunity to present something new, which combined both Craig's passion for women's suffrage, along with her experience on stage. Craig was raised on the stage, travelling with Terry while her mother toured extensively with the Lyceum Company in America, and later working as a stage manager/producer for Terry in America and Britain in her adult years.[41] 1911 was the perfect time for Craig to make her debut as an independent artist, putting all her passions and experience into one project.

Terry's involvement with the Pioneer Players caused tremendous strain between her and Craig. Traditional scholarship portrayed Ellen Terry as an actress known for keeping her public and private lives separate. But evidence suggests that there was much friction between the lukewarm Terry and the fiery Craig, both privately and publicly. Edith was a natural suffragette and was adamant about justice for women, saying, 'I certainly grew up quite firmly certain that no self–respecting woman could be other than a Suffragist.'[42] Edith's passion for the suffrage movement was all encompassing, even her romantic and business partner, Christopher St. John[43] did not seem to find the vote as important as Edith Craig did, declaring that, 'I found it difficult to say whether I was for the Suffragists or against

[40] Katharine Cockin, *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: The Pioneer Players 1911-1925* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). 7-8
[41] Cockin. 7-8
[42] Michael Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History: The Dramatic Lives of Ellen Terry Henry Irving and Their Remarkable Families* (London: Random House, 2008). 422
[43] Also known as Cristabel Marshall

them.'[44] Craig began taking increasingly risky steps in the suffrage movement, and while Terry opposed these risks and the fears they might have for her reputation, it was Craig's mother who was actually more controversial in her private life than her daughter appeared to be. As Katherine Cockin argues:

> It was Ellen Terry's unconventional life off stage, as well as her fame and subsequent financial independence, which made her a 'free woman.' Terry's career as a performer had brought her great success, but she was not known for her risk-taking performances.'[45]

Despite the risks in her private life, Terry worked hard on stage to support her family. Due to her perceived unconventional lifestyle, the actress was particularly careful to keep her personal life out of public view. Terry, while a great stage actress and celebrity who embodied British theatre who had carefully kept her private life out of the limelight for the bulk of her career, suddenly found herself drawn into the pull of social change in the early twentieth century die to her daughter's activism and the suffrage movement in a way that was associated with a different generation and part of a different era.

When examining the different approaches of mother and daughter to their private lives, it is important to remember the generational divide that separated them. Terry was first and foremost an actress who reached her peak of fame during the mid- to late-Victorian era. Cockin refers to Terry's letters as ones which, 'reveal her difficulties of life for both the Victorian women in general and for this exceptional woman who maintained a public profile as a successful international performer while raising two children who, in this period, would

[44] Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History: The Dramatic Lives of Ellen Terry Henry Irving and Their Remarkable Families*. 422
[45] Cockin, "Slinging the Ink: Ellen Terry and Women's Suffrage Agitation." 203

have been designated 'illegitimate.'[46] Therefore, a separation between public and private life was crucial to Terry, especially with her celebrity status. Terry's image can be described as one which was 'all the more extraordinary since it conflicted dramatically with the facts of her life.'[47] In her memoir, Terry indicated that she was well aware of her public image and the way she was seen by society with, 'I was not leaving a human document for the benefit of future psychologists and historians, but telling as much of my story as I could remember to the good, living public which has been considerate and faithful to me for so many years.'[48] Although Terry was providing information about her life to the public, she remained very cautious about the image she was portraying to her fans and about the reputational damage that revelations about her personal life would have on her career.

While keeping reticent about her own persona, Ellen Terry was strategic about aligning herself with the new kind of women as the non-violent suffrage campaign rose in popularity amongst members of the female public. Terry's portrayal of Nance Oldfield in *A Pageant of Great Women* underlines her dual role as both an advocate for women's suffrage and a cultural symbol. By invoking her own name in the dialogue, Terry blurred the line between the character and herself, aligning her personal celebrity with the broader feminist cause. This self-referential performance demonstrates how celebrities used their public personas to lend credibility and visibility to social movements while navigating the risks of alienating more conservative audiences.

1900 and Social Change

[46] Katharine Cockin, *The Collected Letters of Ellen Terry Volume 1 1865-1888* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010). XIV

[47] Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History: The Dramatic Lives of Ellen Terry Henry Irving and Their Remarkable Families*. 6

[48] Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life Recollections and Reflections*, ed. Page & CO Doubleday (New York, 1908). 9

In 1900, British theatre was a bustling, optimistic industry. Social, economic, and political changes were rapidly underway. Theatre scholar Claire Cochrane describes this change as,

> The old and the new were juxtaposed. The advertisements by managers of portable and fit-up companies for actors ready and willing to take to the road and perform at a few days' notice show just how much the popular practices of a much older Victorian theatre still survived.[49]

Therefore, Terry was willing to participate as president of the Pioneer Players, particularly because the theatre society publicly aligned itself with advocacy for single mothers. However, this form of advocacy was controversial because Edith Craig, the Pioneer Players, and the AFL polarised women, positioning them as part of the suffrage movement and producing performances that demonstrated the suffrage movement's relevance to women's lives. Although women were not legally recognised as citizens, they were subject to the law. This subjugation was regularly exposed by suffrage arguments.[50]

Terry may have had lukewarm views on the suffragettes and their militaristic strategies, but she was passionate about women's rights. Terry's letters often indicate charitable support of women working in the precarious field of employment in the theatre. Naturally, the audience the Pioneer Players would have attracted would help them continue to push for legal reform that includes women's rights as mothers, workers, and citizens.[51] Terry knew that she would benefit publicly by supporting the suffragettes, as she was a cultural figure and a representative of British society. The publicity surrounding her support was beneficial to her as an activist for women's suffrage and the New Woman.

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[49] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 20

[50] Katharine Cockin, "Formations, Institutuins and 'Free Theatre': Edith Craig's Pioneer Players 1911-25," *A Journal of Cultural Materialism* 15 (2017): 55–71.

[51] Cockin.

The New Woman

Ellen Terry and Edith Craig may not have entirely agreed with their opinions about women's suffrage, but they were both passionate about the idea of the 'New Woman.' The New Woman was a phenomenon that was propagated through journalism, poetry, novels, and drama, and fed the widespread fear about the changing social roles of middle-class women. This was not so much a means of self-identification as a way to debate the limits of gender, and it served to regulate fears about the rapidly changing roles and expectations of women.[52] The concept of the New Woman was not a novel development at the turn of the century. Craig had been familiar with this notion from an early age, as Terry herself was regarded as an embodiment of the New Woman. This perspective is reinforced by *The Freewoman*, a feminist publication, which explicitly described Terry as the ideal representation of the New Woman:

> We might, perhaps, heard the name of one Freewoman who has become a sufficiently national figure to make her mention impersonal – Ellen Terry, there is one, and for the rest of the inquisitors must be content with being enabled to arrive at the conception of Freewoman by way of a deceptive Bondwoman.[53]

Terry was already known as a woman who went beyond the social norm. She was a working woman, a celebrity actress, and a figure who represented Britain on stage to both British and international theatre audiences. While she was on stage, she was the ideal image of the Victorian woman, or otherwise a 'woman who surrendered her key to self-creation to the men in her life.'[54] Off stage, she embodied the 'New Woman' who chose to identify differently from that of the Victorian social norm. The New Woman challenged the

[52] Katharine Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869 - 1947) Dramatic Lives* (Cassell, 1998). 55
[53] Cockin. 56; Unknown, "Unknown," 1911.
[54] Amy Dunham, "Ellen Terry: Ideal Woman versus Actress," *The Wittenberg History Journal* XXI (1992): 13–17.

boundaries of the feminine role through negotiations with other women in organizations and specific campaigns. Terry was involved in such campaigns, but she was more known for her generosity and supporting individuals over the long term, such as providing places for impoverished actresses to live. She also wanted to empower other women to bring about change through economic injustice or social class. [55] Overall, Terry was an activist for women who challenged the stereotype of what a woman should be.

Terry did not simply push the boundaries of the feminine role for the sake of branding herself as an activist, but what Cockin describes as those pushing themselves into the public sphere with:

> Like other women who were involved in religious, charitable, or educational organizations who wanted to establish a wider form of social change, Terry did not brand herself as the New Woman, but rather she regarded her interventions for social change as a form of duty, and not for a particular branding of herself.[56]

Terry's refusal to brand herself as the New Woman reflects what author David Marshall's definition of branding, which is:

> The human brand has become a bridge for the movement of ideas, the realignment and refocus of issues in cultures, the expression of good will and assistance, and of course – the movement of commodities.[57]

Terry may have resisted being labelled as a 'New Woman,' because of the ways in which the New Woman was critiqued in society. As Cockin argues, the New Woman was negatively represented: 'particularly by male authors and those contemptuous of the innovations

[55] Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869 - 1947) Dramatic Lives*. 56
[56] Cockin. 56
[57] Marshall,David, "The Bridge of the Human Brand." 2-3

associated with such women as new species.'[58] Such women were seen as a shock and a threat to the social order, or in other words, a symbol of a social order under stress.

The attack on the New Woman was seen as a fear of women ignoring their role as the centre of the family and evolving into a force that was destructive to society. The New Woman was someone who was widely regarded as a,

> Monstrous person, who was stepping out of line to invade men's proper sphere; she was a transgression of conventional boundaries, threatening more than localising problems in the bedroom. This way of "breaking out" which was represented by the New Woman drew attention to women who would have been contained and separated otherwise.'[59]

Before the concept of the New Woman became widely recognised as a cultural phenomenon, Terry had already established an independent life in both her personal and professional endeavours. However, as Edith emerged as a representative of the next generation of the New Woman, Terry became increasingly engaged in shaping and contributing to its representation.

Edith Craig

Edith Craig was far from the standard, conventional woman in almost every way. She was engaged to a man; however, she preferred the company of other women and lived with the British playwright and writer Christabel Marshall, who was otherwise known as Christopher St. John. Together, the two women not only explored the limits of gender, but other boundaries were reassessed, tested, broken down or reinforced.[60] Women such as Craig and John would push these boundaries in a patriarchal society, triggering suspicion of their

[58] Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869 - 1947) Dramatic Lives*. 56-57
[59] Cockin. 57
[60] Cockin. 61

sexuality.[61] As Tasmin Wilton suggests, 'to grant women and sexual agency would be to threaten not merely socially constructed gender norms but the discursive matrix of power itself.[62] Craig and John explored these boundaries by, not only living together, but being romantically involved in a society which Katherine Cockin depicts as one where such liaisons were under threat with, 'While passionate relationships between women had been socially acceptable, even encouraged, it was the late 1890s that the antipathy towards spinster feminists and their push for social change created a climate in which love between women became the subject of condemnation.[63] Craig and John took risks by challenging the boundaries of what a woman cannot do or be and what she should do. They carefully challenged the powerplays, but played into the suffrage movement became too much power could prove unwise, as Wilton suggests:

> If to be powerful is to assume sexual rights over the powerless, then sexual power in women represents not only a challenge to existing gendered relations of power, but a rupture with the discursive construction of power itself.[64]

While there was a law against homosexuality between men, there was no such law against female homosexuality. As Cockin describes, homosexual identity was one that was,

> Not reducible to any sexual act. What came to be defined as lesbianism was invisible, widely unintelligible. The heterosexual lens produces a necessary connection between sexuality and gender; the lesbian stereotype (the masculine woman) and

[61] Moran, "Edith Craig (1869-1947)."
[62] Gabriele Griffin, *Heavenly Love* (Manchester University Press, 1993). 2; Tasmin Wilton, "Desire and the Politics of Representation," in *Working Out: New Directions of Women's Studies*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1992), 12.
[63] Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869 - 1947) Dramatic Lives*. 67
[64] Griffin, *Heavenly Love*. 77

> the gay stereotype (the effeminate man) are produced through the association of same-sex passion with gender reversal.'[65]

Craig and John were women who centred their lived around other women. However, at this time, lesbianism was not centred around identity as much as it was centred around women coming together to create social change. Shelia Jeffreys further validates this with:

> Lesbianism as understood by lesbian feminists is a passionate commitment to women, a culture, a political alternative to the basic instruction of male supremacy, a means through which women have gained self-respect and pursued their own goals and achievements with the support of other women.[66]

Being a lesbian was more of a social construct where women would come together in resistance to the patriarchy.

Edith Craig often puzzled Terry because she was so unconventional. Often being described as a 'troublemaker' who was 'aggressive.'[67] Craig was naturally defiant but enthusiastic about women's suffrage from an early age. Cockin depicts, 'one of her teachers played a significant role in the early movement and worked with the WFL and the WSPU later.[68] Since Craig was involved with the WSPU and the WFL, both being militant operations that were extreme concerning their passion for women's suffrage and politics. Craig may have been extreme in her views, but she was also very precise with her opinions. This made her essential for pageants and processions. Craig could take a political argument and put it into a theatrically orchestrated spectacle.[69]

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[65] Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869 - 1947) Dramatic Lives*. 67
[66] Sheila Jeffreys, *Does It Matter If They Did It? Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985* (London: Women's Press, 1989). 24
[67] Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869 - 1947) Dramatic Lives*. 66
[68] Cockin. 83; A.J.R, *Suffrage Annaul and Women's Who's Who* (London: Stanley Paul & Co, 1913).
[69] Moran, "Edith Craig (1869-1947)."; Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 1989. 24

It was because of the combination of Craig's radical opinions along with her intelligence that Terry's reputation as a celebrity actress was at stake. This was especially true when newspapers such as *Vote* would portray Terry as, 'Our good friend delightful Ellen Terry, the most genial of workers, easiest to work with, the most painstaking of picture makers, the quickest to grasp a telling incident and, the most understanding of teachers.'[70] *Vote* would portray Edith Craig as, 'A very Proteus of Suffragists.'[71] Therefore, the reputation of both Craig and Terry was at stake.

While Craig and Terry both embodied the concept of the New Woman in their own way, by the time the AFL was formed in 1908, Craig was working on producing shows and pageants for the League.[72] Terry, however, was getting older and while the theatrical public very much loved her, her serious career as an actress was over. With her eyesight and memory worsening, her ability to remember likes had not let her down completely.[73] There were not many prospects for work with Terry despite her celebrity status, and working with Craig proved to be a financial asset and a way to maintain her celebrity status. Terry was a valuable asset to women's suffrage through her work with the Pioneer Players, and the AFL.

Celebrity Activist and Celebrity Branding

Terry was part of a system that gave her economic value, and, according to Richard Dyer, she was 'widely regarded as a vital element in terms of capital, investment, outlay and the market.'[74] In Terry's case, as a celebrity stage actress and a representative of women's suffrage, she was vital from a capital standpoint, because she was the celebrity president of the Pioneer Players. Terry's presence with the Pioneer Players, along with four other

[70] "Miss Edith Craig," *Vote*, March 12, 1910.;Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869 - 1947) Dramatic Lives*. 85
[71] "Miss Edith Craig.";Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869 - 1947) Dramatic Lives*. 85
[72] Melville, *Ellen and Edy: Biography of Ellen Terry and Her Daughter Edith Craig, 1847-1947*. 209-210
[73] Melville. 209-210
[74] Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*. 10-11

women, was a key factor in holding some of the small amount of monopoly. Cockin elaborates on these women, who were a total of five: Edith Craig, Gabrielle Enthoven, Christopher St John, Olive Terry, and Ellen Terry. They were members of the committee throughout the society's life from 1911 to 1920 and brought invaluable skills. St John was a historian and translator as well as a writer, having already proved herself as Ellen Terry's literary henchman. Olive Terry, Ellen Terry's niece, was a performer in the company, and Gabrielle Enthoven became responsible for recording the society's work, compiling collections of press cuttings.[75] Within the Pioneer Players, each individual brought forth a form of talent that helped them gain more recognition, which was then used to invest more in their representation for a greater cause and a greater outcome: women having the right to vote.

Terry was not only seen by the public through her work with the Pioneer Players, but also in suffrage magazines, where she promoted items such as shopping bags.[76] Terry would also be mentioned in articles such as The Suffragette,[77] and The Vote[78] where she was reported to have been seen near Suffrage demonstrations, or the magazines were simply validating the fact that they had a celebrity who supported them, thus giving them all the more reason to promote their cause.

While Terry did play the part of the actress Nell Gwyn in the Pioneer Players production of *The First Actress*, and she would recite works for the newly founded Theatre Arts Club, Terry's strengths lay in lecturing about Shakespeare's heroines. Terry's agent, Curtis Brown, approached her to do a lecture tour in America. The request was presented at

[75] Cockin, *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: The Pioneer Players 1911-1925*. 27
[76] Women's Social and Political Union (Great Britain), "Votes for Women," *Votes for Women*, 1911.
[77] Women's Social and Political Union (Great Britain), "Ellen Terry," *The Suffragette*, 1913.
[78] Charlotte Despard, "Miss Ellen Terry," *The Vote*, 1920.

a time when Terry was having difficulty maintaining her celebrity status. The tour, however, proved very successful, as she gave lively, evocative impersonations of the characters, based on a lifelong study.[79] Within her lectures, Terry could be an actress as well as a Shakespearean interpreter. The lectures also allowed Terry to be more versatile in certain parts; for instance, she impersonated male and female characters.[80] The success of the lectures in America prompted Terry to conduct more lectures in England. When World War I broke out, Terry began a world tour of her lectures, beginning in Australia, then to New Zealand and London. Throughout the tour, Terry never lost her spark as a celebrity actress. In a programme from 1914, Terry is described as one with, 'Beauty and grace of movement, aligned to an intense appreciation of all dramatic possibilities, acclaimed the Queen of English Dramatic Art and as a woman her personality is one to delight, and as an artist she is one to worship.'[81] While Terry was in Australia, she gave lectures and promoted the work of the suffragettes.

Despite representing herself as a supporter of the AFL and the Pioneer Players in Britain, Terry did not speak out at women's suffrage meetings, nor did she conduct speeches about women and the right to vote in Britain.[82] In Australia, however, Terry was very active with her speeches on women's suffrage. She was confident in her opinions on women having the right to vote and ridiculing those who spoke against it, and would shrug and laugh at some English men who referred to their wives and daughters as 'those political creatures.'[83] Although Terry was more vocal about supporting women's suffrage in Australia,

[79] Melville, *Ellen and Edy: Biography of Ellen Terry and Her Daughter Edith Craig, 1847-1947*. 216-217
[80] Gail Marshall, "Ellen Terry: Shakespearean Actress and Critic," *Europenan Journal of Women's Studies* 11, no. 3 (2004): 355–64.
[81] Walter Bentley, "Programme" (Sidney, 1914).
[82] Melville, *Ellen and Edy: Biography of Ellen Terry and Her Daughter Edith Craig, 1847-1947*. 222
[83] Melville. 222-223

she remained adamant about not supporting the militant suffragettes. Terry made certain that her opinions would be clearly heard, once proclaiming that:

> I'm an ardent suffragette, but I don't believe in all their militancy…It antagonizes people and women never do any good that way. The suffragettes are a magnificent lot of women, but I think that, perhaps their ardour carried them away at times. And it shouldn't. It makes them lose their pose and poise is everything.[84]

Along with being a celebrity actress, Terry had investments as an activist for women's suffrage through her work with the AFL and the Pioneer Players.

Terry had stepped over the social boundaries of British celebrity culture and broken what David Marshall would refer to as, 'influence of entertainment culture on other activities.'[85] When Terry was in Australia, she represented her role of the actress and the activist, giving a series of talks regarding Shakespeare's heroines, and illuminated her remarks by speaking in dramatic style passages such as the death scene of Desdemona or a comedy speech by Rosalind. In Sydney, at an Ellen Terry benefit, several of the most celebrated actors and actresses supported her and her Shakespearean work.[86]

In terms of Terry's celebrity status, going to Australia was an investment, not only to maintain it, but also to reach an international audience with her views on women's suffrage. Terry was important to the outlay and the marketing for the Pioneer Players because Terry and Edith had worked together at the Imperial Theatre and on regional tours as a producer, stage manager, and director prior to the creation of the Pioneer Players, and with that, a marketing campaign for theatre performances around women's suffrage was set in

[84] Melville. 223
[85] Marshall, David, *Celebrity And Power: Fame and Contemporary Culture*.
[86] Strachan "Ellen Terry in Australia," *Notes and Queries*, 1932, https://doi.org/10.1093/nq/clxii.mar05.176f.

motion.[87] Despite Terry being a famous actress, Terry's celebrity status was not what made the Pioneer Players successful, it was their association with the cause of women's suffrage. While Terry was a good marketing asset for the Pioneer Players, Terry's role as a celebrity was more pronounced when touring, giving lectures on Shakespeare's female lead roles, which is what Terry was primarily known for.

The success of the Pioneer Players revolved around the fact that they were a group of women who staged dramatic productions which represented the interests of women and organized political campaigns for women's suffrage. Through their own artistic way, the Pioneer Players challenged the established patriarchal institutions of both theatre and parliament.[88] Therefore, the Pioneer Players looked to a strong woman like Terry to help them with their message and campaign, because having a celebrity working with them could significantly boost their publicity.

Ellen Terry was indeed an activist for women's suffrage, but she did not adhere to the ideologies of individuals such as Emmeline Pankhurst and the WSPU, nor to those of the WFL. Edith Craig, however, was utterly absorbed in the women's suffrage movement and used her own celebrity status to further the cause and her own position as a celebrity activist. Craig wasted no time in becoming actively involved in the WSPU, the WFL, and the AFL, and eventually in producing her own addition to the suffrage movement, the Pioneer Players. While Terry supported Craig, Terry remained staunchly against any involvement with the militant activities of the suffragettes. Terry also had her own options regarding different women's committees. She was steadfast in her beliefs at a time when many women struggled to have their voices heard. On one occasion, Terry did not properly fill out an

[87] Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869 - 1947) Dramatic Lives*. 79
[88] Cockin, *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: The Pioneer Players 1911-1925*. 26

election form. This seemingly minor detail was taken very seriously, to the point that the election could not be properly managed, and Terry's public image would be at risk as a result.[89] Due to the nature of Terry's actions, it was clear that politics was outweighing the arts at a time when Craig and Terry worked hard so that the two could collaborate with one another.

For an individual outside the realm of celebrity, such matters would likely be inconsequential, as they do not possess the same level of influence within market dynamics or media discourse. Chris Rojek posits an equation suggesting that celebrity status directly correlates with an individual's impact on public consciousness, with the media serving as a crucial determinant of the celebrity's future trajectory.[90] The suffrage movement was a historically significant event that garnered substantial media support. This media endorsement facilitated the successful intersection of collective organization and radical politics around a unifying cause, culminating in the establishment of the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL) in 1908. Notably, in 1907, the original constitution of the Actors Association (AA) excluded women from its Council, despite Gertrude Kingston having provided the first signature at the organization's inaugural meeting. In contrast, the AFL benefited from the leadership and endorsement of influential women, including Mrs. Kendal as president, Violet Vanbrugh and Gertrude Elliot as vice presidents, and the support of prominent figures such as Ellen Terry, all of whom lent significant credibility to the suffrage campaign.[91] Being a cultural fabrication, Terry was aware of the influence she had on the public consciousness.

The turn of the century truly was the age of a new generation of women who defined themselves as the New Woman through their political activism and envisaged

[89] Pearl Mary Craigie, "Letter," 1905.
[90] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 10
[91] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 82

equality symbolised by citizenship and brought about by legislative change.[92] It is important to recognise that Terry was a working woman, and that her and Edith Craig's work on women's suffrage was primarily with women from the upper and middle classes. The Pioneer Players involved diverse activities and relationships, some of which included formal transactions and contractual arguments; patronage and nepotism; and unpaid and voluntary activities. The Pioneer Players borrowed theatres and rented public halls. They provided scripted and improvised drama and dance, and, on some occasions, gave music performances and lectures. Due to the variety of performances, professionals and amateurs often worked together, and because of the number of artists hailing from middle- and upper-class families, friction developed when their parents disapproved of them spending time with those of lower class.[93] Despite the class difference, it was the overlap between the suffrage movement and the stage that interested Craig. Rebecca Cameron supports this with, 'Many plays written in support of the British women's suffrage platform to encourage women to raise their voices in a public forum.[94] While social class was an issue, Craig's intentions were to get the word out about the suffrage movement to as many people as possible, regardless of social class.

It is significant that Ellen Terry, the president of the Pioneer Players, was a public and private philanthropist who supported female performers in this way.[95] The audience was varied, and many assumptions were made about both the Pioneer Players performers and their audience. Although the society claimed it was performing plays exclusively for its

[92] Cockin, "Formations, Institutuins and 'Free Theatre': Edith Craig's Pioneer Players 1911-25."
[93] Cockin.
[94] Rebecca Cameron, "'A Somber Passion Strengthens Her Voice' The Stage as Public Platform in British Women's Suffrage Drama," *Comparative Drama* 50, no. 4 (2016): 291–316.
[95] Cockin, "Formations, Institutuins and 'Free Theatre': Edith Craig's Pioneer Players 1911-25."

members, it was still selling tickets to non-members, who were treated as guests.[96] The Pioneer Players contributed more to their community by publicly aligning themselves with advocacy for single mothers, which caused much controversy. The Pioneer Players also performed plays demonstrating the relevance of arguments for women's enfranchisement to the improvement of women's lives and identifying examples of injustice against women.[97] The legacy continued to live on as Ellen Terry, a British stage celebrity who would go on to become a social and cultural icon, known for the image she portrays and the reflection her image represents.

Conclusion

Amid shifting social, economic, and political circumstances, activism played a crucial role in representing a society undergoing transformation, particularly as women began to assert power previously suppressed and to claim a voice long marginalised. However, the emergence of this voice was not immediate; rather, it evolved gradually through perseverance, experimentation, and resistance before ultimately gaining recognition and influence. The Women's Suffrage movement had the support of celebrities such as Terry, along with other West End stars such as Madge Kendall and Violet Vanbrugh,[98] and new celebrities such as Emmeline Pankhurst were also formed from the suffrage movement. Women were able to obtain this power through organizations such as the WSPU, the AFL, and the Pioneer Players, and they eventually achieved their goal, which eventually became the right to vote. But not all women who were members of these organizations agreed with the tactics, propaganda, or methods of attracting attention. In fact, this chapter focused primarily on upper to upper-middle-class women who supported women's suffrage. Ellen

[96] Cockin, *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: The Pioneer Players 1911-1925*. 28
[97] Cockin, "Formations, Institutuins and 'Free Theatre': Edith Craig's Pioneer Players 1911-25."
[98] Melville, *Ellen and Edy: Biography of Ellen Terry and Her Daughter Edith Craig, 1847-1947*. 209

Terry's status as a celebrity figure in society increased her importance to the movement because of her influence over the public; therefore, if she had certain opinions about the suffragettes, she could voice them and be heard by a wide audience. If Terry chose to represent the New Woman, then she was free to do so with minimal repercussions.

While Terry represented the voice of the New Woman and the women's suffragist, her daughter, Edith Craig, chose to be the voice of a new generation of the New Woman and of the suffragettes. With immense energy and concentration combined with her own experiences as an actress,[99] Craig became a powerful force behind the suffragettes as she poured all her passion, time, and energy into representing and campaigning for their cause.

Ellen Terry and Edith Craig were influential women and celebrity activists. They represented the voice of different generations of the New Woman, suffragists, suffragettes, and the British celebrity stage. They were powerful voices for working women and women from different social backgrounds. But ultimately, Terry and Craig were the celebrity voices of social change at a time of immense social transformation and societal upheaval, and a time when female activists were launching themselves into the public sphere. The transformations in Britain and British women at this time would secure Terry and Craig's importance as the voice of female activism, which still echoes today.

[99] Melville. 211

CHAPTER THREE

Celebrity as the Anti-Activist: John Gielgud and Queer Britain

On the 20th of October 1953, John Gielgud, one of Britain's most celebrated actors was arrested in Chelsea, London on charges of importuning for seeing sex in a public lavatory.[1] The next day, Gielgud reported to the magistrates' court, where he was fined £10 for being 'drunk and disorderly,' and advised to see his doctor. This would have been a discreet legal matter had a passing reporter not recognized Gielgud's distinctive voice and written about Gielgud's offence in the Evening Standard.[2] Thereby, thrusting the incident into the public eye. This event not only illustrated the precarious position of homosexuals in 1950s Britain, but also highlights the tension between celebrity, identity, and activism during a time when homosexuals were criminalised.

The arrest occurred at the height of a cultural and legal crackdown on homosexuality in Britain, exemplifying the nature of homosexuality in 1950's Britain as one of forced silencing and policed behaviour. Homosexuality in the 1950s was illegal in Britain, and therefore many gay men and lesbians were forced to remain in the dark and be secretive about themselves. Fuelled by Cold War paranoia and the Lavender Scare imported from the United States, 1950s Britain intensified its efforts to police queer identities. Figures such as Home Secretary David Maxwell Fyfe and Director of Public Prosecutions, Theobald Matthew, viewed homosexuality as a societal threat, warranting severe interventions. In this context, queer individuals like Gielgud were forced to navigate their lives under a veil of secrecy, particularly those in the public eye. In his book, *The Secret Public: How LGBTQ Resistance*

[1] "Sir John Gielgud Fined," *The Eveneing Standard,* 1953.
[2] Croall, *Gielgud A Theatrical Life 1904-2000*. 300

Shaped Popular Culture (1955-1979), music journalist Jon Savage describes the post-war era as marked by a 'coded, hidden, secret' existence for many queer people, a dynamic that extended deeply into British theatre.

Many queer artists found the theatre a place where homosexuals could be safe and away from the watchful gaze of the public and any government official who might be watching. This paradoxical refuge, which the theatre provided, was both a safe haven and a 'glass closet,' a space where queer identities could exist but remain veiled. As the theatre scholar John Clum argues, the theatre's challenge during this era was to 'suggest and indicate without actually acknowledging the existence of the forbidden subject.'[3] Within the safety of the theatre, queer playwrights such as Terrence Rattigan and actors such as Noël Coward and John Gielgud operated, using coded language and subtle character portrayals to evade detection while subtly representing queer individuals and queer experiences.

In accordance with the enforced silencing of homosexuals within British theatre during a period when legal measures sought to suppress homosexual expression, this chapter examines Gielgud's relationship with his sexual identity. It explores how the criminalization of homosexuality, combined with his status as a celebrity figure, influenced his decision to maintain privacy regarding his sexuality in mid-twentieth-century Britain. Through this case study, the chapter addresses the following key questions: What does queer activism look like at this time, and how did John Gielgud's choices reflect or resist it? With a particular focus on queer activism within 1950s British theatrical culture, it is crucial to remember that many plays written by queer individuals were rooted in real events and locations. These plays presented a kind of theatrical doubling, in which queer individuals

[3] Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexulaity in Modern Drama (Between Men-Between Women: Lesbian & Gay Studies)*. 89

read one meaning within them and the general population another. For playwrights such as Noël Coward, Terence Rattigan, and other queer writers, they were both 'open' and 'closeted' throughout their careers, hiding in plain sight. Gielgud himself resisted the role of an activist, once telling the actor Simon Callow, 'I do admire people like you and Ian McKellen for coming out, but I can't be doing that with myself.'[4] Gielgud's silence while self-preserving also echoed a broader strategy within the queer community of the time wherein visibility was both perilous and laden with personal and professional risks.

Within the gay community in and out of British theatre, language doubling was common practice. This coded way of speaking was referred to as *Polari* or an otherwise second language used by homosexuals, in particular gay men, to stay one step ahead of the law.[5] For this reason, the theatre offered a space for queer individuals to safely work and connect with one another. The theatre also offered gay men a place to become a powerful force in British theatre. Thereby, a form of activism was present, but hidden due to the danger of criminalization of homosexuality. This leads one to ask: Why was John Gielgud unable to become an activist?

In the 1940s and 1950s, there was a great enforcement to contain homosexuality in Britain, particularly after the Lavender Scare sought to reduce the number of gays and lesbians because they were believed to be collaborating with the Soviet Union. Spearheaded by Senator Joseph McCarthy, thousands of gay federal employees were dismissed or pressured to resign due to their sexuality as the government pushed to weed out 'moral perverts' from all areas of government. Known as the Lavender Scare, this period of persecution was closely tied to anti-Communist sentiment and intensified by the authority

[4] Jonathan Croall, *Gielgoodies*, 2012. 87
[5] Unknown, "Polari: The Language of Gay London," Prioners of Eternity, 2021.

of congressional investigations. The U.K., which was an ally of the U.S., exported this propaganda in accordance with its own crackdown on homosexuality.

The Lavender Scare and its accompanying paranoia heavily influenced Britain's approach to homosexuality, further embedding systematic prejudice. The infamous Wolfenden Report, though initiated in 1954 to address prostitution, expanded its scope to include homosexuality, ultimately recommending decriminalization over a decade later.[6] However, during the years leading up to this landmark change, the stigma surrounding homosexuality as a criminal offense meant that many homosexuals kept as quiet as they possibly could. Against the backdrop of Gielgud's arrest, rather than serving as a rallying cry for activism, the Wolfenden Report and its consequences instead emphasised the reason for Gielgud's decision to remain silent. His refusal to publicly address the scandal or his sexuality reflects a survival strategy rather than a form of resistance, further complicating his legacy.

Gielgud was a homosexual, as well as an actor, which leads to the question: How would Gielgud identify himself? Was Gielgud a man who was more focused on his identity as an actor and a director or as a homosexual? Gielgud's role in this cultural environment also underscored the interplay between celebrity and activism. As Sean Redmond defines, a celebrity is not merely a performer but a representation of cultural values and societal ideas.[7] Gielgud's arrest, occurring shortly after his knighthood in 1953, thrust him into a dual role as both a celebrated artist and a symbol of societal offense. The public response to the scandal, as detailed in the *Daily Mail,* reveals the unintended consequences of his actions: 'The publicity surrounding Gielgud's arrest was one of the impetuses behind changes in the law over homosexuality. The Wolfenden Commission…concluded that outlawing

[6] "Wolfenden Report-Contents," UK Parliament, 1957.
[7] Redmond, *Celebrity*. 4

homosexuality impinged on an individual's civil liberties.'[8] Ironically, Gielgud's silence and avoidance of activism catalysed a broader conversation about queer rights. Gielgud, by virtue of his celebrity status, became an activist by association. The distinct difference between Gielgud's identity within the theatre and the way he identified himself personally is a matter that must be researched as a part of Gielgud's social and historical impact on queer Britain.

Although the theatre may have provided a safe space for Gielgud, he could not be open about himself as a homosexual outside of the theatre. Consequently, other questions to be addressed concern the terminology that queer individuals in Britain were using at the time. There is the notion of Polari, but, at a more basic level, there is the term 'queer', which is the most well-known. Much of the terminology discussed in this chapter will be based on the changing vocabulary around the terms queer, homosexual, and *gay*. This chapter explores the use of Polari and other terminology and how this was incorporated within the safety of the theatrical community, making it safer for queer performers such as Gielgud.

The last question will focus on how Gielgud's celebrity status protected him and explore how the actor utilised British theatre as a safe haven for himself as a gay man. This last question will address how the theatre was both a safe place and a closet, which enabled Gielgud and many other gay men to stay silent. John Clum describes the widespread use of double meanings by homosexual playwrights within the theatre as, 'the theatre's challenge was to suggest and indicate without actually acknowledging the existence of the forbidden subject.'[9] Gielgud's celebrity status, along with the protection of the theatre, enabled him to

[8] Roberts, Glenys "How a Moment of Madness by Britain's Greatest Actor Drove Him to the Brink of Suicide- and Forever Changed Attitudes to Sex."
[9] Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexulaity in Modern Drama (Between Men-Between Women: Lesbian & Gay Studies)*. 89

be the anti-activist during a time when being an advocate for queer individuals was a topic that was still unspoken about outside of queer communities, and many queer individuals lived in fear of coming out, as being gay was punishable by law.

The theatre not only provided a safe space for gay artists but also a place where gay men could exercise power and gain recognition. In the 1940s to 1960s, many powerful producers and theatre managers in London, such as Binkie Beaumont, exerted significant influence on the West End theatre industry. The theatre offered a platform for homosexual playwrights to create work which would be understood by a queer audience, but bypass a heterosexual audience. The tension between visibility and deletion was mirrored in the theatrical works of the time. Plays such as Noël Coward's *Design for Living* and John Osbourn's *Look Back in Anger* portrayed queer characters through subtext and coding, offering representation without evading scrutiny. Clum describes this portrayal as, 'the history of silences and codes used in the presentation of homosexuality in dramas of the thirties, forties, and fifties mirrors the changing position of gay men offstage.[10] In *Design for Living*, the ambiguous relationship between Otto and Leo could be interpreted by queer audiences as romance while remaining plausible as mere friendship to heterosexual viewers. There are scenes in the play where Polari is used not to hide homosexuality, but to present it simultaneously. Such carefully crafted narratives allowed playwrights to navigate social constraints, presenting queer identities in ways that were both revolutionary and restrained.

Gielgud, however, did not embrace these opportunities for subtle activism. While his arrest brought attention to the persecution of queer individuals, he maintained a staunch separation between his private life and public persona. This choice aligns with Ari Adut's

[10] Clum. xii

description of the 'dynamic of scandal,' in which a publicised violation of social norms forces individuals to navigate the tension between personal integrity and public perception.[11] Through avoiding public acknowledgement of his sexuality or the incident, Gielgud was able to effectively position himself as an 'anti-activist,' thus prioritising his career and safety over advocacy.

This chapter examines Gielgud's court case as a case study examining celebrity tactics of being an 'anti-activist' as a way of safeguarding oneself in a society where identifying as queer was an identity many gay celebrities could not afford to speak about. A comparison between Gielgud and the celebrity playwright Oscar Wilde will be assessed to observe how queer activism has developed. This is crucial to the study of modern queer activism, and the connecting parallels between British celebrity and queer activism are essential to understanding the reflection celebrity has on social change. Had John Gielgud not been a celebrity, his crime would never have appeared in the papers, nor would his career have taken such a devastating turn.

Yet, the ripple effects of Gielgud's scandal cannot be ignored. As a celebrated actor with an extensive career spanning stage, film, and radio, Gielgud's actions - and inactions – highlight the complexities of queer representation and activism in a repressive era. His story reflects the broader struggle of queer individuals in mid-twentieth-century Britain, where survival often required silence and activism took forms that were understated but impactful.

To be an openly gay activist in 1950s Britain would not be a wise decision. However, queer activism was apparent in British society throughout this period. This form of activism was not open in places where authoritative figures would suspect any activism. In examining

[11] Ari Adut, "A Theory of Scanadal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 1 (2005).

Gielgud's life and career, this chapter situates his arrest within the broader historical and cultural context of queer Britain. By comparing his experience to those of playwrights like Coward and illustrating the evolution of queer activism in the post-war era, the narrative underscores the subtle ways in which queer identities navigate repression and visibility. While Gielgud may not have chosen to be an activist, his experiences and the cultural discourse they ignited serve as a painful reminder of the enduring tension between personal identity and public representation in the battle for queer rights.

In the 1950s, it was imperative that the voice of queer activism be subtle, not loud, and easily overlooked by government authorities. Due to the use of the theatre as a powerful form of subtle representation, many queer men were able to gain power and prestige in society, and the activism was primarily coming from the playwrights who created and wrote the dialogue for queer characters, while there were some actors who were able to participate in queer activism by performing as queer characters. John Gielgud stayed away from these types of activism.

While many playwrights were able to create queer characters and evade suspicion from government authorities, they still maintained a reputation. It was not necessarily the playwrights who were watched by the audience, but the actors. John Gielgud, nonetheless, was not simply an actor. But Gielgud was an actor with celebrity status, which remains a distinct construct from that of someone who is simply an actor. As described throughout this thesis, the actor performs, whereas the celebrity represents society. Sean Redmond's definition of celebrity is one, 'whose name, image, lifestyle, and opinions can carry cultural and economic worth.'[12] Therefore, because Gielgud was a celebrity actor, he was seen as a

[12] Stock, *Celebrity Translation in British Theatre*. 5

representative of British culture in British theatre, and this was seen as a representation of Britain.

By remaining an anti-activist, John Gielgud navigated the complexities of being a queer celebrity in mid-twentieth-century Britain, protecting not only his career but also the broader queer artistic community. Following his arrest, the stakes were high – not just for Gielgud, but for those around him. Theatre producer Binkie Beaumont feared the scandal would devastate the production *of A Day by the Sea*, where Gielgud was acting at the time. Beaumont even contemplated removing Gielgud from the production to avoid financial losses, a move that could have further tarnished Gielgud's reputation. However, Gielgud's brother Val, then a key figure at the BBC, stepped in, threatening to expose Beaumont's hypocrisy as a closeted gay man himself. As a result, Gielgud remained in the production, throughout his public silence, which reflected the delicate balancing act required of him as a queer celebrity.

Gielgud's actions were not intended to spark activism, as they inadvertently did, and unfortunately, it would take over a decade for British laws to be changed against homosexuals. Despite this quiet stance, Gielgud's status as a famous actor endured he could never truly escape public scrutiny. Celebrity, by its very nature, demands visibility, and Gielgud's fame made him a symbol not just of British theatre but also of the risky position of queer individuals in 1950s Britain. His peers within the queer community reacted with mixed emotions. While some sympathised with him, others, such as choreographer Fredrick Ashton, grieved for the damage which the scandal had done, reportedly stated that Gielgud had 'ruined it for us all.'[13] Noël Coward, another towering figure in British theatre, privately

[13] Roberts, "How a Moment of Madness by Britain's Greatest Actor Drove Him to the Brink of Suicide-and Forever Changed Attitudes to Sex."

berated Gielgud for his carelessness, while playwright Terrence Rattigan joked that Gielgud's knighthood might now be impossible.[14] These reactions underscore the complex interplay between personal identity, profound reputation, and social expectations during a time when homosexuality was criminalised. By not speaking about his actions and by not allowing his friends to discuss it, Gielgud chose to avoid the scandal as much as possible by being the anti-activist.

To be the anti-activist was a way of protecting both himself and queer British performing artists. Gielgud's choice to remain silent in the face of public scandal was strategic. The mid-twentieth century was a period of heightened governmental and societal hostility toward queer individuals. Convictions for homosexuality had risen sharply, with high-profile cases like those of Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and Labour MP Bill Field[15] drawing widespread attention. These cases, alongside Gielgud's promotion of Home Secretary David Maxwell-Fyfe, led to the commission of the Wolfenden Report, which ultimately recommended the decriminalization of homosexuality.[16] Yet, the stigma remained, and public figures like Gielgud took the shame of societal prejudice. Calls for his expulsion from British Actors' Equity and even suggestions that he should be physically punished reflect the disdain directed at queer individuals in this era. Gielgud himself described the incident as 'loathsome' and feared it would leave a permanent stain on his career and personal life.[17] Amid all the criticism from his peers, Gielgud could be a convincing anti-activist and would try to keep as low a profile as possible, avoiding the controversy surrounding his arrest.

[14] Croall, *Gielgud A Theatrical Life 1904-2000*. 385
[15] Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and Labour MP Bill Field were men of reputable status who were convicted of sexual offences.
[16] Darryl Bullock, *Pride, Pop and Politics: Music, Theatre and LGBT Activism 1970-2021* (London: Omnibus Press, 2022). 15
[17] Croall, *Gielgud A Theatrical Life 1904-2000*. 385

To become the anti-activist was not something that Gielgud's celebrity status would allow. This is because once the title of celebrity is obtained, it demands to be seen. Therefore, no matter how hard Gielgud tried to go unnoticed, his celebrity status made it impossible. The public views the actor and the celebrity as distinct. While the public may like the actor and enjoy the roles they play, there is an obsession with celebrity because it reflects them, and the public likes to see themselves. Chris Rojek refers to this phenomenon as, 'something to do with the way that the public life is constructed.'[18] Due to the ideological exchange of celebrity and publicity, Gielgud was unable to remain hidden, but he was able to remain quiet.

Gielgud did find support from his peers and audiences, highlighting the nuanced relationship between celebrity and public perception. At the opening of *A Day By the Sea* in Liverpool, actor Ralph Richardson joined Gielgud onstage for his first entrance, fearing a hostile reaction. Instead, the audience greeted Gielgud with cheers and a standing ovation. Letters of support poured in from friends, colleagues, and even his great-aunt, Dame Ellen Terry. Reflecting on the experience, Gielgud expressed deep gratitude, remarking, 'The friendship and loyalty that has surrounded me almost made up for so much vileness.'[19] Gielgud's form of quiet anti-activism would be his greatest strength, especially after government officials got involved. Gielgud had every reason to stay quiet, particularly with many of the government's actions surrounding queer individuals.

This outpouring of support strengthened Gielgud's resolve to rebuild his career. He continued his role in *A Day by the Sea* for 18 months, using the stability of a long-running production as a platform for his comeback. While the scandal had cost him some internal

[18] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 5
[19] Croall, *Gielgud A Theatrical Life 1904-2000*. 385

opportunities, including a planned tour of America, Gielgud remained confident in his identity as an actor. To Gielgud, performance was of the most significant importance, having once joked with a reporter about retirement, 'If, God forbid, I can't remember my life, there's always radio!'[20] The theatre would continue to provide Gielgud with a safe haven of protection where he could perform.

For Gielgud, to be an anti-activist was not about being a celebrity actor who was a representative of the queer community who made a mistake, but rather Gielgud was the celebrity actor who was also a gay man who was outed through a mistake he had made. Activism was primarily presented through the playwright, and homosexuality was something that was represented through the world of the stage. The world was similar to the one the audience viewed, but was also a fantasy world, nonetheless, one that playwrights used as a form of representation. While he did write and locate talented playwrights, Gielgud himself was not a writer but a manager, director, producer, and actor.[21] Gielgud possessed an identity that did not include the activist identity, but rather an aspect of himself that would enable him to return to his celebrity actor status after the case was over.

Gielgud's focus on his craft, rather than his activism, speaks to his understanding of the role of celebrity in society. As a cultural figure, he embodied the public expectation of the celebrity actor, while he kept quiet about his private identity as a homosexual. His letters reveal a keen awareness of the social dynamics at play. Writing to his friend Cecil Benton, Gielgud acknowledged, 'I've been spoiled and protected all my life, and now it's something basic and far-reaching that I've got to face for many years to come.'[22] This statement

[20] John Gielgud, *Gielgud on Gielgud* (Macmillan and Co. Hodder and Stoughten, 1977). 5-6
[21] Croall, *Gielgud A Theatrical Life 1904-2000*. vii
[22] John Gielgud and Richard Mangan, *Gielgud's Letters: John Gielgud in His Own Words* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004). 187

captures his self-awareness not only of the privilege but also of the responsibility that came with his public role.

Gielgud's awareness of his celebrity actor status as a gay man meant that he was crucially aware of how the public perceived him. Having once written: 'I can't bear the idea of a case and weeks of obscene publicity.'[23] Gielgud had an awareness and a knowing that he mattered to the public as a celebrity actor. There is a reason why celebrity is important in a social environment: the way the public connects with a celebrity reflects how they communicate with each other. Sean Redmond explains this concept further, suggesting that, 'celebrity matters because it exists centrally to the way we communicate and are understood to communicate with one another in the modern world. Celebrity culture involves the transmission of power relations and is connected to identity formation and the notion of shared belonging.[24] Redmond's notion of communication can be compared to Gielgud's understanding of people and the 'gossiping and chattering'[25] that would commence, along with an acute understanding of the press, notwithstanding Gielgud's assumption that, twenty years ago, the press would be less cruel. Gielgud's assertion aligns with Redmond's perspective, reflecting broader societal dynamics of communication. Specifically, Gielgud's interpretation of the interaction between the press and the public mirrors how society engages in communication.

Gielgud's ambition was another aspect that helped him get through this trial. Although Gielgud was ambitious in his pursuit of celebrity status, he maintained a distinct awareness of the interplay between his identity as an aspiring director and the privacy of his

[23] Gielgud and Mangan. 187
[24] Redmond, *Celebrity and the Media*. 3
[25] Gielgud and Mangan, *Gielgud's Letters: John Gielgud in His Own Words*. 6;Redmond, *Celebrity and the Media*. 3

personal life, a topic he deliberately chose not to discuss publicly, despite being perceived as 'highbrow and unreliable,' Gielgud actively resisted the conventional expectations associated with celebrity status by refusing to conform to societal norms. These expectations were rooted in the notion that celebrities, as economic assets, must adhere to specific social rules to maintain their marketability and public image. Rules which Ellis Cashmore defines as ones to keep us, 'pleasantly occupied.'[26] While Gielgud, being an actor of celebrity status, sits at odds with queer culture in 1950s Britain. He had the power as a celebrity actor, but was powerless as a gay man. This was further exemplified when he was outed and shamed by the press. Paradoxically, he was protected from serious consequences through his celebrity status.

Gielgud's letters[27] Indicate that he was more concerned with the outcome of various performances than with the trial. Despite the tumultuous events, Gielgud remained confident in his ability to continue working as a successful actor and director. As one who kept his public and private personas separate, Gielgud was indeed able to thrive in the industry after the court case.

In choosing not to address the incident publicly, Gielgud resisted the traditional role of the activist; he embodied what could be described as a reflective anti-activism. His silence allowed him to navigate the precarious intersection of celebrity, queerness, and societal expectations in a way that preserved his career. Yet, this very silence contributed to larger societal conversations. The media coverage of his arrest became part of the momentum that eventually led to the decriminalization of homosexuality in Britain, demonstrating that even in his quiet defiance, Gielgud played a role in shaping queer history.

[26] Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006). 264
[27] See Appendix 3

Upon news of the incident, a slow but progressive change began to happen with queer rights. It would not be until 1967 that the Sexual Offences Act partially decriminalized homosexuality in Britain. However, not too long after the incident, The New Statesman and The Observer called for law reform to make Britain a place where homosexual acts between consenting adults were not a criminal act. The last time the debate over decriminalization of homosexuality was in 1900 with the death of Oscar Wilde.[28] These calls for reform were but one of the many over the span of ten years until the Sexual Offences Act was passed.

Gielgud's life and career underscore the complexity of being a queer celebrity in an era of intense social scrutiny. His ability to endure scandal and rebuild his reputation reflects not only his resilience but also the enduring power of the theatre as a space of both refuge and representation for queer individuals. In his letters, performances, and quiet persistence. Gielgud navigated a society that sought to exclude him, emerging as a testament to the subtle yet profound ways that art and identity intersect in the face of adversity. Moreover, while Gielgud was able to bypass being outed, other queer celebrities would not be so lucky.

Oscar Wilde

In contrast to John Gielgud's experience, where his celebrity status was only slightly damaged following his 1953 arrest for soliciting, but his career ultimately recovered, Oscar Wilde's case, six decades earlier, resulted in far more devastating consequences. Convicted of gross indecency in 1895 and sentenced to two years of hard labour, Wilde's reputation, professional life, and health were irreparably damaged. As Darryl W. Bullock argues in his book *Pride, Pop and Politics*:

[28] Sheridan Morley, *The Authorised Biography of John Gielgud* (Sceptre, 2001). 253-254

> For years, Wilde acted as if he cared not if he were discovered, and he was often lampooned in the press for being effete…a close friend to members of the peerage. Wilde probably thought that his connections made him immune to prosecution.[29]

Unlike Gielgud, Wilde's downfall was both rapid and enduring, and he never regained his position in literary or public life.[30] Yet, like Gielgud, Wilde's judicial involvement furthered the cause of others lobbying for change in attitude towards homosexuals.[31] Both cases – though separated by time and differing in their immediate impact – nonetheless contributed to a longer trajectory of public discourse surrounding homosexuality in Britain. As Ari Adut has explored in her work on scandals, such as those caused by Gielgud and Wilde, writing:

> The study of scandal reveals the effects of publicity on norm enforcement and throws into the full relief of the dramaturgical nature of the public sphere and norm work in society. Scandals are ubiquitous social phenomena with unique salience and singular dramatic intensity. They can mobilize much emotional energy, at times with momentous consequences. Scandals in effect trigger a great deal of the normative solidification and transformation in society. At the same time, avoiding them is an essential motive and ongoing activity of individuals, groups, and institutions. Scandal in the public event par excellence, and any theory of the public sphere is sorely lacking without an understanding of its nature. Many famous scandals have served as case studies for social scientists.[32]

As Adut contests, these highly visible moments of moral and legal transgressions – particularly when involving public figures – function not only as spectacles but also as sites

[29] Oscar Wilde was acquainted with queer performers, writers and painters; Bullock, *Pride, Pop and Politics: Music, Theatre and LGBT Activism 1970-2021*. 10
[30] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Alfred A. Knoff, INC, 1984). 219
[31] Bullock, *Pride, Pop and Politics: Music, Theatre and LGBT Activism 1970-2021*. 10
[32] Adut, "A Theory of Scanadal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde."

of social negotiation, exposing and challenging the boundaries of acceptable identity and behaviour.

The cases of Oscar Wilde and John Gielgud bear striking similarities in that both men were publicly exposed and convicted of a form of indecency under the prevailing laws of the time, and subsequently were publicly outed as homosexuals as a result. However, while Wilde's conviction in 1895 destroyed his career and personal reputation, Gielgud – though initially shamed following his arrest in 1953 – managed, over time, to restore his celebrity image and subsequently his status, while Wilde was ruined. Firstly, lies in the changing landscape of queer activism between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. The years following Wilde's imprisonment saw the emergence of early homosexual advocacy, laying the groundwork for the gradual shift in public and political attitudes towards homosexuality.

Shortly after Wilde's release from prison in 1897, his friend George Cecil Ives established the Order of Chaeronea, widely regarded as the UK's first homosexual rights group. In that same year, Magnus Hirschfield, a German physician and sexologist, founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in Britain, which is now recognized as the first LGBT rights organization. Moreover, German lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and English poet and philosopher Edward Carpenter would begin to lobby for a change in attitudes towards homosexuals. Ulrichs, who had been fighting for homosexual rights since the 1860s, would go on to plead for the repeal of anti-sodomy laws at the Congress of German Jurists in Munich.[33] These early efforts, though unable to help Wilde's plight, marked the beginnings of a slow but significant transformation in how homosexuality was understood and

[33] Bullock, *Pride, Pop and Politics: Music, Theatre and LGBT Activism 1970-2021*. 10-11

contested, shaping the socio-political climate into which Gielgud's scandal would later unfold.

In the nineteenth century, queer artists such as Wilde achieved notoriety alongside other performers, such as Vesta Tilley, a male drag performer who performed in music halls and on stages all throughout the country. There was also a certain amount of eccentricity tolerated amongst artists, which the music hall provided as a source of income, an audience, and, in some ways, a safe space for queer individuals to represent themselves, despite the fact that they often masked and mocked their identity on stage.[34] The theatre provided the safe space that was necessary for queer performers, in ways similar to those in which Noël Coward and John Gielgud found refuge. However, the theatre's safety did not protect Wilde from the judicial system, nor from the scandal that followed its condemnation of the celebrity. Adut argues that:

> The constructivist approval to scandal rightfully reminds us that reactions to transgressions cannot be derived from the transgression themselves. But they often tend to adopt a voluntaristic theory of social construction and have difficulty explaining the variations in the public reactions to deviance…in the Wilde case, however, scandals often involve violent condemnations of transgressions that were widely known and tolerated before.[35]

Although the public was aware of the scandal surrounding Wilde's trial, the nature and consequences of public reaction differed significantly from those experienced by Gielgud. Wilde's imprisonment, followed by his early death just a few years after his release, left him with little opportunity to engage in any form of public activism or rehabilitation.

[34] Bullock. 10
[35] Adut, "A Theory of Scanadal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde."

Oscar Wilde vs John Gielgud: Shifting Landscapes of Celebrity Culture

In contrast to Oscar Wilde, who was incarcerated and remained active in the theatre world, John Gielgud, who was not incarcerated, experienced a scandal that unfolded within a more socially embedded context. One that was shaped by shifting media dynamics and evolving public attitudes. His decision to remain silent in the aftermath reflected both a strategic retreat and an awareness of the intense scrutiny such scandals now entailed, particularly in a society increasingly attuned to the politics of visibility and reputation.

Following his arrest in 1953, John Gielgud attempted to remain as quiet as possible about the affair, avoiding public comment and maintaining silence in the hope that the incident might pass unnoticed. However, once the press uncovered the story, the event became a matter of public record, effectively outing Gielgud's homosexuality to the general public. His arrest, alongside the 1,685 other convictions for homosexual offenses that year, contributed to growing pressure on Parliament to reform the laws concerning homosexuality. While early lobbying efforts were largely disregarded by the government, the eventual formation of the Homosexual Law Reform Society in 1958 played a significant role in advocating for the recommendations of the 1957 Wolfenden Report. Despite such initiatives, contemporary newspapers reported that the government had no intention of legalising homosexual acts, underscoring the political resistance to change.[36] Crucially, unlike Oscar Wilde, Gielgud was not imprisoned for his offense. It was only after media exposure that his private life became a subject of national scrutiny. Initially, there was hope that the matter might soon fade from public memory; playwright and novelist Dodie Smith reassured him in a letter, 'This damnable business will be forgotten in a few weeks.'[37] However, Smith's

[36] Bullock, *Pride, Pop and Politics: Music, Theatre and LGBT Activism 1970-2021*. 15
[37] Croall, *Gielgud A Theatrical Life 1904-2000*. 386

optimism proved misplaced. The stigma endured, and it would be at least a year before Gielgud secured another prominent role, indicating the scandal's enduring impact on his professional standing.

The second key distinction lies in the differing social perceptions of celebrity between the historical periods of Wilde and Gielgud, and in how changing views of celebrities affected the outcomes of the two men's scandals, which greatly impacted their public and private lives. While elements of celebrity culture remained consistent between the late Victorian era and the early 1950s, significant transformations occurred in how public figures were understood and consumed by audiences. As P. David Marshall suggests, 'the public sphere played with the scandalous directions that Oscar Wilde embodied in the late nineteenth century as signalling the true movement of individuals into a public-private form of publicity of the self,'[38] marking an emergent movement in which individuals began to navigate a new public-private mode of self-publicity. Wilde's visibility, therefore, was both sensationalised and pathologized – his persona becoming a cultural battleground for debates about morality, artistry, and social deviance. By the time of Gielgud's scandal in the 1950s, the mechanics of celebrity had evolved, shaped by new forms of mass media, shifting political sensibilities, and a more nuanced understanding of the private lives of public figures. In many ways, the public's reaction to Gielgud's arrest can be read as contingent upon the symbolic legacy of Wilde's downfall. This precedent continued to inform the cultural logic of scandal. Gielgud's survival, while fraught, reflects not only changing attitudes toward homosexuality but also the evolving structures of celebrity itself.

[38] Marshall, David. *Celebrity And Power: Fame and Contemporary Culture*. 231

To further contextualise the changes to celebrity culture beginning in the late Victorian era, Lewis Declan Hughes observes that, 'the late Victorian era contained a mass celebrity culture also engages with ongoing debates regarding the nurture of the nineteenth-century British public and notions of national and imperial community.'[39] Celebrity in Wilde's time was thus embedded within broader discussions of collective moral progress and imperial identity.[40] As David Marshall argues,

> Celebrity is built on this kind of spectacle but relies on a commodity culture, resulting in a constituting of value and a personification of value that demarcate a different configuration of order and structure.[41]

Therefore, the culture was more structured around individual identity rather than collective identity.[42] In this framework, the celebrity becomes a site where public and private selves are constructed for mass consumption. Yet, in Wilde's period, the concept of celebrity itself was still emerging – less fully embedded in the national consciousness and more aligned with a sense of exceptionalism or eccentricity.

Wilde's fame, though considerable, was tied more closely to his individuality and flamboyance than to a broader collective notion of celebrity as understood in the mid-twentieth century. Hughes reinforces this point, noting that Wilde may have been outed and prosecuted in part because the culture was so focused on individual identity that there was a much more passive consuming public. Celebrity culture was still a novelty idea, or as Hughes argues, 'a curiosity rarely explicitly referred to in popular media, and that seemingly

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[39] Huges, "Late-Victorian Celebrity Culture: The Interaction of Celebrity, Media and Consumers." 12;Simon J Potter, "Webs, Networks, and Systems: Globalization and the Mass Media in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Empire," *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 3 (2007): 621–46, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1086/515446.

[40] Huges, "Late-Victorian Celebrity Culture: The Interaction of Celebrity, Media and Consumers." 13

[41] Marshall,David, *Celebrity And Power: Fame and Contemporary Culture*. 55

[42] Ironically this notion of the identity of one's self is found in many of Wilde's works.

failed to pierce extensively into the British popular consciousness.'[43] While Wilde was popular, he didn't represent British celebrity status in the same way that Gielgud did, because the collective relationship to celebrity was still emerging. It did not have the same power to influence the public that it would by the mid-twentieth century.

John Gielgud, by contrast, benefited from a celebrity culture that was less focused on the individual and more on the collective. Britain had witnessed the disastrous effects of World War I and World War II. It was now a society that was less focused on a celebrity's personality and more on how that celebrity represented the nation. When such a celebrity is involved in a scandal, as David Marshall contends that the 'scandal can allow the individual to transcend that identity, or it can lead to the disappearance of the celebrity from public consciousness.'[44] John Gielgud transcended his identity as a scandalous celebrity by disappearing from public consciousness for 18 months and then returning to the limelight, working his way back to fame over time. While Wilde retreated in disgrace to poverty and illness in Paris, John Gielgud, not long after his trial, was able to return to triumph on stage with a standing ovation from his continuingly adoring public.[45] Gielgud's continuing impact on British audiences – despite being outed as a homosexual during a period of continuing homophobia and legal criminalisation – seemed to represent something which Marshall describes as 'a form of representation in the field of popular culture,' that 'relied on media to give them that power and their voice.'[46]

The media's capacity to represent is instrumental in understanding how celebrity, as a formation of contemporary individuality, has migrated from entertainment culture into a

[43] Huges, "Late-Victorian Celebrity Culture: The Interaction of Celebrity, Media and Consumers." 14-15
[44] Marshall,David, *Celebrity And Power: Fame and Contemporary Culture*. 12
[45] Croall, *Gielgud A Theatrical Life 1904-2000*. 385
[46] Marshall,David, *Celebrity And Power: Fame and Contemporary Culture*. 9

wider political culture.[47] Through theatre, film, television, and radio, John Gielgud had immense power over British audiences and other British actors and actresses. Dame Judy Dench once wrote about John Gielgud, saying:

> I met him and was in *The Cherry Orchard* with him in 1961, as Anya. And I had the most terrible time with Michel Saint-Denis, the director. A terrible time. He kept saying to me, 'You've got to prove to me that you deserve the job.' One day after we'd run it and I was a gibbering mess, John just said, 'If that had been for me, that you had been acting that would have been just right.' And I thought, then I shall change my sights. I shall simply veery round as a kind of weather cock and I shall perform just for John I shall perform for his next compliment. And that's what got me through it.[48]

There are multitudes of other stories actors have about their relationship with Gielgud and his importance to their work in the industry. Despite the distress he endured from the press, government authorities, and the public, Gielgud persevered and remains an iconic actor. Nevertheless, he also remains an anti-activist because of his refusal to use his platform to further rights of homosexuals, and he remained silent on the subject of his sexuality even after legislation. Therefore, to preserve his reputation, career, and celebrity status, he chose to remain silent and keep his private sphere separate from his public persona.

Conclusion

This chapter addresses three central questions that together examine the concept of non-activism as a complex form of queer political engagement. Rather than overt protest or

[47] Marshall,David. 243
[48] Clive Fisher, *Gielgud Stories* (Macdonald & Co Ltd, 1988). 38-39

public advocacy, this chapter explores how silence, coded representation, and self-preservation functioned as forms of activism at the macro level. These themes are contrasted with more direct, micro-level activism, which will be discussed in the following chapter. While John Gielgud's 1953 court case may not have been the most high-profile case the queer community has ever seen, it certainly was a case that exemplified the nature of homosexual laws and views, both hostile and more tolerant of homosexuality in 1953 Britain. The case revealed some truths which were hidden amongst the queer community, such as the theatre being considered a very safe place for queer individuals, especially for gay men. The theatre was a place where gay men could work, form friendships, and represent themselves in a place where it was safe to do so without the scrutiny of government authorities.

The first guiding question of this chapter is: What did queer activism look like in 1956? By exploring this query through an investigation of the theatrical works of playwrights – particularly gay or queer-identifying men or those who introduced queer-coded characters into their plays - research into this area reveals that one powerful, if subtle, mode of activism in the 1950s came in the form of artistic representation. Through coded language, nuanced characteristics, and suggestive dialogue, playwrights embedded representations of queer life that would be legible to queer audiences while remaining obscured to heterosexual viewers. This technique enabled discreet yet affirming visibility within a largely hostile cultural climate. Noël Coward and John Osborne are exemplary figures in this context. Both employed theatrical form to articulate veiled queer narratives, offering queer spectators a sense of recognition and inclusion within the safety of the theatre. This subtle encoding functioned as both a protective mechanism and a symbolic affirmation, allowing

queer spectators to see themselves reflected in public art at a time when explicit representation would have been censored or condemned.

This leads to the second question: Why, following his arrest in 1953, was John Gielgud unable to act as an activist? Unlike playwrights who could embed subversive themes within fictional worlds, Gielgud's status as a high-profile celebrity actor made any public political stance far more precarious. As a widely recognised figure who represented Britain through theatre, film, radio, and television, Gielgud was seen as a cultural ambassador. His visibility meant that any explicit alignment with queer activism risked both professional exile and public backlash. Following his arrest for, 'persistently importuning male persons for immoral purposes,' Gielgud adopted a strategy of extreme discretion. He withdrew from public discourse around the incident, refusing to speak openly about the arrest or his sexuality. This silence, while not activist in the traditional sense, functioned as a form of self-protection and, paradoxically, allowed Gielgud to eventually reclaim his career.

This silence was in stark contrast to the fate of Oscar Wilde, who was imprisoned for two years for 'gross indecency' in the late nineteenth century.[49] Wilde, unlike Gielgud, never recovered from the scandal; his career and his social life collapsed, and he died not long after his release.[50] Thus, neither of the two celebrities was able to be outspoken activists nor to represent the queer community through their own violations due to their social and political circumstances. However, their experiences offer insight into how public figures navigated systems of surveillance, shame, and suppression. Their legacies also underscore how public scandal could, over time, contribute to broader cultural dialogues about

[49] Bullock, *Pride, Pop and Politics: Music, Theatre and LGBT Activism 1970-2021*. 4

[50] The terms 'persistently importuning male persons for immoral purposes' and 'gross indecency' imply that both Gielgud and Wilde were caught in situations where they were attempting to have relations with other men.

sexuality, even when the individuals involved could not participate in those discussions themselves.

The third and final question this chapter explores is: How did John Gielgud identify himself, and what role did this identity play in his public and professional choices? While Gielgud did identify as a gay man in his private life, he was foremost committed to the theatre. This profound commitment shaped his entire career and coloured his response to the scandal. As director, Peter Brook described:

> John's highly developed sense of responsibility to an audience is greater than his responsibility to himself. So, of the two integrities, John, unlike several actors, would sacrifice not only himself but the reality of his own work for the sake of not letting the audience down…a director can help by concentrating on himself, creating for him a climate of selfishness that he won't create for himself…Submerged in each of John's performances is a core that is pure, clear, strong, simple, and utterly resilient. The act of working rightly is, for him, to come towards that core.[51]

Gielgud was devoted to the theatre, and it would be the theatre that would help him after the media exposed Gielgud's homosexuality to the public. Rather than withdrawing entirely or attempting to mount a police defence, he relied on the theatre as both refuge and vehicle for recovery. It was not overt activism that salvaged his career, but a return to the stage, supported by his peers and the theatre's cultural capital. His identity as an actor – more than as a gay man – shaped the terms of his public redemption.

This raises the question of whether it was Gielgud's celebrity status or the theatre community's support that ultimately protected him. In truth, it was both. As a respected

[51] Fisher, *Gielgud Stories*. 21

figure already embedded within a network of prominent artists and institutions, Gielgud benefited from a level of protection that might not have been afforded to a lesser-known actor. Figures such as Sybil Thorndike and Ralph Richardson stood by him during and after the scandal, lending their reputations to his cause and reinforcing his cultural legitimacy. Their support reflects the broader ethos of the post-war British theatre world – an ethos increasingly invested in questions of authenticity, artistry, and the private self.

The year 1953 marked the beginning of a shift in queer visibility and artistic expression. In the post-war period, a new generation of performers was emerging – young men and women shaped by the trauma and upheaval of World War II. This generation was more willing to question authority, more eager to challenge societal norms, and more insistent on visibility and representation. Their rise signalled a slow but inexorable cultural shift, laying the groundwork for more overt queer activism that would emerge in the 1960s and beyond. While Gielgud may not have been an activist in the conventional sense, his career and public silence served as a traditional space between repression and representation – a space in which non-activism, too, could be understood as a form of survival and subtle resistance.

In this light, non-activism does not signify absence or apathy. Rather, it reflects a strategic response to conditions of constraint – a form of activism shaped by context, risk, and historical movement. For public figures like Gielgud, silence itself could carry meaning, not as an endorsement of the status quo but as a refusal to capitulate to total erasure. The theatre, in turn, became the stage not only for artistic performance, but for the quiet persistence of identity. Together, Gielgud and his peers offered an alternative model queer visibility – one that operated beneath the surface of scandal, spectacle, and censure, and

one that shaped the cultural landscape of post-war Britain in ways both subtle and profound.

CHAPTER FOUR

Celebrity versus Activism, Equity Goes to Court

On the 10th of May 1974, an article from *The Daily Telegraph* depicted in bold letters: 'Olivier backs fight to stop Equity 'takeover.,'[1] concerning a disagreement within British Actors' Equity between factions who held opposing perspectives on the governance of the union.[2] The younger group, led by the British celebrity actors Corin and Vanessa Redgrave[3] who aligned with the Trotskyist Workers' Revolutionary Party, sought to influence the union's political orientation by advocating a referendum that would favour Leftist ideologies and by using the platform of celebrity power associated with British Equity to further political causes.[4] In contrast, the opposing group, which included prominent British actors of the older generation such as Laurence Olivier, Derek Bond, and Marius Goring, opposed the referendum, emphasising the preservation of individual rights within the union and a focus on union activities in the performing arts industry.[5] This chapter uses this dispute as a case study where celebrity activism takes centre stage, illustrating the transformation of the role of celebrity in the 1970s, where generational and political strife was indicative of the broader issues in British society.

To fully understand this case, three matters must be addressed. The first of these is the political, economic, and social scene in Britain during the 1970s, as well as exploring prior to World War Two, to observe how the social, political, and economic climate of Britain

[1] Keith Nurse, "Olivier Backs Fight to Stop Equity 'Takeover,'" *The Daily Telegraph*, May 30, 1974.
[2] Nurse, "Olivier Backs Fight to Stop Equity 'Takeover.'"
[3] The children of British celebrity actor Sir Michael Redgrave
[4] Nurse, "Olivier Backs Fight to Stop Equity 'Takeover.'"
[5] By the time this article was published in 1974, Laurence Olivier and Marius Goring had achieved significant celebrity status in theatre, film, radio and television.

developed after the Second World War. The second aspect concerns the influence that unions wielded over the economic industry and the ways in which entitlement and authority were structured within unions across the U.K. Before and during the 1980s, unions served as the primary stronghold for skilled workers, playing a pivotal role in labour representation and economic negotiations.[6] The third of these matters is the actors' union, the British Actors' Equity Association. Within these three specific matters, other issues that affect them are the Arts Council of Great Britain and the overall impact of celebrity culture on society.

Social Climate after World War Two

After the end of World War Two, America's dominance rose, and with that, Britain felt a need to preserve its identity as a world leader even as its empire was in decline. Due to Britain's alliance with America during the war, Britain became more influenced by America's left-wing politics, and therefore certain areas of British theatre were fascinated by these ideals.[7] While some actors who were part of the older generation, such as Laurence Olivier, adjusted to this new type of theatre, others, such as Marius Goring and actor Alec Guinness, preferred to value the older tradition of British theatre, particularly concerning certain productions of Shakespeare, in order to preserve a sense of British identity. Due to America's influence, much of British society recognized America's global power and came to realize its own former world power status. Britain felt increasingly overshadowed by America's global influence. These trans-Atlantic tensions were felt by the military and by British artists, whose colonial heritage naturally imposed a position of interiority, and subordination was scarcely

[6]'The Cabinet Papers | 1960s and 1970s Radicalisation', accessed 6 December 2021, https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/alevelstudies/1960-radicalisation.htm.

[7] There were many people who aligned with the socialism and the communist party prior to the aftermath of world war two. Many of which were actors and celebrities. However, socialism and communism was not perceived to be as big of a threat until after world war two.

acknowledged.[8] This chapter explores the economic, social, and political influence of America as shown through the actions of Laurence Olivier, Derek Bond, and Marius Goring. These three British celebrities and cultural icons were immensely popular in both British and American film, radio, and television. However, it was on the British stage that these actors began their careers and made the greatest impact through the immense social changes in Britain after the Second World War.

Much of Western society has taken the aspect of celebrity and transformed it into a title which his socially admired and often respected today. Film studies scholar Olivier Driessens argues that there are several different concepts of celebrity. 'Celebrification comprises the changes at the individual level, or, more precisely, the process by which ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities.'[9] Bond, Goring, and Olivier are the embodiment of everything this statement encompasses. Furthermore, celebrity can be broken down into different variations that comprise the influence and sphere linked to individual differences. Sociologist Chris Rojek depicts these individual changes as three forms: ascribed, achieved, and attributed.[10] Ascribed status refers to celebrity status conferred through lineage, a form of recognition that Olivier, Bond, and Goring did not inherently possess. Instead, their celebrity status was attained through their professional achievements. Furthermore, their status was shaped by cultural intermediaries, as their public recognition was closely tied to the social values they embodied. Consequently, their celebrity status can also be understood as an attribute rather than an inheritance. Bond, Goring, and Olivier embody Driessen's concept of Celebrification.[11] They were transformed

[8] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 141
[9] Driessens, "The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture."
[10] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 17
[11] More about this concept can be found in the introduction.

into celebrities through their growing notoriety as actors on the stage and in film, and were able to adapt and negotiate changes on an individual level. Although many of the decisions they made throughout their career were controversial, their fame continued. Bond, Olivier, and Goring successfully leveraged their celebrity status and influence to shape their profession and the broader field of British culture and society. They would use their advantage as powerful celebrities throughout the British Equity court case.

While those men had achieved their celebrity status through their own labour, the Redgrave family, on the other hand, was an excellent example of ascribed celebrity through lineage, as one of the most beloved theatrical legacy families in twentieth-century Britain. The Redgrave's were a multi-generational family of actors who maintained their celebrity status through their family dynasty. Vanessa and Corin Redgrave were the children of celebrity actors Michael Redgrave and Rachael Kempson. Celebrities raised in celebrity families experience a distinct and unique upbringing compared to individuals from a non-celebrity background. For example, Vanessa Redgrave was immersed in an environment shaped by her parents' association with renowned figures in the entertainment industry. Notable visitors to the Redgrave household included Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Ralph Richardson, and Alec Guinness. Additionally, Redgrave was introduced to public prominence from an early age, exemplified by her presentation of a bouquet to the young Princess Elizabeth at a Royal Command Performance.[12] While Vanessa and Corin grew up surrounded by celebrities, and celebrity was a part of their lives since birth, they also reflect broader phenomena, such as celebrification, as discussed by Driessens, the process of transforming ordinary people into celebrities, and the cultural and societal impact of that change. Michael

[12] Tim Adler, *The House of Redgrave: The Lives of a Theatrical Dynasty* (Quarto Publishing Group, 2014). 33.1

Redgrave was also a socialist, which influenced Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, but they would be more affected by other organizations, such as the Workers' Revolutionary Party.[13] Due to such a separation between generational ideas and thoughts, this chapter investigates how the social turmoil and upheaval 1970s Britain is reflected through the court case against British Actors' Equity by Marius Goring and his antagonists, Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, and how this case is a battle, not solely for a theatrical union, but for the role of activism amongst celebrities in the post-war era.

At a societal level, celebrity serves as a reflection of broader social dynamics, a portrayal that is mediated through various forms of media. The media serves as the primary conduit, bridging the gap between celebrities and societal values, shaping public perception through its portrayal of fame. Its significance lies in its role as a facilitator of everyday societal and cultural exchanges, influencing public discourse through stylistic trends, diverse viewpoints, controversial topics, and agenda-setting. As an essential component of daily life, the media mirrors interpersonal interactions, positioning celebrities as intermediaries between the public's social and personal spheres. Consequently, celebrities are disseminated to mass audiences through newspapers, television, radio, and film, reinforcing their cultural influence.[14] Cultural and societal exchanges, which are influenced by the modern phenomenon of celebrity, are circulated by the media and epitomised by Marius Goring's first attempt to file a court case against British Actors' Equity in the 1970s.

Cultural and Social Changes Revealed by the Court Case

On Wednesday, the 27th of October, 1976, an appeal was heard before the Court of Appeal between the British Actors' Equity Association and the appellant, actor Marius Goring, and

[13] See Appendix 3
[14] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 14

the defendants, actors Corin Redgrave and Graham Hamilton. The appeal was granted to confirm the meeting of the true construction of the rules of the British Actors' Equity Association.[15] The conflict was between union members who say that the rules can only be changed at a properly constituted general meeting of the membership and members who say that such a change could be brought about by a postal ballot of the entire membership, as well as by a vote taken at a general meeting.

The conflict in the court case involving Equity and Goring reflects what Driessens asserts about celebrity, emphasising that it is distributed unequally.[16] This case reflects the broader social and political concerns of British performing artists during the 1970s, which shaped and interpreted the role of art in Britain within the evolving discourse on social change. Building on the work of sociologist Jürgen Habermas, large-scale public communication necessitates specific mechanisms for dissemination and influence. In the modern era, newspapers, periodicals, radio, and television serve as key media facilitating discourse within the public sphere.[17] Media crosses the threshold between reflections of society and celebrity, having the power to assess what the celebrity is doing and whether the celebrity's actions are socially acceptable. As Driessens argues, 'In multiple social fields, such as the political, cultural, or economic field, celebrity has become a valued power source.'[18]Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, along with Graham Hamilton, hoped to use the power obtained from the celebrity status to turn Equity into a platform for Leftist political discourse, while the conservative appellants, including Goring, Bong, Olivier, and others,

[15] Otherwise known as Equity
[16] Driessens, "The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture."
[17] Habermas, *On Society and Politics: A Reader*. 231
[18] Driessens, "The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture."

hoped to keep the performers' union separate from the divisive political sphere of 1970s Britain.

In simple terms, the dispute centred on the interpretation of the referendum rule, which granted the Council the authority to indicate a vote among the entire membership on any question or resolution, while providing individual members with a more limited voting power. Equity did not have a branch or delegate structure that allowed for political party representation. As a result, to participate in decision-making, members were required to attend general meetings in person. There was no provision for representation at branch, district, or regional levels, nor was there an assembly of individuals authorised to exercise votes on behalf of members. Additionally, the organization's rules did not include any mechanism for individual representation through a delegate acting on behalf of another member.[19] Basically, if an individual wanted to be represented by Equity, they would have to represent themselves in person, which many in the entertainment industry found difficult, if not impossible, to do during a busy performance season, while on tour, or while filming on location.

The court case between Goring and Equity was fundamental to mid-twentieth-century concerns about art as a platform for social change across Britain. The defendants, Corin Redgrave and Graham Hamilton, used their celebrity status to better engage in political activism during a time of great division in Britain. Their position was challenged by Bond, Goring, Olivier, and other appellants, who argued that art (and artists) should remain

[19] AMBROSE APPLEBE PARTNERS, ON APPLEAL FROM HER MAJESTY'S COURT OF APPEAL (ENGLAND) IN THE MATTER OF THE RULES OF BRITISH ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION BETWEEN BRITISH ACTORS' ASSOCIATION Respondent -and- MARIUS GORING Appellant GRAHM HAMILTON Respondent CORIN REDGRAVE Respondent (THE HOUSE OF LORDS 27 October 1976).

above politics. Goring and his associate called to safeguard the interests of such a divisive body of members within Equity from political activism.

The founders of British Equity initially created a council with wide powers, subject to the control of the members at annual or specific general meetings and, in specific circumstances, the whole membership.[20] Celebrity culture played a significant role in influencing the decision to amend Equity's rules and, in many ways, facilitated Marius Goring's efforts to challenge Equity regarding the referendum issue. It also enabled him to resist Vanessa and Corin Redgrave's attempts to reform the organization before ultimately escalating the dispute to the House of Lords. Although there was a divisive body of members within Equity, due to Goring's personal cultural capital as a celebrity and his power and influence as a member of Equity's council, he was able to gain control over the union's decisions.

The Politics, Economics, and Society in 1970s Britain

To be a celebrity in Britain during the 1970s was different than being merely an actor. While fame brings power, [21]the power that celebrities have has allowed them to progress economically and socially. But to gain a better perspective on how celebrities were able to advance with such power, an understanding of the political, economic, and social landscape in 1970s Britain is necessary. To be a celebrity in Britain during the 1970s was to occupy a role that extended far beyond that of a working actor. While actors might have traditionally been associated with artistic labour and performance, celebrities in this period had begun to operate within a wider cultural and ideological framework – one that granted them a unique

[20] Lord Justice Roskoll and Lord Justice Lawton, BRITISH ACTORS EQUITY ASSOCIATION and MARIUS GORING and GRAHAM HAMILTON and CORIN REDGRAVE, No. 4246 (Royal Courts of Justice 27 October 1976).
[21] Piers Paul Read, *Alec Guinness: The Authorised Biography*, 2011. 301

kind of social currency. Fame did not merely offer visibility; it conferred a form of power that could be leveraged for economic gain, cultural influence, and increased mobility across class and institutional boundaries. Unlike earlier periods in which fame might have remained confined to theatrical circles or artistic prestige, by the 1970s, British celebrities were situated at the intersection of media, politics, commerce, and public discourse.

Understanding how celebrities capitalised on this power requires a deeper engagement with the broader political, economic, and social conditions in Britain during the decade. The 1970s were a time of profound upheaval and transformation. Economically, the country was grappling with inflation, industrial decline, and a series of debilitating strikes, culminating in the so-called 'Winter of Discontent.' Politically, there was widespread dissatisfaction with both Labour and Conservative governments, while new political movements – including those rooted in feminism, racial justice, and gay liberation – were gaining momentum. Socially, Britain was confronting the lingering legacies of empire, shifting gender norms, and the increasing influence of mass media on daily life. These overlapping crises and transformations created an environment in which celebrity could function not only as entertainment but also as commentary and even soft power.

Towards the end of the 1970s, Britain culminated in a full social breakdown, power cuts, rampant bureaucracy, and powerful trade unions.[22] Despite a quarter of a century since the Second World War, the country was still in a state of social and political reconstruction. The 1970s were also a period of fractious politics, marked by deeply divided party factions on the Right and the Left. The Labour Party politician Tony Benn referred to the differences between the Right and the Left as, 'Looking ahead, I said I thought one of our

[22] Alwyn W. Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the 1970s*, 2013. 4

difficulties was that the Tories seemed to be thinking of the Seventies, whereas the Labour Party looked as if it was just at the end of its period of office.[23] Both factions did what they thought was best to gain votes without considering the outcome. The outcome was one marked by power cuts and workers' strikes, first by refuse workers, then by Mineworkers.[24] Individuals with power and authority blamed one another, and those beneath suffered as a result. This chaos is directly mirrored in the court case; however, to understand the history of activism amongst the British theatrical community, an exploration into the politics prior to the Second World War must be addressed because the source of social tension between social class and the effect such pressure had on the arts was created prior to the Second World War.

Political Activism and Britain in the Twentieth Century

In the 1930s, Britain saw significant support for Leftist politics, mainly in response to the rising influence of fascism in Europe and to the economic crisis following the Wall Street crash in 1929, which put 2.5 million people in Britain out of work. Over the course of the 1930s, many people felt frustrated with the Tory government, and many Britons began to look to Left-Wing ideologies, such as communism or socialism, which seemed fairer and more efficient than the conservative government.[25] Naturally, when one system of government is seemingly failing society and not offering any hope of work or a better economy, another system may appeal to many.

Within the theatrical community, responses to the political and economic climate came in the form of workers' political groups. Left-wing groups of actors with names such as

[23] Turner. 11
[24] Turner. 11-15
[25] John Smart, *Twentieth Century British Drama*, Cambridge Contexts in Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2001). 19

Theatre of Action or *Red Megaphones* and *Unity* would go out on the streets and proclaim their Leftist ideals. *Unity's* mission was, 'To foster the art of drama by interpreting life as it is experienced by the majority of people, to work for the betterment of society.'[26] These early Leftist theatrical groups would serve as precursors to the 1956 revolutionary movement, which included John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*. Theatre director Joan Littlewood combined politics with stage performance through the Theatre of Action, a company composed largely of untrained actors, working-class enthusiasts who resented traditional views of the theatre.[27] *Theatre of Action* wanted to convey its political mission through theatre.[28] Ewan McColl, another Leftist performer, would establish the Red Megaphones, who often gave open-air performances in public spaces to spread their political message to crowds.[29] These Leftist groups would reflect the social attitudes and anger felt towards the Tory government; however, this would change all too soon.

After World War Two, socialist attitudes began to change, and an anti-communist policy would affect the Labour Party. Socialist groups saw themselves as the guardian of liberalism and of freedom itself. There was an immense desire to change the current economic system into one that appeared appealing from the outside, without giving any thought to the consequences. These changes would be made with a reference point in experience and a transhistorical term, because the concept of naturalism remains unbroken from the liberal ideas of the nineteenth century, as a sense that human beings are at the centre of a history that happens to them, driven by external factors.[30] After the war, the

[26] Smart, *Twentieth Century British Drama*. 20
[27] Eyre and Wright, *Changing Stages a View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century*. 260
[28] Eyre and Wright. 260
[29] 'WCML | Red Megaphones First Performance | 200 Years of Working-Class Movement Activism', accessed 20 December 2021, https://www.wcml.org.uk/about-us/timeline/red-megaphones-first-performance/.
[30] Simon Shepard, *English Drama* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1996). 277

mainstream of British culture was influenced by social change in Europe, as it was portrayed through art. Any form of political transformation in society is directly mirrored in artistic expression. In response, emerging European avant-garde movements in the post-war period adhered steadfastly to an aesthetic that appeared to reject experimentation, artisanal craftmanship, and overt political activism.[31] However, within the theatre, there were different discussions about how art should be portrayed. The younger generation longed for something new and different from the older generation's values.

Theoretically, political attitudes continued to lean left-wing among the younger generation, who were angry with traditionalist society and old-fashioned values based on recycled plays and worn-out formulas.[32] The younger generation sought out new and inspiring ways of portraying art, where new theatre lacked enough old stories and legends; they abhorred this and were much more interested in new ways of portraying theatre. The post-war form of new drama would continue to convey messages against traditionalist values and to make political statements, with many actors going beyond the stage to proclaim their political ideals.

Leftist ideals and the pre- and post-war Leftist theatre heavily influenced Vanessa and Corin Redgrave. Vanessa would appear onstage in an adaptation of George Elliot's novel Daniel Deronda to protest against the Vietnam War, and Corin would co-produce an open-air musical for the Socialist Labour League.[33] Vanessa and Corin's engagement in political and social causes contributed to their reputation as celebrity Leftists, a status they carried with them wherever they went. Vanessa and Corin Redgrave became actively involved with the Socialist Labour League in the 1960s. Socialism would have a lasting impact on many areas

[31] Simon Shepard, *English Drama* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1996). 270
[32] Shepard. 275
[33] Donald Spoto, *The Redgraves: A Family Epic* (Crown Publishing Group, 2012). 248

of their lives, as they went public with their political viewpoints.[34] Along the way, Vanessa and Corin Redgrave would gain followers, such as actor and member of Equity, Graham Hamilton,[35] who, along with other fellow Equity members Miriam Carlin and Kika Markham,[36] were seen as either being Marxist or Trotskyist, and would soon take their political message to Equity in an attempt to gain support for the National Union of Mineworkers when they went on strike.[37] Another theatre group, The Red Ladder, joined the anti-Vietnam War protests in 1968 outside Grosvenor Square, which were led by Vanessa Redgrave.[38] Vanessa and Corin Redgrave would continue to be involved with socialist and Marxist movements, and their political involvements would impact both their professional and personal lives.[39] Eventually, Vanessa and Corin would attempt to take their political stance to Equity.

British Actos' Equity Association

The rising tension between the pre- and post-war generations of Actors' Equity culminated in Marius Goring's disapproval of any association between Equity and Left-wing politics. *The Daily Mail* articulated Goring's disapproval of Equity's growing influence on the miners' strike in 1973: 'Goring once threatened Equity with a writ when it proposed to donate money to striking miners. That made them stop the cash and offer mild verbal support instead.'[40] The strife within Equity would lead to the legal battle mentioned at the beginning

[34] Spoto. 248-249
[35] Goring, Marius. "Letter to the Editor." *The Stage* 20 January 1977.
[36] Eric Jacobs, "This One, I Told Him, Will Run and Run," *The Sunday Times*, November 9, 1975.
[37] 'Vanessa and Her Lefties Get Upstaged Article by Shaun Usher *Daily Mail* 22 June 1973.
[38] 'Red Ladder Theatre Collection - Library | University of Leeds', accessed 30 November 2021, https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/389638.
[39] Spoto, *The Redgraves: A Family Epic*. 248-249
[40] 'Vanessa and Her Lefties Get Upstaged Article by Shaun Usher *Daily Mail* 22 June 1973.

of the chapter, but to fully understand the importance of the case, an exploration of the power of trade unions and other organizations is necessary.[41]

The Arts Council of Great Britain[42] was born to provide funding for the arts on a non-profit basis.[43] Initially, the Arts Council was to be a model that offered a chance to make the arts more accessible to people and to open up opportunities through funding, thus giving big and small theatres a chance. The ideological shift that characterised this period was heralded by the appointment of Britain's first Minister for the Arts, Jennie Lee, in 1964. Lee was committed to distributing more art while upholding quality. She wanted to level up the Arts industry in the UK through national subsidies. Lee's strategy was to maintain the use of grants to existing places considered centres of excellence, while fostering the broader diffusion of excellence. For Lee, the arts had to occupy a central place, and that enjoyment of the Arts should be regarded as something remote from everyday life.[44] Despite Lee's outlook on the arts, by the 1970s the theatre industry was in turmoil amid financial crises sweeping the country.

Due to inflationary pressures driving up costs, building-based theatre proved more difficult, breaking up long-term contracts and repertory companies, thereby fragmenting the lives of professional actors.[45] The theatre industry faced additional problems, particularly from 1973-74, due to rising oil and heating costs. Due to their large windows, high-ceilinged lobbies, and large auditoriums, new regional theatres were vulnerable to inflation.[46] The Stratford theatre, with its 1,500 seats, faced the problematic cost of £45 million to replace

[41] Such as the Arts Council of Great Britain
[42] Otherwise known as the Arts Council
[43] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 12
[44]"The Guardian View on the Arts White Paper: No Direction Home." *The Guardian*', 27 March 2016.
[45] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 184-185
[46] Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester University Press, 2005). 22

the existing building. Pressures increased as the theatre industry evolved during this period, from grand-scale theatres such as the National Theatre, the Old Vic, and the Royal Shakespeare Company, with its menagerie of celebrities, to smaller fringe theatre companies and small-scale touring groups.[47] With this evolution, the shifts within the theatre industry reflected those happening outside the theatres in broader British society.

In the early 1960s, Peter Hall established revolutionary three-year contracts for actors with the founding of the Royal Shakespeare Company.[48] Things proved difficult as well-known actors were taking on film offers, and flexibility was limited. Industrial relations between managers, performers, and theatre workers became strained as a result. With theatre contracts issued only on a yearly basis and the renewals, along with the strain of maintaining staff and artist relations, union membership in theatre companies became more common, particularly among technical and backstage workers. Industrial action by unions had a greater influence on working conditions and the fair treatment of staff within the industry. In 1976, the National Theatre delayed its opening due to the relationship between staff and managers and the powers of negotiation. Then, in 1976, Hall, who by then was the artistic director of the National Theatre, defied two strikes by running productions without a stage crew.[49] Hall's approach to the unions illustrates the imbalance of power between those publicly recognised as leaders of the theatre industry and the lesser-known workers and backstage staff who suffered as a result.

Balance of Power within the Arts

Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, power relations within the arts in Britain shifted from what was considered civilising and understood by the elite to a more metropolitan

[47] Eyre and Wright. 284
[48] Otherwise known as the RSC
[49] Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire*. 201

culture that would offer the best shows to most of the public. Therefore, celebrities would receive more government investment in order to increase distribution. Thus, more regional theatres were created to produce their own shows rather than rely on touring theatre groups.[50] The theatre industry was becoming more compact, so shows could be more convenient for those who would otherwise not go to the theatre.

This shift in power would become evident in 1970, when the conservative government returned to power and took charge. All the while, there was constant conflict with the trade union. This conflict was ultimately curtailed in 1974 by Prime Minister Edward Heath, who sought to regulate political theatre groups that performed at factory gates, during strikes, and at union meetings.[51] In 1972, Equity would agree to strike if the West End theatre management rejected a demand for a £30 minimum wage. Equity had been struggling for an £18 minimum wage to up to £30, with other wage increases for stage management and the company, along with paid holidays and better rehearsal fees.[52]

Union Equity was unique because it was formed in 1929, particularly to protect lesser-known actors and other artists with careers in show business.[53] The profession of performing arts, nonetheless, encompasses a wide range of careers, distinguishing Equity from other trade unions that typically represent a single occupation, whereas Equity encompasses multiple artistic professions. Since the theatre industry is such a broad category, it was necessary for Equity to differ from other unions that focused on a single profession or group. Therefore, if several hundred actors had come together and affiliated themselves as a union to a council which consists of trade unions throughout Britain, known

[50] Harvie, *Staging the UK*. 18.
[51] Simon Trussler, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of British Theatre* Cambridge university press, 1994. 345
[52] 'Equity Members Vote to Strike over Minimum Wage Article DM 12 June 1972.
[53] "What Is Equity? All About the British Actors Union in the UK."

as the Trade Union Congress,[54] a number of issues or concerns surrounding strikes, settlements, reform, etc, which surround unions in Britain could be addressed by the TUC, if a performer believed they were being treated unfairly, Equity would advocate on their behalf by bringing these concerns to the UK government, Parliament, and other influential bodies.[55] There would be what Jen Harvie would refer to as a, 'tension between the individual and the community.'[56] It was this type of advocacy that became the central issue in the 1976 court case between Goring and Equity and whether the union should align itself politically with either the extreme Left or Right, and whether the regulations established for a few hundred performers in 1929 remained applicable to the 25,000 performers in 1976.[57] Basically, should the rules stay the same to accommodate more members and account for changes in British society?

To answer this question, an exploration of Equity in the 1930s and 1940s is necessary, when Equity was still a fairly young union. At this time, Leftist politics were seen in a much more positive light, and by World War Two, they were associated with the second front against the Nazi's. This, however, was not the case after the war, and by the late 1960s in Britain, Leftist politics were not seen in the same way, especially when Vanessa and Corin Redgrave tried to use Equity to influence members to vote for the Workers' Revolutionary Party to be elected to Equity's council. Equity members such as Goring and Olivier began to view the influence of Leftist politics within Equity as a takeover, particularly since fewer than 500 of the 25,000 members attended Equity's general meetings. Moreover, many of those who did show up were supporters of the Workers' Revolutionary Party.[58] From this conflict,

[54] Otherwise known as the TUC
[55] "What Is Equity? All About the British Actors Union in the UK."
[56] Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester University Press, 2005). 12
[57] Andrew Stephen, "Enter Marius Goring, Stage Right," *The Sunday Telegraph*, June 11, 1978.
[58] Stephen.

Equity ultimately passed motions supporting the miners and authorizing the use of Equity's funds to further support them through financial assistance schemes.

The vote to provide financial assistance to the miners caused significant tension within the union, particularly between the individual and the community.[59] The challenge Equity faced, unlike many other trade unions, was that at any point in the year, a vast majority of its members were likely to be out of work. This caused many members to struggle to pay the minimum £18-a-year subscription and led to a deficit on their accounts.[60] Critics of the Redgrave's scheme to support the miners through a subsistence fund by Equity made other members of the union argue that with a high percentage of Equity's membership being unemployed, and having trouble giving their £18-a-year subscription, freely giving funds to another union would cause frustration and worry to a wide number of members who were not represented in the council's vote.[61] This tension is both periodically aimed at the individual and the community, as Harvey explains that, ' at once aiming to make possible individual opportunity – even when one person's access to opportunity may directly diminish another person's – but also trying to protect group or community rights.[62] Much of this internal struggle within the union was revealed through the press. *The Sunday Telegraph* reported that, 'the motions that were passed often did not have the support of the great silent majority in Equity.'[63] Critics argued that the vast majority of Equity's members were more concerned with utilising Equity's political associations, which were held by a few of their more radical members, many of whom were more successful and less financially strapped than the majority.

[59] Harvie, *Staging the UK*. 12
[60] Stephen, "Enter Marius Goring, Stage Right."
[61] Stephen.
[62] Harvie, *Staging the UK*. 12
[63] Stephen, "Enter Marius Goring, Stage Right."

The power dynamic within Equity is a post-structuralist relationship, in which one side seeks dominance and authority over the other, and both reject each other's ideas and views. The power imbalance amongst Equity members between the successful and the more obscure majority increased tension within the union. There were celebrity actors in Equity, such as Laurence Olivier, who were so famous that they were guaranteed to get publicity every time they coughed, and others were simply performers looking for their next job.[64] Thus, having the actor and the celebrity actor both in the same union exhibited an imbalance of power between the two groups. Prior to the debate over the miners' strike, there was a national debate on Equity's involvement with the Industrial Relations Act. The Industrial Relations Act was a Conservative Party policy to restructure power within the unions by bringing them under government surveillance, strengthening employees' power, and providing individual protection against trade union pressure and intimidation to follow the union agenda. The Act ruled that, for trade unions to be subject to government regulations and supervision, they would have to voluntarily register.[65] However, some Equity members like Goring were against this policy, and their argument was, 'We, the membership of Equity, deplore and condemn the unprincipled action taken by Equity Council to register our union under the Tory Government's Industrial Relations Act.[66] This statement of Equity's membership's opposition to the union's registration illustrates the growing tension between Equity's leadership and Its membership.

The rupture between Equity's Right and Left political factions was wide-ranging. Many actors and actresses would come forward to express their political and social opinions

[64] Stephen.
[65] Gosh, "The British Trade Unions and the Labour Law: The Case of the Industrial Relations Act 1971," *Relations Industrielles/ Industrial Relations* 35, no. 2 (1980): 251–78.
[66] 'A Special General Meeting' *The Stage* and *Television Today*, 6 April 1972, The Garrick Club Library.

on the dispute. Equity's leader, Peter Plouviez, believed that the union was 'caught in a vicious circle, whereby every decision taken can be challenged and reversed, so that, in certain circumstances, there is nowhere it can be said that ultimately authority lies.[67] The actors Marius Goring, Laurence Olivier, Michael Denison, Nigel Patrick, Kenneth More, Richard Briars, Bill Simpson, and Donald Sniden[68] were those who were on the side of the moderate, or otherwise known as the politically Right, while the actors Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, Miriam Carlin, and Kika Markham were on the side of the politically Left.[69] Each group would have its own faction. Those on the political Left would be part of the faction 'Campaign for Restructuring and Progress for Equity.'[70] Each group would leverage its celebrity status to advance its views on the structure of Equity. *The Times* reported that there was concern that, 'there is real danger that control of the union may, within a fairly short time, fall in the hands not meagrely of the faction who wish to change its structure fundamentally, and in doing so, greatly weaken the control that the majority can have over the determined minorities.[71] Without a doubt, Equity, like many other British trade unions, would have its ongoing struggle around power and control.

Tension between the Right and Left factions worsened when the Leftist members of Equity sought to adopt Equity's constitution for rule by general meeting, where everyone could vote, and turn it into a branch-and-delegates structure, with a more structured voting procedure. By this time, Goring and other members who opposed Leftist ideals came to be known within Equity as the Right-wing. Right-wing members argue that the use of a referendum was the only way to prevent a resolution from the Leftist members within

[67] Bruce Loudon, "Equtiy Heads for Showdown with Vanessa," *The Daily Telegraph*, 1975.
[68] Jacobs, "This One, I Told Him, Will Run and Run*, The Sunday Times*. 1975"
[69] Jacobs.
[70] Otherwise known as CRAPE Jacobs.
[71] Bernard Levin, "Equity: The Fanatics Waiting in the Wings," *The Times*, May 24, 1978.

Equity. Goring, who was very passionate about Equity, mentioned that, 'In the recent battle for Equity, actors voted at a general meeting, by a clear majority, to keep their union non-political and non-sectarian. Should this decision be put to the entire membership and it were ratified by referendum, it would demonstrate that trade unionists still have the power to unlock the doors of threatened Incarceration.'[72] Thus, a conflict emerged between the extreme Right, who now referred to themselves as *Act for Equity*, led by Laurence Olivier and Nigel Davenport, and the extreme Left began. *Act for Equity* campaign papers would make statements such as,

> If you dislike hypocrisy, we urge you to vote for the following candidates who may or may not be members of ACT for Equity, but who SAY the will of the majority shall prevail and Equity remain a non-political party non-secretarian Union." "THEY MEAN WHAT THEY "SAY.'[73]

From what appeared at first to be a subtle disagreement between the Left and the Right, the union was not turning into an all-out war.

At this time, newspapers went wild with articles titled, 'This One I Told Him Will Run and Run' from the *Sunday Times,* with, 'Picture the scene. The Coliseum curtain rises. Stage Right, Lord Oliver and Nigel Davenport. Stage Left, the Redgraves, Vanessa and Corin.'[74] Another with the headline, Equity: 'The Fanatics Waiting in the Wings' from *The Times* which reported that, 'There is a real danger that control of the union may, within a fairly short time, fall into the hands not merely of the faction who wish to change its structure fundamentally, and in doing so greatly weaken the control that the majority can have over

[72] Marius Goring, "Letter to the Editor of The Times Re Equity Closed Shop," *The Times*, 1975.
[73] Laurence Olivier and Nigel Davenport, 'ACT FOR EQUITY', 1978., The Garrick Club Library, accessed 2 December 2021.
[74] Jacobs, "This One, I Told Him, Will Run and Run."

the determined minorities.'[75] The Daily Mail had the headline, ''Actors' Union is Facing Break-Up' reporting that, 'Their[76] The aim is to fight Left-Wing actors who, they say, are bringing politics into the theatre and have succeeded in dominating Equity's ruling council.'[77] A combination of celebrity status, and the power structure within Equity would prove to be the factors which would aggravate the despite between the Right and the Left even further.

The power of Right-wing industry members, along with the newspapers' attention, would prove unfavourable to the reputations of some Left-wing activists because of the dispute. Corin Redgrave's outspoken involvement with the Socialist Labour League and the Workers' Revolutionary Party made it almost impossible for him to find work within his field during this period.[78] The same was true for Vanessa, who was openly accused of being a registered Communist and, in 1974, was denied a visa to the United States until Charlton Heston intervened on her behalf, and she was able to perform as Lady Macbeth in Los Angeles.[79] Vanessa and Corin became more involved in campaigns against the Vietnam War, alongside other socialist and Marxist movements across the UK.[80] Therefore, when Vanessa and Corin Redgrave wanted Equity to have more politically Leftist ideals and actions, there was unrest amongst many of the members, such as Bond, Olivier, Goring, and another British actor, Richard Briars, as Equity was becoming a union that was split between members who were politically Left and members who were politically Right.[81] Another Equity member, Graham Ashely, would rebuke Corin Redgrave's Leftist ideals with, 'the suggestion that management books should be opened and contents displayed to the

[75] Levin, "Equity: The Fanatics Waiting in the Wings."
[76] ACT for Equity
[77] 'Equity Facing Breakup Article *Daily Mail* 6 February 1975.Pdf', 1975.
[78] Spoto, *The Redgraves: A Family Epic*. 249
[79] Spoto. 249
[80] Spoto. 249
[81] 'Vanessa and Her Lefties Get Upstaged Article by Shaun Usher *Daily Mail* 22 June 1973'.

membership is sheer impertinence. Why do we tolerate him?[82] The political unrest within Equity became so severe that Goring left the union for a short time, but he later returned to pursue litigation against Equity.

This time, control over Equity shifted because there was so much competition for the structure of Equity from the two factors. The Daily Telegraph reported that Plouviez was concerned for the political powers which were infiltrating Equity and that:

> An increasing number of members resent the attempts that have been made over recent years by small groups of one kind or another to use the union and its members for purely party-political ends.[83]

The newspapers were all reporting the latest news regarding the political situation within Equity. *The Times, The Daily Telegraph,* and *The Sunday Times*,[84] were among the many papers that revolved around Vanessa and Corin as leaders who were putting Equity at the centre of a political battle. The newspapers would refer to Vanessa, Corin, and their followers as either being, 'Trotskyist extremists or Vanessa's Loonies,'[85] presenting a biased perspective towards those who sided with the politically Left members within Equity.

In 1970s Britain, there remained a significant bias against individuals closely associated with Leftist politics. While Leftist ideologies had played a constructive role during World War Two, they had since become likened to communism and radicalism, reflecting the broader political climate of the time. There were politicians who were exceptionally clever men with a wide range of experience, brimming with the energetic certainty of those trained to hold power. These men believed that Marxism destroyed freedom and that the

[82] 'Marius Goring Resigning from Equity Council Article in *The Times* 15 March 1972'.
[83] Loudon, "Equtiy Heads for Showdown with Vanessa."The Daily Telegraph 6 October 1975
[84] Jacobs, "This One, I Told Him, Will Run and Run." *The Sunday Times* 9 March 1975
[85] Loudon, "Equtiy Heads for Showdown with Vanessa." *The Daily Telegraph*. 6 October 1975

discredited liberal free market brought chaos and unfairness.[86] Therefore, anything associated with Marxism was viewed as a threat to the freedom of the British people, and Vanessa and Corin Redgrave were the prime targets for such prejudice.

In addition to these prejudices, Goring, alongside Olivier and Davenport, became a leader in the legal action against Equity, representing other members of their faction in court. In 1972, Goring would issue a writ against Equity in order to keep it from contributing to the miners' strike fund. After the strike ended, however, the writ was never served.[87] Goring remained determined to continue the fight. He was ambitious and persistent in his efforts to keep Equity as far away from Leftist politics as he could, and continue his actions against the political Left in Equity after the miners' dispute had ended. Goring once reported that, 'Unfortunately, there is a small but strong minority who are more interested in politics than acting and who want to turn Equity into a political union.'[88] What began as a disagreement over Equity's political stance would result in a court battle that was taken to the House of Lords. Since the case concerned Equity's voting policy, the fact that it was taken to the House of Lords is a direct reflection of the vast social change occurring.

However, Goring and others' argument for Equity to remain apolitical as an institution was opposed by other members of Equity, both on the Left and the Right. When Plouviez became Equity's general secretary in 1974, he was keen on Equity keeping an apolitical stance during this period, claiming that, 'In the council's view, what is needed is the determination by the majority of members of Equity to resist any attempt that might be made to the union for party political purposes.'[89] The disagreement among union members

[86] Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (Macmillan, 2007). 232
[87] Stephen, "Enter Marius Goring, Stage Right." *The Daily Telegraph*. 11 June 1978
[88] 'Marius Quoted about Equity Article by Michael Cable *Daily Mail* 22 April 1972'.
[89] Loudon, "Equtiy Heads for Showdown with Vanessa." The Daily Telegraph. 6 October 1975

over whether Equity should take political action escalated into a heated dispute that made its way into the papers by 1972. The celebrity status of Equity members made the dispute within the union spill over into a national debate among the British public. Public polls questioned Equity's involvement in various activities, such as increasing the minimum wage, the Industrial Relations Act, and whether Equity should affiliate with the Trade Union Congress.[90] It was clear that celebrity actors in the union were using their celebrity to exert public pressure to ensure that Equity's executive decisions aligned with their objectives.

These celebrity powers were executed on the 9th of November 1975, when a 10-hour-long meeting was held at the Coliseum in London, where 2,000 actors debated over Equity's policies and structures. Goring, Oliver, Davenport, along with the actors Ralph Richardson and John Gielgud, took an open political stand against Vanessa and Corin Redgrave at the meeting.[91] Actors Glenda Jackson, Janet Suzman, Shelia Hancock, Michael Bryan, and Dame Peggy Ashcroft were among the other celebrities who joined. *The Observer* referred to the meeting as 'one of the oddest shows in Britain at the Coliseum.'[92] Despite the meeting's length, it was clear that it was happening during Equity meetings. Nonetheless, having multiple celebrities all in one accord, with different opinions arguing amongst themselves, was not an effective strategy for resolving political matters, because the conflict had already reached the House of Lords in 1974. The House of Lords would provide a different medium for celebrity actors to demonstrate their power. Case 1 date 13 April 1978. British Actors' Equity Association v. Goring and Others.[93]

[90] 'KEEP EQUITY A UNION AND MAKE IT A FIGHT!', 1977., Garrick Club Library, accessed 2 December 2021.
[91] Chesshyre, "Equity Showdown at the Coliseum." *The Observer* 9 November 1975
[92] "All-Star Cast for a Big Bore," *The Observer*, 1976.
[93] Despite the case being referred to as 'case one' the debate had been going on since 1972. An appeal was granted in October 1976, leading to this case in 1978.

Marius Goring filed a case against Equity over the authority to hold a referendum to determine the union's rules. In October 1976, an appeal was granted, allowing Equity to establish its own regulations. The case escalated further, reaching a panel of four members of the House of Lords, with both Marius Goring and Equity being represented by their representative legal counsel and solicitors.

During this dispute, four key questions arise that would determine the power structure within Equity. The legal dispute surrounding Equity focused on the interpretation of the Referendum Rule, which granted the Council the authority to conduct a vote among the entire membership on any question or resolution while simultaneously limiting individual members' power. As mentioned earlier, there was a debate over the Council's ruling on the miners' strike. Equity had no branch-and-delegate structure that would represent any political party. Therefore, at any general meeting, each member who wishes to be represented must travel to the Equity meeting to attend in person. As mentioned earlier, attendance at these Equity meetings was extremely low, limiting the voice of many Equity members. There were no delegates to exercise the members' votes; if someone wanted to be represented, they had to promote and campaign for themselves, because there was no provision in the rules for individual representation by representatives. The four separate questions which were involved within the dispute were as followed:

1. Can the council put the question of a rule change[94] to the vote of the membership on a referendum? Basically, can the Council bring about a change of the rules by means of an affirmative vote of the membership on a postal ballot without convening a

[94] Or a resolution involving a rule change

general meeting? Should this be brought forth?[95] The power which the Council would have originally held would be dispersed and not confined to one particular place.

2. Can the Council conduct such a postal ballot to bring about a change of rules?[96] In the case where the question of the change of rules has been put to a properly convened general meeting but has not been carried at that meeting?[97] Otherwise, if a postal ballot is conducted, it would give members the freedom to vote on their terms.
3. Can the Council conduct such a postal ballot so as the nullify or reverse a change of rules[98] In the case where the question of the change of rules has been put to a properly convened general meeting and has been carried at that meeting?[99] This means that the council could continue to use a postal ballot if it wanted to change the rules again.
4. Can one hundred members force the Council to conduct such a postal ballot to nullify or reverse a change or rule?[100] In the case where the question of change of rules has been put to a properly convened general meeting and has been carried at that meeting?[101] Basically, can a postal ballot be forced on the council?

[95] APPLEBE PARTNERS, ON APPLEAL FROM HER MAJESTY'S COURT OF APPEAL (ENGLAND) IN THE MATTER OF THE RULES OF BRITISH ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION BETWEEN BRITISH ACTORS' ASSOCIATION Respondent - and- MARIUS GORING Appellant GRAHM HAMILTON Respondent CORIN REDGRAVE Respondent.
[96] If the vote is affirmative
[97] APPLEBE PARTNERS, ON APPLEAL FROM HER MAJESTY'S COURT OF APPEAL (ENGLAND) IN THE MATTER OF THE RULES OF BRITISH ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION BETWEEN BRITISH ACTORS' ASSOCIATION Respondent - and- MARIUS GORING Appellant GRAHM HAMILTON Respondent CORIN REDGRAVE Respondent.
[98]Assuming the vote would be in favour of the status quo
[99] APPLEBE PARTNERS, ON APPLEAL FROM HER MAJESTY'S COURT OF APPEAL (ENGLAND) IN THE MATTER OF THE RULES OF BRITISH ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION BETWEEN BRITISH ACTORS' ASSOCIATION Respondent - and- MARIUS GORING Appellant GRAHM HAMILTON Respondent CORIN REDGRAVE Respondent.
[100] Assuming the votes would be in favour of the status quo
[101] APPLEBE PARTNERS, ON APPLEAL FROM HER MAJESTY'S COURT OF APPEAL (ENGLAND) IN THE MATTER OF THE RULES OF BRITISH ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION BETWEEN BRITISH ACTORS' ASSOCIATION Respondent - and- MARIUS GORING Appellant GRAHM HAMILTON Respondent CORIN REDGRAVE Respondent.

These questions were fundamental to the dispute, determining how power would be exercised within Equity. If Equity's council could receive a change on a postal ballot, and if the individuals who sent the postal ballot were not present at Equity's general meetings, this would limit the voice of many Equity members. The fundamental challenge was the danger that, perhaps, 100 members present at a general meeting could force the council to conduct a postal ballot for individuals who were not present. On the other side, if these rules change, then members would be given the chance to vote with a postal ballot without having to be present at a general meeting, and that would, constantly, give Equity less control over changes regarding the rules and more direct control to the majority of members in the union. The dispute was over power and representation within the broader Equity membership. If the power structure remained as it had been, only those who were able (or willing) to attend a general meeting had representation, and the council attending general meetings gained more direct control over the outcome. In essence, since the council consisted primarily of members of the Right, such as actors Tony Britton, Marius Goring, Derek Bond, and Donald Sinden,[102] the outcome would favour the Right.

Marius Goring and Graham Hamilton, as the first and second defendants of the Right-wing position, were joined as defendants of Equity to represent the two sides of the dispute. The Third Respondent, Corin Redgrave, was the third defendant to the summons. He was joined as a defendant on his own application, and he adopted in both the courts the same position as that adopted by the Second Respondent, namely, that the answer to all four questions should be in the negative, which translates to: no question involving a rule change can be decided by a referendum. The Appellant argued for an affirmative answer to

[102] 'Vanessa and Co Beaten in Poll Article by Roderick Gilchrist *Daily Mail* 9 May 1975.

all four questions. Equity supported this position in the Court of Appeal, although Equity had remained neutral in the High Court; in the end, two voted affirmatively, and two voted negatively.[103] Since Equity was such a prominent union in Britain, the outcome of the case would reflect the social change occurring.

The verdict: Equity would alter the rules by referendum.[104] The final decision would be in favour of Goring, as it would be made outside the influence of political or social issues. Equity would be required to stay neutral and be preserved as a union of art for art's sake.[105]

Goring had won the case, while Equity would have to pay the court fees.[106] The council decided that it had the power and the duty to conduct a vote when the motion had been carried and the membership demanded a referendum.[107] Changes to the rules could be made at a yearly or a special general meeting when a certain number of members are present, and the members would be notified of the rule changes within 21 days. Should any changes be made to the rules, at least 40 members of the union must sign a document containing the changes before they can be discussed at a General Meeting. If the changes reached the General Meeting, the members would have to vote on whether to support or oppose them. At least two-thirds of the members would have to vote for or against the changes for a change in the rules to commence.

[103] APPLEBE PARTNERS, ON APPLEAL FROM HER MAJESTY'S COURT OF APPEAL (ENGLAND) IN THE MATTER OF THE RULES OF BRITISH ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION BETWEEN BRITISH ACTORS' ASSOCIATION Respondent - and- MARIUS GORING Appellant GRAHM HAMILTON Respondent CORIN REDGRAVE Respondent.
[104] APPLEBE PARTNERS, ON APPLEAL FROM HER MAJESTY'S COURT OF APPEAL (ENGLAND) IN THE MATTER OF THE RULES OF BRITISH ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION BETWEEN BRITISH ACTORS' ASSOCIATION Respondent - and- MARIUS GORING Appellant GRAHM HAMILTON Respondent CORIN REDGRAVE Respondent.
[105] In accordance with those who wanted to preserve the union as apolitical
[106] 'Equity - Goring Wins Equity Rules Battle in the Evening Standard 13 April 1978.Jpg', n.d.
[107] In the Matter of the Rules of the British Actors Equity Association BETWEEN BRITISH ACTORS EQUITY ASSOCIATION and MARIUS GORING and GRAHAM HAMILTON and CORIN REDGRAVE, No. 4246 (House of Lords 27 October 1976).

A critical understanding of the verdict is essential to the argument presented in this chapter, because it encapsulates the broader implications of the case's outcome. For nearly a decade, Equity was embroiled in ideological disputes between politically right-leaning and left-leaning members, reflecting deeper tensions within the organization. These conflicts ultimately escalated to the House of Lords, where the ruling on rule changes became the decisive factor in resolving the dispute. Beyond determining the immediate legal outcome, the decision also illustrated the dynamics of power distribution between Equity's council and its general membership. Notably, this struggle for control within trade unions across the UK would ultimately be curtailed with the rise of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, marking a significant shift in the political landscape of labour relations.

The Court Case: A Performative Act of Social Change

In an era of profound social transformation, when debates over the purpose of art in Britain were deeply intertwined with broader discussions of social change, any intervention in Equity's governance could be perceived as an attempt to exert political influence over its structure. The act of amending its rules, therefore, carries an inherent connotation of authority and control. However, when rule changes are strategically implemented not to reflect evolving societal values but rather to resist them, this resistance itself becomes a critical site of analysis. Understanding the deliberate obstruction of change is essential to fully grasp the complexities of acceptance, as it reveals the ideological tensions that shape institutional governance and the broader cultural landscape.

The 1976 legal dispute with Equity revolved around the fundamental definition of a referendum. While a referendum is intended to provide individuals with a platform to voice their political opinions, the conflict within Equity extends beyond its basic purpose. Although a referendum typically enables Equity members to vote and express their views freely, this

particular dispute restricted their ability to do so, instead compelling them to choose between predetermined opinions without a genuine means of independent expression. Goring ridiculed the breakdown of Equity's general meetings from union business to a platform for political activism:

> If these meetings were about the cares of the profession, a lot of people would go, but they've deteriorated into nothing but political bear-gardens, and no self-respecting actor would go near that place. The others you would have to bully and cajole. Very reluctantly, they come. But they don't come again, for what they've seen digresses them so much they don't want anything more to do with it.'[108]

The Equity dispute over who had the right to speak within the union was central to the leadership and membership's rights to express their political beliefs within the power structure of Equity's council. Upon closer observation, however, this issue over the meeting behind a referendum goes beyond a legal dispute within a union designed for performing artists.

The court case between the conservative and liberal factions in Equity reveals how members of Equity, a union for performing artists divided into extreme-Left and extreme-Right groups, were willing to set aside time for their work in the arts industry to fight for their voice in British Actors' Equity. While many performers had already expressed their political views on stage, others used alternative public-sphere venues to voice their beliefs. While stage productions such as John Osborne's Look Back in Anger are important as artifacts of cultural and social change, court cases such as this one illustrate the sheer impact of political strife on Britain and the arts industry in the 1970s.

[108] Stephen, "Enter Marius Goring, Stage Right." *The Daily Telegraph*. 11 June 1978

The dispute also revealed a divisive society on the eve of Margaret Thatcher's coming to power, which would strip the trade unions of their power and significantly reduce British Actors' Equity's ability to advocate for its members in the future. [109]Moreover, this case reveals the power wielded by the two groups within their union and illustrates their commitment to their disparate political agendas. Had Corin Redgrave and Graham Hamilton won the case, there is speculation, according to an article from the *Sunday Telegraph*, that Corin and Vanessa wanted entertainers to be seen as simply workers. The *Sunday Telegraph* argued that 'Nationalism without compensation under workers' control of the entire assets of the entertainment industry' and 'to commit more economic and political power within the union.'[110] Furthermore, there was the possibility that Vanessa and Corin Redgrave's fight for Equity's involvement with political issues offered them authority to use the union to protest against civil rights abuses in South Africa under the Apartheid government,[111] as well as fight for the rights in Rhodesia, and further the cause of the Zionist movement in Israel. Weaving together the union's ability to use the celebrity status of many of its members to further political causes was seen by many as threatening to turn Equity into a very different union.[112]

Equity would not be the only entertainment industry outlet where Vanessa and Corin Redgrave would use to proclaim their political views. Vanessa, who was adamant about spreading the word about Marxist principles and the Workers' Revolutionary Party's cause, tried to talk to the cast members offstage during rehearsals about her principles and to

[109] Brian Towers, "Running the Gauntlet: British Trade Unions under Thatcher, 1978-1988," *ILR Review* 42, no. 2 (1989): 163–88.
[110] Stephen.
[111] The dispute of Equity's involvement in South Africa would create another court case with Marius Goring in the 1980s.
[112] Stephen, "Enter Marius Goring, Stage Right." *The Daily Telegraph*. 11 June 1978

distribute leaflets and booklets. The actors respond politely, although they found her tiresome.[113] While Vanessa was busy spreading her political views and trying to convert other individuals, many of her fellow actors were mildly annoyed by this. The actor Sir John Gielgud once said that, 'She's a marvellous actress, and she manages to find time for all that political rubbish.'[114] It is essential to recognize that while Vanessa and Corin dissemination of their political views was not inherently harmful, the situation became more problematic views was not inherently harmful, the situation became more problematic when they sought to exert influence over Equity's council and, by doing so, over the most powerful union for actors in Britain.

After the Right faction won their dispute, many of the victors felt that this would deter infighting and uncertainty within the union membership in the future. Peter Plouviez described the unequal power structure within the union as, 'because we have a very open structure, small groups can play a very disproportionate part. The activities of the Left have led to a reaction, possibly an over-reaction, from these members who don't want the union to become a political football.'[115] Thus, even if a few political agents demanded a meeting or a referendum, members of the union would be the deciding factor in passing or vetoing the proposition. However, even after the court case was resolved, some campaigners continued to oppose widespread changes. They contended that altering the rules would strip union members of their right to call a referendum, thereby consolidating excessive power within the council and the appeals committee.[116] Fears and anxieties concerning the distribution of

[113] Spoto, *The Redgraves: A Family Epic*. 248
[114] Croall, *Gielgoodies*. 35
[115] Stephen, "Enter Marius Goring, Stage Right." *The Daily Telegraph*. 11 June 1978
[116] "Equity - Campaign to Oppose Equity Rule Changes." *The Guardian* 21 February 1979

power within Equity mirrored those occurring throughout 1970s Britain and enduring the crackdown by the Thatcher government in 1979.

The concerns of Equity members about representation and politics directly reflect many of the concerns and struggles found in Britain in the 1970s. The power that unions had before the reign of Margaret Thatcher was central to the dispute, not only for what they meant to their members, but also for what they represented for society at large. Therefore, the power of a union designed for performing artists became a greater issue because of the roles of celebrity performers in society during a period of social strife between Right- and Left-leaning political ideologies. This case highlights the social changes that influenced Britain at the time, and the statements made by Goring, Olivier, and Bond, as well as those by Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, played a fundamental role in shaping the rules that Equity adheres to today. More importantly, the disagreements between the politically Left and the politically Right celebrity actors in 1970s Britain illustrate how society is directly reflected through its celebrities, no matter how unbelievable the circumstances may seem. Tension continued amongst these factions. A key illustration for how tension continued amongst these factions can be seen in a Daily Mirror article documenting a dispute between Laurence Olivier and Corin Redgrave, in which Olivier expressed his frustration with Redgrave for failing to apologise for remarks suggesting that he and Derek Bond were attempting to blackmail Equity by threatening to establish a breakaway group if left-wing members gained control of the union.[117] Clearly, there was much greater concern about the use of power and authority within the union, as evidenced by this dispute over the political turmoil among celebrity Equity members. Some found that the Equity Council was too caught up in these

[117] "Olivier Hits Back at Storm over Union," *The Daily Mirror*, June 25, 1974.

disputes, rather than focusing on the matter at hand: unemployment and equal pay for performers.

In conclusion, while actors were at the forefront of this case and played a central role in the disputes within Equity, their efforts to restore stability within the union did little to address broader issues beyond it. Those with influence and authority – primarily celebrity figures – were focused mainly on their own interests, often neglecting the concerns of non-celebrity performers. This dynamic reflects the broader social and political changes of the time.

Conclusion

In 2019, *The Times* published an article headlined, 'Glenda Jackson's power lies in her acting, not her politics,'[1] a statement that encapsulates the core tension explored in this thesis. Jackson, once one of Britain's most celebrated stage and screen actors, left behind her artistic career to serve as Labour MP for Hampstead for over two decades. Yet, as the article reflects, her political persona – though rooted in deeply held convictions – was often perceived as divisive and less effective than her artistic work in generating empathy or social awareness. Acting, the piece suggests, allowed Jackson to, 'expand the world' by fostering human connection and compassion, while politics seemed to limit her reach. Glenda Jackson, however, in a 2018 article for *Vanity Fair* defends her right to have a voice in politics, arguing that, 'We have a right to voice our opinions.'[2] The tension between an actor's sphere on the stage and in the public sphere goes to the heart of this thesis: the power of celebrity lies not only in public visibility but in the emotional and cultural influence that performers wield. The intersection of celebrity and activism – particularly on the British stage – reveals how actors have historically negotiated their public roles, using performance as both a platform for social critique and a space for profound human expression.

Throughout this study, the evolving role of the British stage celebrity between 1900 and 1978 has been examined, particularly in relation to activism and public representation. Through a series of historical case studies – including Ellen Terry, Margot Fonteyn, John Gielgud, and Corin and Vanessa Redgrave – this thesis has demonstrated how celebrity status operates not simply as a marker of fame, but as a vehicle for meaning. It can function

[1] Melanie Phillips, "Glenda Jackson's Power Lies in Her Acting, Not Her Politics," *The Times*, 2019.
[2] Katy Rich, "Glenda Jackson Defends Actors in Politics: 'We Have the Right to Voice Our Opinions,'" *Vanity Fair*, May 2018.

as both a mirror and a mediator of broader national anxieties, political movements, and cultural transformations. These figures in this thesis illuminate the multifaceted relationship between celebrity and activism, revealing how performance itself becomes a form of social engagement. Whether on stage, in the press, or in public life, they operated within complex systems that shaped how their celebrity could be mobilised – or constrained – by a changing society.

This thesis advances three key arguments. Firstly, it contends that celebrity directly reflects the social, economic, and political changes of its time. Secondly, it argues that celebrity is not a fixed concept but exists in multiple, evolving forms shaped by context and cultural circumstances. And, finally, it explores how the figure of the celebrity activist exemplifies a specific form of celebrity branding. Drawing on Chris Rojek, this thesis highlights how the entertainment industry's ultimate aim is to reinforce and extend the rule of capital.[3] Celebrities are commodities conceptualised as means by which capitalism can control and exploit the masses.[4] Therefore, because celebrity is used as a means of control, there are an infinite number of ways it can be utilised for gain and profit. As this thesis demonstrates, this is particularly true when a celebrity enters the realm of activism.

Central to this inquiry is the recognition that celebrity is never a neutral status. As this study has shown, the celebrity is a branded entity, situated at the intersection of artistic production, public consumption, and ideological meaning-making. Figures such as Terry and Fonteyn were not only celebrated for their talents. Still, they were also strategically positioned to represent Britain at moments of national reckoning, whether in the face of imperial decline, post-war reconstruction, or emergent feminist activism. Their public

[3] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 9
[4] Rojek. 33

images carried an ideological charge between tradition and modernity, compliance and resistance.

Some examples of the ideological charge carried by the public image are Ellen Terry's leadership of the Pioneer Players during the suffrage movement. This charge signalled a commitment to feminist ideals at a time when women's roles in society – and on the stage – were undergoing radical transformation. Fonteyn, by contrast, came to prominence in the post-war period, when her elegance and poise were used to project a version of British resilience and refinement that stood in contrast to the nation's material devastation. When she performed *The Sleeping Beauty* in New York, she did so on a stage that was untouched by bombs, in a country unscarred by direct warfare. Her image carried the aura of survival, grace, and continuity – a carefully crafted symbol of national pride.

This thesis contends that the celebrity activist occupied a particularly complex cultural position. Far from being a straightforward fusion of fame and political engagement, the celebrity activist is enmeshed in a contradictory system of representation – what Lam and Raphael call a 'double-edged sword.'[5] Celebrity can lend visibility to political causes, but it can also compromise or overshadow them, absorbing activism into a marketable persona. This dynamic is evident in the cases of Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, whose outspoken socialism attracted both administration and backlash, in the quiet, coded resistance of John Gielgud, whose inadvertent outing contributed to the shifting public controversies around homosexuality.

This thesis has explored the concept of celebrity through the varied experiences of British stage actors, demonstrating how it functions in multiple, often contradictory ways.

[5] Raphael and Lam, "Introduction: Becoming Brands." 5

This diversity is significant, as it reveals how both celebrity figures and celebrity activists are categorised and shaped by a culture that places high value on fame and public visibility. Within these constructed categories, celebrities become emblematic of broader social changes in Britain. However, because celebrities reflect rather than generate these shifts, a tension emerges between the perceived power of the individual celebrity and the actual power of society. Richard Dryer describes this discrepancy as:

> Stars have major control of the representation of people in society – and how people are represented as being in the mass media is going to have some kind of influence (even if only of reinforcement) on how people are in society. Stars have a privileged position in the definition of social roles and types, and this must have real consequences in terms of how people believe they can and should behave.[6]

The theme of consequences – particularly the societal consequences of fame and representation – runs throughout this thesis. This is especially evident in the analysis of two iconic British ballet dancers: Margot Fonteyn, who represented Britain on stage, and Moira Shearer, who embodied British identity through film. Each was subject to expectations shaped by the cultural and technological conditions of their time. Therefore, the two dancers were expected to have certain conditions which Dyer would describe as being made possible by, 'a position of surplus and the development of technology and mass communication.'[7]

This surplus position in British post-war society operated along a divide. Between instrumental and expressive systems – between those who enacted national goals and those who symbolised them. This dichotomy is embodied in Moira Shearer's career transformation

[6] Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*. 8
[7] Dyer and McDonald. 8

through *The Red Shoes*. While her ambition was to match Fonteyn's dominance in the Sadler's Wells company and attain similar acclaim in classical dance, her expressive role, as shaped by Michael Powell, cast her as the emotional and visual centrepiece of a cinematic narrative. Despite Shearer's personal resistance to this shift, she became a film celebrity – a different category of fame shaped by mass culture and visual spectacle. Her fame coincided with the decline of British imperial influence and the ascendancy of American cultural power. The success of *The Red Shoes* illustrates how cinema, as a dominant force in global entertainment, began to eclipse other performance forms and redefined what it meant to be a celebrity in the post-war era.

After the immense destruction Britain faced after the Second World War, these conditions needed to be met by British celebrities so that Britain had a way of global representation. British celebrity actors were a powerful means of marketing and representing Britain. Naturally, Western culture had an immense market for celebrity culture, which consumed the representational work offered. Before this period of rapid technological and cultural transformation, however, many of the same representational conditions were already present. During the early 20th century, movements such as Women's Suffrage recognised the power of performance as a means of political expression. The Pioneer Players, founded by Edith Craig and supported by Ellen Terry, exemplified the convergence of art and activism. At a time when women were fighting for the vote and broader social recognition, the stage offered a platform for dramatizing feminist concerns. The hope was that political enfranchisement would lead to broader structural changes, including improved working conditions in theatre and the arts. These early examples of celebrity activism laid the groundwork for later generations, demonstrating that

performance could function not only as entertainment but as a site of struggle and transformation.

Yet, as this thesis has demonstrated, stepping beyond accepted boundaries of representation can carry risks. When celebrity actors disclose aspects of their private lives or take political stances in public, they risk destabilising their public image. Rojek articulates the vulnerability of the celebrity's reputation with:

> Celebrities are literally elevated in public esteem, which frequently contributes to personal problems as they struggle to be themselves with their families. A celebrity whose public face is rejected may fall prey to feelings of anxiety and modification.'[8]

John Gielgud's arrest in 1953 for homosexuality was a devastating moment, both personally and professionally. Though he remained a revered figure in British theatre, the scandal underscored how fragile celebrity status could be – particularly when it collided with prevailing moral codes. The psychological toll this can take on celebrities, elevated in public esteem, may find themselves struggling to reconcile personal truth with public expectation. The consequences of visibility are not always celebratory.

When Vanessa and Corin Redgrave began publicly stating their political opinions, they took risks that could have been very harmful to their careers. The Redgrave siblings represent a more deliberate and confrontational form of celebrity activism. Their public engagement with leftist politics, particularly their association with the Workers Revolutionary Party, drew admiration from some quarters and condemnation from others. In a culture that often demands neutrality or ambiguity from its celebrities, the Redgraves' unapologetic stance provoked discomfort. Yet, their political courage also positioned them

[8] Rojek, *Celebrity*. 20

as critical voices in a climate of increasing conformity. Their careers exemplify the double bind of the celebrity activist: to speak out is to risk being silenced by the very industry that grants visibility. They also became representatives of an activist post-war generation working against the conservative pre-war celebrities, Marius Goring and others. David Marshall details celebrities and the individual notions they have of themselves, coming into contact with the way in which they are socially perceived:

> Some elements of the personal obsession come from longer historical cultural arcs. For instance, there are elements of consumer culture that have increasingly focused on the individual production of the self, which at least identifies elements of the obsession that have grown and intensified for more than a century.[9]

In the case studies examined, the individualised production of the self, or rather the individual production of the collective, was represented directly through the celebrity.

Importantly, this thesis has distinguished between the artist and the celebrity, and subsequently between the celebrity and the activist. These distinctions, while analytically useful, are often blurred in practice. Through historical case studies and theoretical frameworks – from Dyer's structured polysemy,[10] to Marshall's notion of the celebrity as the 'human brand,'[11] this project has shown that the identities of the artist, celebrity, and activist are not static, but are continually reshaped through their interactions with institutions, media, and the public imagination.

Marshall's work on the 'individual production of the self' illuminates how this tension is shaped by longer cultural arcs.[12] In a society increasingly defined by consumerism and

[9] Marshall,David, *The Celebrity Persona Pandemic*.
[10] Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*. 3
[11] Marshall,David, "The Bridge of the Human Brand." 1-2
[12] Marshall,David. 1-2

individual branding, the celebrity becomes a site where personal identity and public meaning intersect. The case studies examined here illustrate how celebrities must continually negotiate this intersection – balancing authenticity with expectation, individuality, and marketability.

Celebrity itself is a form of branding, a title placed on an individual the moment they acquire celebrity status. This gives them a certain economic and social value, which Marshall describes as someone who:

> Is also used in philanthropic and political causes…a key figure in the contemporary attention economy in their capacity to bring the world's attention to particular causes, struggles and issues. But human brands such as celebrities are never just branded products, they contain within them some competing forms of value, compromising ethics, and perhaps elaborate back and future stories that make their attachments to issues variegates to say the least.[13]

This thesis, focused on two qualities of celebrity branding, the first being celebrity as someone who began as an artist and now had to become a social figure. A figure whom Luckhurst and Moody would describe as someone who, rather than being "famous" and living the exceptional life, is now a celebrity, or, more specifically, a concept that focuses attention on the interplay between individuals, institutions, markets, and media.[14] The individual, therefore, gives up part of their identity as an artist to assume responsibility for their new role as a celebrity. The second quality concerns the celebrity activist, who embodies the individuals, institutions, markets, and media.[15] Lam and Raphael further describe this interplay as, 'the association between activism and celebrity often occurs in

[13] Marshall,David. 1-2
[14] Luckhurst and Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. 1
[15] Luckhurst and Moody. 1

public views through scrutiny of the media. Indeed, celebrities encourage media interest if it draws attention to their causes and publicises issues.[16] The celebrity activist can take many forms, as this thesis has discussed. Therefore, the celebrity and the celebrity activist can be attributed to multiple categories.

When the artist becomes socially branded as a celebrity, they become, from the perspective of an ideology, an image that exists in films and other media texts.[17] This then stresses the structured polysemy, that is, the finite multiplicity of meanings and the affects that are foregrounded and others that are either masked or displaced.[18] When the artist then becomes this image, the celebrity can choose to leave this status or embrace it and perhaps expand upon it. This image of the celebrity is one that the advertising industry relies heavily on for endorsements, while more and more celebrities are becoming involved with charities to benefit both their own celebrity persona and philanthropic purposes. This means the celebrity and charity are often reliant on one another, and to be successful in communicating with the public, they have to find a way to work together. The outward persona, which is the brand of the celebrity, is one that is sold to the public. This power of their brand can be used for either inspiration or chaos.[19] Activism and celebrity go hand in hand with one another; however, this is not always a good thing.

This thesis also underscores the significance of biography as a historiographic tool. Biographical narratives provided insight not just into individuals' lives but into the broader socio-political forces that shaped and were shaped by these figures. Whether it was the pioneering suffrage activism of Ellen Terry, the coded defiance of Noël Coward's theatrical

[16] Raphael and Lam, "Introduction: Becoming Brands." 5
[17] One of those texts being the theatre stage.
[18] Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*. 18
[19] Raphael and Lam, "Introduction: Becoming Brands." 5

works, or the performative politics of Equity in the 1970s, these biographies served as cultural artifacts – repositories of memory, meditation, and meaning.

Essentially, what is being investigated is the effect one memory has on another. Joseph Roach's theory of the continuing tradition of memory and cultural reproduction is especially useful here. Roach argues that, 'here too is the dramaturgy if doubling in a role governs the functions of cultural transmission in the service of institutional memory.'[20] The idea that celebrity performance constitutes a form of surrogation – a way of transmitting cultural memory – highlights the symbolic role that celebrities play in the process of historical continuity and change.

Therefore, in order for a culture to reproduce and re-create itself with a collective memory that works selectively and imaginatively, it must withstand many trials and errors. What is to be intended cannot fulfil expectations, create a deficit, or exceed expectations, thus creating a surplus. This re-creation of a culture must prove to be a divisive choice, because there is a possibility that it will induce a great sense of anxiety. The process of re-creation can provoke feelings of uncanniness across generations, and, depending on its intensity, certain social or cultural differences can exacerbate generational ones.[21] The material gathered for the chapters contains collective memory, obtained to develop a hypothesis about how celebrity activism reproduces and recreates itself in accordance with the media and celebrity culture that reap the benefits of what the celebrity has thus made known. Due to the constant evaluation of social change, the activism in which the celebrity was involved, or sought to avoid, has given rise to many uncanny prospects surrounding the celebrity, the issue they were involved in, and the historical context of the time.

[20] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*.1-2
[21] Roach. 1-2

This project must also acknowledge its limitations. In selecting specific case studies, it has necessarily excluded many figures who could have offered additional insights. For instance, Ninette de Valois, founder of the Royal Ballet, played a pivotal role in shaping British cultural identity through dance.[22] Dirk Bogarde's performance in Victim (1961) helped bring issues of homosexuality into public consciousness. Michael Redgrave, father of Vanessa and Corin, was both a prominent actor and a closeted bisexual man navigating a complex public life. Paul Robeson, an American actor known for his performance as Othello, was outspoken with his socialist beliefs, and Sybil Thorndike, a British stage actress known for her left-wing views. While these individuals are admirable in their contribution to the performing arts in Britain and were excellent candidates for case studies, they supported the actors chosen for the case studies and helped play into the bigger picture. These figures, though not central to this thesis, remind us of the multiplicity of paths that British celebrity activism has taken.

Furthermore, Dame Ellen Terry had many fruitful areas to investigate, and she navigated many challenges in her private and public spheres as a celebrity actress throughout her lifetime. Her relationship with the British stage and celebrity actor Henry Irving was particularly enticing. Terry and Irving were a well-known couple at the height of their stage careers and founded the Lyceum theatre together. They were both known for their Shakespearean and their own stage works. Exploring the public and private lives of the two actors and how their choices in addressing those spheres reflected their time period would offer a particularly interesting lens into the study of celebrity culture in the nineteenth century.

[22] "Ninette de Valois," Royal Opera House, https://www.roh.org.uk/people/ninette-de-valois.March 2024

Clearly, there are multiple routes this thesis could have taken, given the wide-ranging nature of celebrity culture and activism in the history of the British stage; this thesis had to narrow its focus to a select few British theatre celebrities and how they mirrored the radical social changes of the twentieth century. Each case study allows for a distance investigation of the complex relationship many celebrity actors had towards activism in the period under study. Despite the paths not taken, this thesis has demonstrated that the intersection of celebrity and activism in British theatre is both historically significant and theoretically rich. Celebrity is not a passive condition – it is an active, negotiated identity, shaped by media, ideology, performance, and power. It reflects social change even as it participates in shaping it. In Britain, where the theatre has long been tied to questions of class, empire, and cultural identity, stage celebrities have played a unique role in mediating national narratives.

As illustrated in this thesis, the diversification of celebrity has proven itself to be a complex matter. Celebrity is influenced by the media, marketing, capitalism, power struggles, and internal dynamics. It is part of a diverse and ever-changing society and should be studied within specific social fields that value celebrity status and other forms of power.[23] Celebrity, truly, is a concept branded through social, economic, and political markets and media. When an individual is branded a celebrity or a celebrity activist, they are expected to act and abide by a certain manner that is pleasing to the economic and social conditions in which they are located. Britain was chosen for this thesis because of the many ways Britain represented itself to the world before and after World War One and World War Two, and thus, British celebrity actors were chosen because they reflected Britain's representation to the British people and to the rest of the world.

[23] Driessens, "The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture."

Activism, too, is a form of branding – one that adds new layers of meaning and expectations to the celebrity figure. It demands action, credibility, and risk. When combined with a celebrity's cultural authority, activism becomes a powerful tool for shaping public discourse. Yet, it also introduced instability. The activist celebrity is celebrated and scrutinised, admired and desired. They are expected to be both extraordinary and relatable, outspoken and diplomatic, sincere and strategic.

Ultimately, this thesis has argued that the British stage celebrity, especially when engaged in activism, becomes a powerful site of cultural memory and national identity. These figures are not merely entertainers of political commentators; they are agents within a larger dramaturgy of representation – one that stages Britain's self-image for domestic and international audiences. In moments of rupture and transformation, the celebrity offers a potent means through which society negotiates its past, imagines its future, and contests the terms of its present.

Negotiations from the past, ending in 1978, have provided a historical foundation for this thesis. To go any further would lead to a discussion of developments that occurred after 1978. Such developments include: the AIDS crisis, the rise and eventual fall of Margaret Thatcher, the effects of Thatcher's politics on unions and society, the way these developments were portrayed on stage, and the celebrities involved in social activism. Due to developments after 1978, many of the topics discussed in this thesis took a different direction than they originally did.

In tracing the arc from Edwardian stage glamour to post-war disruption, from silent, coded activism to overt political confrontation, this thesis offers a framework for understanding the celebrity activist not as a stable type but as a mutable figure shaped by history, ideology, and performance. As Britain wrestled with its imperial legacy, shifting class

structures, and the rise of mass media, its celebrities bore the symbolic weight of a nation in flux. Their legacies – and the cultural works they performed – remain vital to understanding the interplay between performance, politics, and public life in twentieth-century Britain.

Appendix

Appendix 1

A body officially styled the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, but commonly known for its initial letters as C.E.M.A. It was the task of C.E.M.A to carry music, drama, and pictures to places which otherwise would be cut off from all contact, such as air-raid shelters, war-time hostels, factories, and mining villages. The Entertainments National Service Association or E.N.S.A would entertain the Services and the British Council and would keep contact with other countries overseas. C.E.M.A was meant to maintain the opportunities of artistic performances for the hard-pressed and often exiled civilians. C.E.M.A initially began as an organization which was dependant of private aid, however, over time C.E.M.A would become sponsored by the government who would change the name to the Arts Council of Great Britain.[1]

Most of the Report will deal with finance and administration. There need be no apology for this. Artistic trends are a matter for the artists. It is for the Council to help solve the increasing and always changing problem of the place of the arts in our confusing society. It would of course be disingenuous to claim that the Council is without influence in artistic matters. In its continuing partnership with the artistic processions, demonstrated by the Panel system and in other ways, the Council whose funds are limited, has to walk boldly in the areas of assessment and choice. For all that, the key word in any description of its

[1] Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes." Pg 203-204

function must be 'response' to other people's efforts. This may be by the way of a contribution, often limited or shared with other authorities, to supplement what comes from the paying customer. Response may be inadequate, and the Council fails in its task if subsidy to an already supported and flourishing enterprise is kept too low: or it, in the case of a new enterprise. Its potentialities are not appreciated, and subsidy is refused or inadequate.[2]

Appendix 2

Consequently, it was many years before I began to understand anything of the selective control and technical skill needed by an actor. I thought acting was an imitation of life, that emotion had only to be felt in order to be expressed on stage. The art of diction, timing, rapport with other actors, pace, clarity, style, the means of reproducing a part continually over a number of performances- of all this I was entirely ignorant. I found it very hard, as a beginner, to concentrate on my own small part at work at it doggedly in order to perfect it. I was often more interested in the other characters than in the role I played myself. As soon as I began to think how I must walk and speak and act I was paralysed by self-conciseness and affectation.[3]

(To photographer Cecil Benton) Thank you very much for writing. It's so hard to say what I feel to have let down the whole side- theatre, my friends, myself and my family – and all for the most ideocratic and momentary impulse. Of course, I've been tortured by the thought that I acted stupidly *afterwards*, insisting on tackling it without advice of any kind – bit I expect it would all have come out anyway – and I just couldn't bear the idea of a case and

[2] Unknown, "The Arts Council of Great Britain: Twenty-Seventh Annual Report and Accounts 1971-1972." Pg 11-12

[3] Gielgud, *Gielgud on Gielgud*. Pg 5-6.

weeks of obscene publicity – even if I had got off with a clean sheet the slur would have still been there, and everyone would have gossiped and chattered. As it is – well. I can only feel that I've been spoilt and protected all my life and now it's something basic and far-reaching that I've got to face for many years to come. The miracle is that my friends have stood by my so superbly, and even the public looks like letting me go on with my work. Both things would not have been so twenty years ago (though I don't think either the press would have been so cruelly open).

There are many other things to be thankful for. For one, I don't think my Mother has realised the full significance of it, or else she's the most wonderful actress in the Terry Family! For another, I wasn't' actually playing in London at the time, and these four weeks of the tour are a sort of test both as regards for the public and my own nerves. There are some tricky lines in the play. But many are also compassionate and charming, and the character I play has sympathy without seeming to ask for it too much. That is all to the good.[4]

(To Stark Young) We opened last week in the new N.C. Hunter play which has had a superb reception, and I will, I think, be a big hit, though the critics find it lacking in power and inconclusive – as indeed it is. However, it gives fine parts to all the players, and the teamwork is beautiful, I know if wouldn't do it for America, but it is the kind of thing they like here very much, and I think it has been a good idea for me to play in a modern dress

[4] Gielgud and Mangan, *Gielgud's Letters: John Gielgud in His Own Words*. Pg 187

again after so long in costume. [Julius] Cesare is playing just across the road, so I can hardly fail to be in the public eye one way and another.

Unfortunately, I may have been in it a great deal too much lately, a disagreeable incident of which no doubt rumours may have reached you. I can't write about it, for it has been very loathsome, and might have had even worse repercussions than it has, but I did as I thought best in the circumstances to get it all over quickly. Unfortunately, the press got hold of it, and blew it up to terrifying proportions and the world repercussions have not been pleasant. It may affect my coming to the States next year with Stratford, but they have been very charming to me about it, and are waiting to decide for a few weeks until everything is more settled and further in the distance.[5]

(To Stark Young) The play goes enormously well here, and the picture is still running across the road. The Stratford people have decided that I shall not go there after all for the end of their summer season, and then on to America for the tour. This is something of a disappointment, of course, but at the same time I feel rather relieved at not having to bear the responsibility, or come up against any possible check through the press or the Immigration people. Everyone I know has been awfully nice about it, and the inquiries in high places were all favourably received. I was to have left this play in June in order to get a holiday, and then go to Stratford, but now I may stay on a few months longer.[6]

Appendix 3

In a book review Michael Redgrave wrote, 'The iron curtains which curtsey to us nightly at the behest of the Lord Chamberlain are symbols of confusion and clash of thought les ugly

[5] Gielgud and Mangan, *Gielgud's Letters: John Gielgud in His Own Words*. 188
[6] Gielgud and Mangan. 189

but, in their own world, no less complete than the grim political metaphor which is their namesake.[7]

[7] Michael Redgrave, "Book Reviews," 1950.

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