

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
2001 Annual Oration
Was Crabtree a Thespian!!!!!!

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February 2001

Elders, Scholars and Acting Deputy Temporary Living Burden

I fear I will not live up to the honour bestowed upon me by the Elders of this distinguished body. Greater minds than mine have explored the annals of Crabtree history and, indeed, more significant and far reaching revelations have been placed before this august and learned group of ladies and gentlemen. Nevertheless I will try!

My forays into the complex, constantly expanding, ever significant yet tantalizingly elusive story of this remarkable man began when the Living Memory drew his many attributes to my attention in the early days of this chapter. I was astounded at the reports of this great man's immense capacity for industry; his enormous powers of concentration; his reputation for rigorous physical activity in the workplace, the battlefield, and the boudoir; his prolific creative output in music, art and cooking; and his propensity for cross dressing. All suggested to me that this was a man who *must* be of my own calling -a man of the Theatre.

I made it my goal that I would conduct my own research into this extraordinary man. It seemed obvious Crabtree was showman, one who brought entertainment to the people of his generation, the Cameron Macintosh; the Lloyd Webber; the Phineas T Barnum of his time. A practical, hands on, "Gee with all this Talent - Let's put on a Show" type of genius. His name would be found would be found on posters and leaflets above those of stars, and *before* the word "Presents".

By good fortune I was granted a Churchill Fellowship in 1986, to study in the UK and Europe. With high hopes I set off.

Alas, little recorded evidence is available to indicate Crabtree's involvement in the theatre world. The work of scholar and elder Professor David Bradley merely shows him as having followed in the path of Thespis, trodden the boards and influenced the works of some lesser playwrights. The learned scholar McGrath has revealed Crabtree as composer of an opera, *Ill, Pasta Fido*, the libretto and score of which appears lamentably to have disappeared completely. .

Surely, if Crabtree's hand had touched the theatre a deeper mark would have been made.

I despaired of finding any evidence tenuous or otherwise which would link Crabtree with the impresarios or theatre managers of his time. Indeed after an extensive search of libraries, and theatrical, antiquarian and erotic bookshops I found scant reference to the theatre of Crabtree's day. That is until by chance I happened to find myself in Hay-on-Wye, a delightful English village which can only be described as a conurbation of bookshops.

Rescuing my wife (and credit card) from a veritable biblio-mausoleum my eye fell on a lightly foxed (and exceedingly scorched) volume. It bore the barely legible title:

Hiftory of ftage Difafterf in Reformation Theatref

Here was the key, the clue I had been looking for!!

In forming my conclusions regarding Crabtree's role I had overlooked his sense of humor. Previous scholars have shown that in addition to a great wit, Crabtree was possessed of an impish sense of fun and was the instigator of many puckish pranks. Stagehands and other backstage workers are of similar mien and tales of practical jokes, stage disasters and embarrassing moments abound in their oral history. It would be in the folklore of the Theatre that Crabtree would be found.

As a devotee of the school of method acting, I resolved to extend the lexicon of methodologies of Crabtreean research as elucidated in the excellent paper *Erotic influences on Crabtree's Musical Contribution to the Chinese Pizza Industry* (McGrath, 1993). Applying the principles of the Stanislavsky Method to my researches required me to spend the rest of my Churchill Fellowship immersed in claret and pursuing the fairer sex, in order to deepen my understanding of the Crabtree persona.

Some may think the following revelations are the maudlin meanderings of a wine soaked dissolute. More discerning scholars will understand that within this lies the truth; the culmination of years of immersion in the character, the heart, the mind, the very soul of Crabtree. Only through neo-Stanislavskian research methods could this be achieved.

The King's Head, Chipping Sodbury was the place to start. Remarkably I had found myself directly opposite a run down Edwardian Facade bearing the name "Chipping Sodbury Hippodrome". A marquee advertised "Tonight - Danny La Rue as Cinderella". This would bear investigation.

After "Last Drinks", I found my way to the Stage Door. The baleful eye of a Stage Door Keeper of years in keeping with the age of the building regarded me. "Ah" he said. "It'll be the Shades ye'll be wantin to see" I was led into the stalls of the theatre, where he raised a trapdoor revealing a ladder which descended into Stygian darkness.

I found myself in a substantial undercroft interspersed with supports for the structure above. Dust lay thick upon the floor, and the walls bore evidence of a past fire. The stalls of the old Hippodrome originally adjoined a public house. Here actors, stagehands and the great unwashed gathered to carouse after the performance, and should the Hippodrome have a ghost (as all good theatres do) it would surely be Crabtree.

But there was a bonus! The walls, or what was left of them were covered in graffiti - enough indeed for another book by the late Ian Turner.

Unlike the usual statements such as "I hate Graffiti" overwritten with "I hate all Italian food" there were observations by actors, stagehands and playwrights such as

“Fedeau fell flat on his farce”

Godot .couldn't wait .gone home’

‘Here I sit, broken hearted ...

Missed my cue, the play has started ...”

But it was a scrap of a poster remaining attached to the wall which attracted my attention. It was badly faded but some words were legible and after some time I could make out:

Benefit Concert by the Chi...g Sod...’s .

For

Mr Jos ... (here the paper was disfigured) ... C ...

to celebrate . . . engagement in L, . .

Price one ha’penny.

Here indeed was Crabtree.

Good fortune led me to a collection of theatre memorabilia in the possession of a local identity Mrs. Westphalia Newton - Arbor. At the mention of the Crabtree name Mrs . Newton - Arbor displayed some hostility, but immersed as I was in the very psyche of By

Through the use of proven Crabtree techniques, I soon overcame her inhibitions. Among her most intimate possessions I found some scratchy notes of meetings of a troupe of Players, The Chipping Sodrians, and from these I can now begin to chronicle the theatrical achievements of Joseph Crabtree.

In 1773 Crabtree had become smitten by the charms of a certain Miss Eurelia Herbaceous Border, an ingenue with the Chipping Sods. Pursuing this budding actress he enlisted as assistant Stage Manager to the production in which she was performing.

At the time he was involved with the Chipping Sods the idea of the electric light had not yet occurred to Crabtree and performances in theatres were lit by candles, undoubtedly brighter and more reliable than the technology of today.

During one performance Crabtree was observing Eurelia in her role of Ophelia from the right side of the stage when to her distress her diaphanous gown caught aflame from a candle in the floats. The audience grew tense. Eurelia was terrified. In those days there were no reticulated fire sprinklers or fire extinguishers. Nor were any fire buckets available. Crabtree, with immense presence of mind and demonstrating his enormous capacity for holding (and disposing) of his drink made use of the only means to hand.

The fire was doused from off stage by a well placed stream that relieved the tension of the moment and in passing, that of Crabtree.

It is fitting that Miss Herbaceous Border's exclamation, at the time is now enshrined in the language. Actor's right side of the stage has ever since been known as **OP**.

No theatrical reference can be found to Crabtree, or indeed the Chipping Sodrians beyond the year 1774, for in that year the Hippodrome mysteriously burned to the ground.

Researching through the theatre pubs of regional England I next found Crabtree at the Astley Amphitheatre, in an out of town tryout of Sheridan's "The Rivals" prior to its London debut at Drury Lane in 1775. Crabtree, again, was engaged as Assistant Stage Manager, and was called upon to take the stage in the role of Captain Absolute when the romantic lead actor became indisposed. Having all the physical requirements but being a better-built male than the absent actor he did not readily fit the costume, so the wardrobe department hastily let out the breeches of the costume and tried to provide for the Crabtree physique by extending the cotton of the fly buttons.

Crossing the stage before the admiring crowd he sat carefully in an armchair, As he sat the of rending fly-buttons was heard. Simultaneously the delectable, desirable, diaphanously-dressed Eurlia in the part of Lydia Languish threw herself into his lap, and as directed snuggled herself into the loins of her lover. Unsure of his lines, but not his ground Crabtree rose to the occasion.

The scene ends with Lydia Languish springing to her feet and running off, beckoning Captain Absolute to follow. Crabtree, contrary to the stage directions remained, crouched over a problem of immense proportions. His "scuttling" exit from the stage is believed to have inspired a little-known French writer of the time to develop a hunched, scuttling character known to this day - Quasimodo.

Alas, Crabtree's elevation to the role of a straight actor was short-lived. He did not travel with "The Rivals" and remained at the Astley Ampitheatre until its mysterious destruction by fire on 14th of April 1779.

The trail went cold for some time after this revelation. Late one night, however, at the Duke of Wellington in Banbury, evidence emerged during learned discussion with two ageing comics. They recounted legends of animal performances at the Banbury Bijou. The diabolical cleverness of these acts, the disciplined training of the animals and innovation of the performance indicated that Crabtree was the mastermind.

Crabtree found his remarkable talent for training animals for stage performances when he became faced with the problem in a scene of a now forgotten play where a cat was required to cross the stage and sit by a fireplace. Renowned animal trainers from throughout the land were consulted to direct the behaviour of the animal, but, as the opening night approached no cat would perform.

It took Crabtree to find a solution. Come the performance, those concerned watched

Crabtree bring the cat in a box to the wings. On cue he released the animal. It walked on stage, looked at the fireplace, ran to it and curled itself up contentedly. The actors were amazed ... the management applauded and the cat purred loudly.

Crabtree, showing his immense understanding of animal psychology had taken the precaution of placing the cat in the box for some hours before the performance. What others did not know was that Crabtree had previously filled the box with snow!

This begs the question, was the fire in the fireplace real? No-one can answer. We do know however that fire razed the Banbury Bijou in late 1787.

Once again the trail went cold. However, the King William the Fourth in Coalbrookdale played host to a gathering of rude mechanicals expounding on legendary feats of the stage. Privileged to join their gathering, I rediscovered Crabtree.

With his reputation for creating special effects, Crabtree was asked to create a scene for the Kidderminster Criterion theatre. A number of chickens were required to fly down from the sky. His brilliant technique was to hang a long narrow box from the ceiling. This had a hinged base which was opened by pulling a string from the floor. Chickens, preset within the box, would then flutter and fly down onto the stage. In rehearsal the effect worked perfectly. On the opening night, the chickens were loaded into the box before the audience arrived. The play began. With the heat of the candles and the hundreds of people in the theatre the chooks, in the darkness, dozed.

On cue, the Stage Manager pulled the string, the trapdoor opened and dozens of sleeping chickens fell like stones, landing with a thump and a squawk as they struck the stage and the heads of the unfortunate actors.

The Kidderminster Criterion suffered the fate of many theatres of the time. It was burned to ashes on the night of 13th June 1792. One wonders could Crabtree have extended his services to the fast food industry by pioneering the char-grilled chicken?

Our next encounter with Crabtree is at the Haymarket, Oswestry. A gathering of stage technicians passing the time between scene changes at the adjoining hostelry "The Green Man and French Horn" recounted tales of the great operatic tradition of Oswestry.

I recognised the hand of Crabtree instantly,

A celebrated but now forgotten tragic opera culminates in the suicide of the heroine. Her lover dead, her honour defiled, and pursued for murder she leaps from the battlements of the castle wall. This is one of the great moments in Opera.

The diva, objecting to the usual mattress, demanded something more resilient to break her fall. Crabtree, assigned the task, procured himself a steel frame. Using springs purloined from the bedstead of his digs he tensioned a tarpaulin within the ironwork and mounted the assembly upstage of the battlement. The apparatus functioned admirably.

The diva, at the opera's climax leapt from the battlement and plunged earthwards.

Now, Newton's third law of motion states "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." Hooke's Law ensured this was so. In true operatic form, the heroine's death was prolonged as the diva tramped above the battlements, to descend again. And again. And again. And again. All of this as the assembled chorus and principals mourned her passing.

Crabtree's career continued with the Oswestry Opera Company with the revival of his earlier work *Ill, Pasta Fido*. The enormous success of this led to the commissioning of what has become known as his magnum opus, a four part cycle entitled *The Ring of the Wineglass*.

Tragically the score and libretti of all four operas perished in the conflagration as the Haymarket burned on the night of 17th July 1802. Myth has it that a young German music student, holidaying in Oswestry at the time, was seriously influenced by this work.

London's West End is to Theatre what Lygon Street is Italian restaurants. Nestled in the heart of the district is the great theatrical pub the *Flyman and Firkin*. (Many theatre managers consider this title should be reversed and the conjunction deleted). Here I next found Crabtree and at Drury Lane, no less.

Crabtree here graduated to theatrical impresario, becoming a leading figure in the presentation of the great English institution of Pantomime. In this field he made his greatest contribution to the Theatre. Not through the spectacular presentations of such well known works as *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, *the Beanstalk and Jack*, or *Cat Whittington and his ... Associate*, but through happenstance.

In Puritan times women were prohibited by law from acting. Female roles were therefore played by men. It was not until the time of Charles II that men were emancipated from this arduous task, and women, by Royal Patent in 1662, took the stage. As with all human endeavour the pendulum swung too far. The eighteenth and nineteenth century saw women taking the roles of men!'

Breeches roles in opera in fact continue to this day though the counter-tenor may prove the final solution.

I digress.

Crabtree resented this trend, and was committed to redressing the balance. Opportunity came in the production of *Cinderella* he mounted at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane in 1812. On opening night, 22nd September, Dame Hyacinth Newton - Arbor, suffered a surfeit of laudanum within minutes of curtain-up. The leading lady was, to use today's terminology, *smacked off her face*. Having no replacement to hand. Crabtree seized the moment. The show would go on and gender balance would be redressed! Donning the costume, Crabtree took the stage.

The audience was enraptured The critics were ecstatic. The cast ... devastated.. Crabtree's intrepertation Widow Twankey took London by storm! Aged stage door johnnies queued for weeks with flowers and chocolates. Dukes, Earls and Princes sought his favour, but in the main were disappointed.

With a single stroke of his genius Crabtree launched one of the greatest traditions of the English theatre - the Panto Dame. The tradition continues to this day. So far reaching has it become that Australia too has been influenced by this contribution of Joseph Crabtree. We have only to consider how our own, dear, dame
(Presents photo of Dame Everage)
Edna Everage may have come to the antipodes.

Perhaps she is the living Image

Scholars, thank you.

By the way, the Theatre Royal burned down on 1 February 1813 and was reconstructed by R.B. Sheridan the same year.

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