# ASPECTS

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## FLORENCE GLOSSOP-HARRIS (1883-1931)

at the Casino Theatre: Touring the London Stage to St John's

BY MICHELLE KING AND ROBERT ORMSBY

Between August 1926 and December 1930, British actress Florence Glossop-Harris toured her eponymous theatre company four times to the Casino Theatre in St John's.1 Her company is often mentioned, though only briefly and vaguely, in accounts of Newfoundland performance history, but she is otherwise almost entirely forgotten by scholars.<sup>2</sup> Yet Glossop-Harris had a distinguished career performing in London and on tours of the British Provinces, South Africa, and the western coast of the Atlantic. She brought with her to St John's a troupe of English actors who, collectively, had significant experience in London's West End theatres and on tours around the world.

er company performed a repertoire comprised of Shakespeare, other English classics, and some plays with subject matter that may have challenged audiences' mores. But mostly they staged popular comedies, melodramas, and genre pieces that fall under the broad categories of romance, thriller, crime, and mystery drama. The company toured with its own elaborate sets, an extensive collection of costumes, and theatre equipment that allowed them to produce these plays to a standard on par with those prevailing in London.

Glossop-Harris came to Newfoundland 80 years after the advent of what Paul O'Neill calls "the Golden Age of professional theatricals" in St John's, by which he means decades of numerous companies visiting the city from England and the United States.<sup>3</sup> These performers provided diverse forms of entertainment, from theatre to opera, and vocal and instrumental music. Others included a circus, magic shows, a hypnotist, and even an exhibition from Mme Toussaud's wax museum.4 Although many of the theatres in which touring shows were performed succumbed to the great fires of 1846 and 1892, they were usually rebuilt and early 20th-century St John's could boast of many attractive and practical performance spaces. With a capacity of 1,350, the Casino occupied the top floor of the Total Abstinence Hall; rebuilt in 1894, it was one of a number of St John's theatres located in buildings owned by benevolent societies.5

Because so much of the performance during this "Golden Age" was from abroad, the era's theatrical productions have been drawn into debates about geography and cultural authenticity. Surveying the history of Shakespearean performance in Newfoundland, Peter Ayers connects the island's supposed cultural belatedness, or long-lasting social and political reliance on Britain, to its isolation from the rest of North America. 6 Like

Louise Whiteway, he argues that Newfoundland's spotty coastal settlement and underdeveloped transportation links contributed to the separation of legitimate (that is, scripted) theatre in St John's from "folk" performances elsewhere in the province. Ayers comments that legitimate theatre, imported from other urban centres, had, for much of its history, been disconnected from the daily lives of most Newfoundlanders. Furthermore, he notes distinctions made between a supposedly authentic Newfoundland folk culture in outport communities and the "external" interests represented by St John's.

This argument reflects a strain of grievance common in popular conceptions of Newfoundland's historical relationship to Britain, but the pre-Confederation colony routinely domesticated imported culture for its own purposes. For instance, Newfoundlanders have incorporated practices, symbols, and events as varied as child actress Jean Davenport's 1841 performance as Shakespeare's Richard III in St John's and the attack at Beaumont Hamel into public debate in order to create their own understandings of virtuous colonial citizenship. <sup>10</sup> This is to say nothing of the amateur performers in 19th-century St John's who staged works by Gilbert and Sullivan, or of Johnny Burke, who adapted English light opera to dramatize Newfoundland history and characters. <sup>11</sup>

Such domestication occurred across a range of cultures imported to Newfoundland. The spread of cinema in the early 20th century connected the Island to a global American industry but, as Paul Moore argues, social relations peculiar to Newfoundland meant that film's regulation and people's viewing habits differed significantly from those elsewhere in North America. Meanwhile, both Kelly Best and Jeff Webb challenge the notion of authentic/isolated Newfoundland culture: the former reveals how the popular American minstrelsy character Jim Crow influenced mummering in locations such as Carbonear during the 19th century; the latter describes Newfoundlanders' appreciation of highbrow and popular American and British music in broadcasts and recordings during the 1930s and 1940s. 13

Glossop-Harris's tours to St John's exemplify some of the ways that early 20<sup>th</sup>-century English theatre could be employed to work out questions of local identity in relation to a cosmopolitanism that was based on membership in the British Empire. As an experienced actress who honed her skills in London and internationally, Glossop-Harris exposed Newfoundland to actors and plays that put audiences in touch with venerable British theatre traditions and the latest in

taste-making West End performance, thereby linking local theatre-goers to the colonial centre in London. Virtually the only evidence about the company's activities in St John's appears in the *Daily News* and the *Evening Telegram*. The puff writing in both papers suggests that they were little more than biased promoters for Glossop-Harris, which did not give the public much voice in determining how the company was understood in Newfoundland. Still, while the coverage treated company members as celebrities who brought with them from England a revelatory cultural sophistication, it also indicates that Glossop-Harris wanted the relationship between her troupe and the city to be regarded as one of mutuality, that of a gracious host eagerly embracing honoured guests.

#### A theatrical life in England and on tour

Born in London in 1883, Florence Glossop-Harris made her theatrical debut as Benedick's page in a 1903 production of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* and spent the next 27 years carrying on the family business by acting, theatre-managing, and touring before she died in 1931. Her father, Sir Augustus Henry Glossop-Harris, was, like his own father, a prominent actor and impresario; he managed the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London's foremost performance space for legitimate theatre. There, he co-authored and mounted numerous spectacular crowd-pleasers that filled the large auditorium. He also produced serious drama, invited to England influential European companies, and staged innovative operas at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

At the age of 26, Glossop-Harris married into another distinguished London theatrical family. Her husband, Frank Cellier, was an actor whose father and uncle served during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as musical directors of Richard D'Oyly Carte's company, where they conducted that quintessentially Victorian form of popular musical theatre, Gilbert and Sullivan opera. Glossop-Harris and Cellier co-managed the Prince's Theatre in London and each toured, together and separately, modern plays and Shakespeare's works. <sup>16</sup> In 1914, Glossop-Harris gave birth to their daughter, <sup>17</sup>Antoinette, who would eventually perform in her mother's St John's productions of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth*, <sup>18</sup> and would later go on to her own screen career. <sup>19</sup>

It is unclear how often Glossop-Harris and Cellier worked together on stage or in management prior to their divorce in 1925, though there is ample evidence that she herself had an extensive career on the road

before coming to St John's.<sup>20</sup> She toured her own companies, beginning in 1906, and eventually covered the British Provinces,<sup>21</sup> Germany,<sup>22</sup> the Caribbean, and Canada.<sup>23</sup> Between her own and other managers' companies, she performed in South Africa, the British Provinces, and Central and South America.<sup>24</sup>

Her touring made Glossop-Harris part of a network of artists who moved between English theatres and those overseas. In addition to working with the important actor-manager Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree in

London, Glossop-Harris performed in Sir Frank Benson's company. <sup>25</sup> Numerous English theatre artists had learned their craft working with Benson, who developed a system for touring his many companies across Britain and internationally. <sup>26</sup> These "Old Bensonian" colleagues included Oscar Asche and Basil Rathbone, both of whom had successful careers in England and abroad. <sup>27</sup> Besides these company members, Glossop-Harris performed with many others who had notable careers touring internationally, such as Leonard Rayne, who operated theatres in South Africa frequented by English performers, <sup>28</sup> and the American ex-patriot Mrs Brown-Potter, who performed in England, Australia, and Asia. <sup>29</sup>

These travelling actors effectively exported the theatrical culture they developed at home to the distant corners of the British Empire, something Glossop-Harris was well suited to do, given her experience performing the work of Shakespeare, who was widely regarded as England's "National Poet."30 She played Shakespeare in Birmingham, for the Oxford University Dramatic Society, across England, and overseas.31 She also assumed prominent roles in three seasons at the Memorial Theatre in Stratfordupon-Avon. Glossop-Harris joined Benson there in 1915,32 at which point he had been producing spring and/or summer seasons of Shakespeare for nearly three decades in the playwright's hometown.<sup>33</sup> By the time she got to Stratford, Shakespeare had acquired particularly nationalistic meaning, as England and Germany had made the rhetorical battle to claim cultural ownership of the dramatist part of their war efforts.34 Between 1915 and 1916, when

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numerous ceremonies were held to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, Glossop-Harris performed the female lead in six of Benson's Shakespearean productions and took a principal role in three others, playing Ophelia to his Hamlet (May 1, 1916), and Katherine opposite his Henry IV, and Portia against his Shylock (both on April 24, 1916). Three years later, she returned to Stratford to perform with William Bridges-Adams's New Shakespeare Company, playing Hermione in The Winter's Tale,

Portia in *Julius Caesar*, and Helena in *A Midsummer* Night's Dream between August 2 and August 30.<sup>35</sup>

#### Company composition and repertoire

When she toured to St John's, then, Glossop-Harris was a busy and esteemed actress who enjoyed close ties to England's theatrical establishment, but what did her company actually do during their tours to the city? If the evidence does not indicate what the productions were like, it does reveal some basic facts about the troupe's working methods. Over the course of their four stops, they staged 64 full-length plays and two curtain raisers (short, one scene plays presented before a full-length production). The company performed these pieces in 74 "runs," each usually lasting half a week (Monday to Wednesday or Thursday to Saturday), though there were some deviations from this pattern. Their first tour lasted one month, from August 30 to September 29, 1926, when they staged nine plays. Although Glossop-Harris employed six women and eight men for the first two visits, she doubled the length of the second tour: taking place from May 8 to July 4, 1928, it featured 17 plays performed over 20 half-week runs. The company also apparently began gauging audience taste, repeating The Ghost Train by Arthur Ridley and Charley's Aunt by Brandon Thomas from their first visit, and repeating the latter within the tour.36

Details of the third tour suggest that Glossop-Harris's fortunes continued to improve in St John's. The company stayed four months, from December 24, 1928, to April 27, 1929. Furthermore, they virtually doubled the number of plays they staged compared to the last tour, mounting 32 works over 34 runs. Glossop-Harris

also increased the size of the company to nine women and 11 men, and hired local talent: NONIA provided some costuming; 37 various anonymous residents performed in The Bells and Hamlet; 38 young actress Eileen Delmar took part in three plays (Passers By; The Lie; Macbeth), 39 while a Ms Hutton and a Mr and Ms Warren did some singing, and Aubrey Crocker provided the orchestration and conducted the music for select plays. 40 The troupe continued to repeat pieces that seemed especially to appeal to audiences in St John's, bringing back Ghost Train a third time and re-mounting four other plays within the tour. The major innovation of this stay was that the company significantly increased the number of Shakespeare's dramas they staged. Although they had previously included a few of Shakespeare's works in their repertoire, and would do so again on their last visit, they now performed six of his dramas, plus the Balcony Scene from Romeo and Juliet. Their fourth and final stop in St John's lasted only six weeks, from October 31 to December 9, 1930, when the repertoire was performed by a company of five women and 12 men, as well as Professor PJ McCarthy from St John's, who was the company's musical director for the season.<sup>41</sup> That year they produced nine fulllength plays and one curtain raiser. They repeated one work within the tour stop and closed out their visit with Ridley's Ghost Train, evidence of the drama's popularity with Newfoundland audiences. 42

While Glossop-Harris staged more comedies than anything else, there was some generic variety in the troupe's repertoire. The plays they performed recycled the same basic themes that dramatists had relied on for centuries: marriage, family, disguise, class, and social commentary. These issues were well represented in the company's performance of canonical comedies of manners that satirized 18th- and 19th-century English society, Oliver Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer (1773), Richard Brinsley Sheridan's The School for Scandal (1777), and Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest (1895). These ideas also featured prominently in the difficult or "problem" plays Glossop-Harris staged, George Bernard Shaw's Candida (1894) and Arthur Wing Pinero's The Second Mrs Tanqueray (1893). Glossop-Harris divided her Shakespearean repertoire evenly between popular comedies and tragedies and added the rarely staged history, King Henry VIII. She favoured Shakespeare that she had acted in previously, such as *The Merchant* of Venice and Hamlet, in which she played Portia and Ophelia respectively.

Most of the more recent works the company staged in St John's concerned early 20th-century English society and demonstrated repeated situations, characters, and concerns that suggest the actress-manager's sense of crowd-pleasing dramatic formulae. The comedies she selected frequently treated contemporary Britons caught up in extramarital flirtation, thwarted desire, misunderstandings about romantic partners, and farcical deceptions. Walter Ellis's aptly titled A Little Bit of Fluff, in which a wife suspects her husband of infidelity when she finds a pearl necklace and a bit of fluff in his pocket, epitomizes these comedies. The crime dramas in the troupe's repertoire normally featured a male English protagonist who was in various ways conflicted, ranging from the cantankerous-but-amiable retired barrister in Grumpy by Horace Hodges and Thomas Percyval to the chauvinistic and hyper-masculine World War I veteran Bulldog Drummond in HC McNeile and Gerald DuMaurier's work of the same name. A handful of plays they produced included supernatural elements, whether those were religious allegories like Jerome K Jerome's The Passing of the Third Floor Back or the lurid tale of a cursed charm in WW Jacobs's The Monkey's Paw. Other such dramas incorporated fantastical and exotic elements that were resolved as crime procedurals, such as the Sherlock Holmes vehicle The Speckled Band.

Whatever the genre, Glossop-Harris mounted numerous plays at the Casino that dramatized England's sense of itself as an evolving nation and world power. John Galsworthy's *The Skin Game* depicts the industrialization of rural Britain and the shift from the power of the landed gentry to that of the nouveau riche, whose wealth derived from manufacturing. The company's most often-repeated play, *The Ghost Train*, was a spectacular political thriller about Bolsheviks infiltrating England. Both Neil Grant's *Petticoat Influence* and Walter Ellis's *Almost a Honeymoon*, comedies about men who need wives to help them secure posts in the British Empire's colonial service, may have prompted theatre-goers in St John's to reflect on their own colonial relationship to the English actors onstage.

#### Reception and promotion in the press

The main sources of information for their activities in St John's, stories and reviews in the *Evening Telegram* and the *Daily News*, are so full of superlative praise for the company and so closely aligned with their advertising that they cast doubt on the papers as reliable guides to value judgment. However, the nature of the press coverage is informative. If the papers were simply a

medium of publicity for the theatre troupe, they can't reveal how Newfoundland theatre-goers reflected on their relationship to the company, but they do suggest how Glossop-Harris wished her company to be regarded by audiences in Newfoundland.

Glossop-Harris was one of the most important English actresses to leave her mark on St John's since Jean Davenport did so 85 years earlier and the differences between their public images in the city are instructive. When Davenport played in Newfoundland, her

father orchestrated both her public daily routines and her stage performances.<sup>43</sup> Her work on stage, calculated to challenge Edmund Kean's tradition of male-centred tragic performance, sparked heated debates in the St John's press about appropriate and gentlemanly forms of response from Newfoundland audiences to crossgendered acting by an English performer.<sup>44</sup>

Any challenges that Glossop-Harris posed to the male-dominated theatre were subtler than those posed by Davenport. Prior to her arrival in 1926, the newspapers referred to her a few times as the daughter of Augustus Harris, the famed manager of Drury Lane. 45 Yet she was not subordinate to her father's reputation; references to him soon disappeared and she was the troupe's undisputed leader. Advertisements during all four tours consistently named the "Glossop-Harris Company," featured the phrase "Including Florence Glossop-Harris" centrally, and many included her photograph. On their first visit, both dailies remarked that "The Company is headed by Florence Glossop-Harris, a leading lady" of "unlimited" "ability," adding that the troupe had "no particular leading man."46

The papers depicted company members as English exponents of cosmopolitanism, playing on theatregoers' desire for connections to London's metropolitan sophistication. Advertising typically refers to them as an "English Repertory Company," and often includes "Under the Distinguished Patronage of His Excellency" the governor or administrator of the day. Furthermore, stories about the troupe appear to vouch for the talent of its members by associating them with the London theatres in which they have

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acted; St John's audiences were informed that they could witness performances that had been seen at such renowned London playhouses as the Royalty, the Strand, the Savoy, the Prince of Wales, Drury Lane, the Criterion, the Ambassador's, the Old Vic, the Regent, the Garrick, the Aldwych, and the Apollo.47 News stories, furthermore, noted that company actors toured widely: to the West Indies,48 Canada, South Africa, Rhodesia, India, Ceylon, the Philippines, China, Japan, Hawaii, and the United States.49

This language also appears in both papers' treatment of the company's repertoire and production values. Dozens of news stories remarked that the success of the company's repertoire had already been established in London (and often New York), valuing these dramas according to the approval of the English metropolis. In certain cases, the press endorsed Glossop-Harris's repertoire according to the status of an English performer associated with a given play: for instance, one story noted that "Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, the most famous living actor of the present day," had enjoyed great success in Jerome K Jerome's The Passing of the Third Floor Back.<sup>50</sup> In other cases, the papers praised the company for its supposed ability to stage plays "in [a] manner" comparable to those in London or for precisely recreating metropolitan theatrical worlds in the Casino, such as their staging of The Bells, which they "produced in exact detail as in the original production in which Sir Henry Irving scored so famously."51

Such commentary establishes Glossop-Harris's commercial-theatrical credentials, but she evidently wished her company to be regarded as strengthening the links that held together the British Empire. In 1928, company member T Gordon Blyth addressed the Casino audience, reportedly telling them that the upcoming *Merchant of Venice* would be the kind of pedagogical opportunity that "educational authorities in England" thought so beneficial; he added that 1,500 Jamaican schoolchildren had recently witnessed their production. <sup>52</sup> Driving home the sense that Newfoundlanders should not shirk their colonial duty, the story notes that he concluded by telling theatre-

### CASINO THEATRE, ST. JOHNS.



FLORENCE GLOSSOP-HARRIS

# Che Glossop-Barris

English Repertory Company

INCLUDING

Florence Glossop-Barris
In the Latest London Successes.

Daughter of the late Sir Augustus Harris, of Drury Lane. Commenced her theatrical career under the management of the late Sir H. Beerbohm Tree at His Majesty's Theatre; supported Sir Frank Benson as leading lady at the Court Theatre and the Stratford Tercentenary Celebrations; leading lady with the New Shakespeare Company at the Strand Theatre and the Stratford-on-Avon Festivals. Toured extensively under her own management the Colonies, South America and English Provinces, including Seasons at the Prince's Theatre, London.

Specially invited by the Oxford University Dramatic Society to play "The Queen" in their production of "Hamlet."

For the 1930-31 tour the company present a repertoire of the latest London successes. A strong company supports this personal visit of Miss Florence Glossop-Harris, and the entire elaborate scenery, costumes, and properties are carried. The public are assured that the company is of unusual excellence and has been selected with exceptional care. Every artiste has a London reputation and experience in the best Repertory Theatres of England.

goers how pleased Glossop-Harris was "to perform with an entirely English Company on Empire night before an audience in Britain's oldest colony, thereby helping to weld more firmly the bond of fellowship uniting the two countries." <sup>53</sup>

Similarly, an April 1929 biographical sketch in both papers details the actress-manager's Shakespearean credentials in order to emphasize for Newfoundlanders her connections to prestigious locales, institutions, and events in recent English theatre history. Among these events is Glossop-Harris's "appearances at the Festival [in Stratford] – notably the Tercentenary Celebration in 1916 when Sir Frank Benson received his Knighthood."54 The phrasing conflates two episodes from May 1916, locating the actress-manager in one celebratory pageant staged in Stratford and an earlier one at Drury Lane when King George V knighted Benson in the theatre's royal box following a pageant of scenes from Shakespeare's plays and a performance of Julius Caesar.55 The purpose of the article, clearly, is to link audiences in St John's - through Glossop-Harris and Shakespeare - to incidents that combine august theatrical tradition, the cosmopolitan glamour of West End London, and royalty.

But many more newspaper items described the relationship as mutual, in which St John's gladly embraced Glossop-Harris's company, making them part

of the community. These stories repeatedly described the "crowded," "bumper," and "packed" houses<sup>56</sup> of "thoroughly appreciative" 57 theatre-goers who, "aroused to the highest pitch of enthusiasm,"58 replied with "deafening" applause, 59 evidence that "St John's can appreciate a company from the Mother Land."60 By the fourth tour, Glossop-Harris had won "her host of admirers"61 and two of her leading actors "were each given an ovation as they appeared on stage" for the tour's opening performance. 62 Yet, even by the second tour in 1928, the newspapers described company members as more than celebrities who brought a cosmopolitan lustre with them from London; they were "old friends." 63 While these "old friends" donated to local charities,64 staged Shakespeare especially for school audiences,65 and addressed the Rotary Club,66 the city found various ways of having its say about the troupe: anonymous authors wrote poetic tributes to Glossop-Harris;<sup>67</sup> one story claimed that a "high dignitary of the Church in St John's" convinced the company to print a synopsis of Macbeth for potential spectators;68 and in each of the last three tours, productions were staged by "special request" of the audience.

At the conclusion of their longest tour in 1928-1929, the newspapers portrayed the troupe and the city exchanging gifts and feting each other. The first 200 women who attended *Antony and Cleopatra* 

on April 23 received signed pictures of Glossop-Harris.<sup>70</sup> The following night, the company and 60 guests attended a farewell dinner and dance at the Cochrane Hotel, where they enjoyed "the rendition of a song reminiscent of the Company's associations with Newfoundland."<sup>71</sup> For their final performance (*Ghost Train*), Glossop-Harris personally escorted the governor into his box before the show; afterwards, she "was presented with two beautiful bouquets," then addressed the crowd before the cast "joined hands, and with the audience, sang 'Auld Lang Syne," at which point "hearty cheers were given by the audience."<sup>72</sup>

#### Conclusion

We have been able to provide here a much fuller account than has previously existed of Florence Glossop-Harris's touring to St John's, but it has been much harder to describe the influence that the company had on the city. The company evidently found it worthwhile to return to Newfoundland four times in five years, with an extended stay in 1928-1929, but there is no certain indication of how many tickets they actually sold nor how well their productions were actually received on any given day since the reporting is no more than puff writing. It is also clear that Glossop-Harris, an important actress-manager who starred in most of her own productions, provided St John's the chance to experience a cosmopolitan repertoire performed by professional English actors who, implicitly and explicitly, worked to solidify the bonds of Empire. Yet we know almost nothing about what the productions actually looked and sounded like nor how the actors performed, given that the bombastic-yet-trite reviews are so vague in their details.

Furthermore, because the reviews are so devoid of meaningful commentary, they provide little sense of relationship between the troupe and St John's, save the financial arrangements between the newspapers' advertising departments and the company. It is therefore hard to know how locals domesticated the international culture that was performed for them. Admittedly, by hiring local talent, making appearances at social clubs, holding special school performances, and being hosted by citizens at a farewell party, members of the company did become somewhat wound up in the community as more than just performers from London. However, we have no understanding of what their daily lives were like in St John's or how they understood their relationship to its citizens.

Still, despite the shortcomings of the evidence about the company, and although the company did not play outside St John's, the information that can be gleaned from existing sources is further indication of the extent to which the Island was far from isolated; rather, Florence Glossop-Harris, a leading actress-manager with deep connections to key English theatres and performers, linked its capital city to near-contemporary metropolitan culture that circulated widely on both sides of the Atlantic in the early 20th century.

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