

WHEN DITCHERS AND JACK TARS COLLIDE: BENEFIT THEATRICALS AT THE CALCUTTA LYRIC THEATRE IN THE WAKE OF THE INDIAN MUTINY

By Mary Isbell

THE COLLISION I EXPLORE in this essay is not a physical one, though it does emerge from a performance event that brought Ditchers (European residents in Calcutta) and Jack Tars (sailors in the Royal Navy) to the Calcutta Lyric Theatre on February 25, 1858. The collision actually manifests in print, as conflicting reviews of this event. Announced in the silk playbill pictured in Figure 19, the sailor amateurs of HMS *Chesapeake* offered a benefit theatrical to raise money for the Indian Relief Fund, a charity offering support to “widows, orphans, or other representatives of those who perished in the mutiny” (“Indian Relief”) (Figure 19).

While the drama critic for the *Bengal Hurkaru*, an English-language newspaper printed in Calcutta, acknowledges that the sailors “pulled on the sock and buskin with the very laudable motive of affording us *Ditchers* amusement and the Indian Relief Fund substantial support,” he nevertheless confesses that “we repaired to the Calcutta Lyric Theatre . . . with considerable misgivings” (“Lyric Theatre”). With this confessed prejudice, it is not surprising that the critic reports that the sailors made a “precious mess” of the prologue, a “travesty” of the drama *The Seven Clerks*, and “made low buffoons of themselves” in the burlesque tragic opera *Bombastes Furioso* because they “could not exactly understand its drift” (“Lyric Theatre”). The critic notes, by contrast, the superiority of the gentleman amateurs of the Calcutta Histrionic Society, whose earlier performance of *Bombastes* “threw our Amateur Sailor performers completely in the shade.” The critic for the *Young Idea*, a weekly handwritten newspaper published aboard HMS *Chesapeake*, characterizes the performance as a great success and claims that jealousy prompted the *Hurkaru* critic’s “acrimonious,” “unwarrantable,” and “splenetic” attack on his shipmates (McArthur n.p.). While the *Englishman*, a rival paper to the *Hurkaru*, printed a polite puff review just after the event, the paper later ran a letter to the editor, which claimed that the caustic critique in the *Hurkaru* was not an accurate representation of “the opinions of those who witnessed the performance” (“Fair Play”).

One can imagine why gentlemen in Calcutta would accuse sailors of damaging the dramatic texts they perform, but I argue that this performance event offers more than

Calcutta Lyric Theatre.

UNDER THE DISTINGUISHED PATRONAGE OF COMMODORE RUNDLE
BURGES WATSON, C. B., AND OFFICERS OF H. M.'S S. "CHESAPEAKE."
For the Benefit of the "Indian Relief Fund."
THE AMATEURS OF HER MAJESTY'S SHIP "CHESAPEAKE" WILL
On Thursday Evening, the 25th February, 1858,
Perform the much Admired and highly Romantic Drama
The "SEVEN CLERKS,"
Or the Thief and the Denouncer, in two Acts and 7 Tableaux (a Legend
of Marseilles.)

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

Claude Darnaud (the Miser),	Geo. Horner.
Count Adolphe de Briancourt,	Chas. Stewart.
Gustavus, his friend,	Thos. Walshe.
Larosse, a Merchant,	Robt. Wilkinson.
Simon Siggel, the Miser's Tenant,	Henry Underhill.
Hans, a Dutchman,	Jno. Walshe.
Matteo, an Italian,	Henry Montagu.
Jno. Brown, an Englishman,	Isaac Wright.
Pierre,	Henry Hamilton.
Antoine,	Jas. Branna.
Victorine, the Miser's daughter,	Miss Connell.
Peasantry, &c. &c.	

NAUTICAL HORNPIPE, Thomas Walshe.
COMIC DUET, &c. Henry Underhill and William Connell.

The whole to conclude with the Laughable Burlesque Tragic Opera,
"BOMBASTES FURIOSO."

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

Artaxominus (King of Utopia)	Henry Montagu.
Fushas, Minister of State,	Charles Stewart.
General Bombastes,	Henry Underhill.
Attendants, Courtiers, &c. &c.
The Grand Army of Utopia,	Miss Connell.
Distaffina,

The Performance will commence with a *Prologue* written expressly for
the occasion.
The splendid Band of H. M.'s S. "Chesapeake," under the able superin-
tendance of their talented Master JUAN JOSE FAUSTINE, will attend on the
occasion.
Doors open at 7½ o'clock. Performance to commence at
8½ o'clock precisely.

The Amateurs of H. M.'s S. "Chesapeake" have kindly requested Mr.
VauGelder's management for the occasion, to which he has most willingly
acceded.

CALCUTTA:—PRINTED BY D'ROZARIO & CO. TANK-SQUARE.

Figure 19. Silk playbill included in the journal of J.W.L. Bamfield. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

confirmation that classism pervaded the theater scene in Victorian India. Unlike the many instances of English-Indian interaction that rightly constitute the history of the British presence in India, this performance event, which I explore through reviews in three English-language periodicals, offers insight into fissures within the British community in Calcutta in

1858. Drawing on the tradition of benefit theatricals in Calcutta, which typically attracted spectators from the same social group as performers, I interpret this sailor performance as a rare instance of interaction between social groups in Calcutta, groups that differed in their interpretation of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the British response to it.¹

The editorial policies shaping the *Bengal Hurkaru*, the *Englishman*, and the *Young Idea* offer useful insight into the politics of the British communities they served, and these policies are evident most clearly in the coverage of the Mutiny in each periodical.² The editor of the *Hurkaru* presents his paper as a corruption-exposing machine and portrays the *Englishman* as the propagandistic voice of the Crown, while the editors of these two professionally produced papers are unaware of the *Young Idea*, edited by a clerk aboard the *Chesapeake*, A. D. McArthur, who took great pains to prevent the paper from becoming a vehicle for insubordination. Thomas Rice Holmes notes that during the early days of the Mutiny, English journalists in Calcutta, while largely supportive of Charles Canning, the Governor-General of India, were critical of his advisers, “to whose influence they ascribed the feebleness of his policy” (168). Mohit Moitra argues that the “Gagging Act” on the press, passed by Canning on June 13, 1857, was an attempt to stop native journalists from inciting further rebellion, but Holmes argues that it was also encouraged by Canning’s advisers, who were frustrated with attacks on their actions in English-language newspapers (Moitra 126; Holmes 168–69).

More important for my purposes than fixing the precise reasons for the Gagging Act is the response to that act by the *Hurkaru* and the *Englishman*, evident in a series of editorials appearing in the *Hurkaru* in July of 1857. In these editorials, we find traces of a controversy over the alleged role of the *Hurkaru* in prompting the Gagging Act, an accusation originating in the *Englishman*. While issues of the *Englishman* during this controversy are not extant, the editorials in the *Hurkaru* characterize what its competitor was printing. On July 1, the *Hurkaru* editor writes to defend his decision to print an English translation of the rebel proclamation and to insist that the printing of this translation could not possibly have prompted the Gagging Act because the Act was passed within hours of the publication of the proclamation in English (*Bengal Hurkaru* 2). The proclamation, written by sepoys outraged at the introduction of “cartridges made up with swine and beef fat,” warns Hindu and Muslim civilians that “all the Europeans are united in this point, first to deprive the army of their religion and then by the force of strong measures to christianise all the subjects” (qtd. in Husain 8–9). It was first published in the Urdu paper *Doorbin* on June 8 and in another Urdu paper, *Sultanul Akhbar* on June 10 before the editor of the *Hurkaru* printed an English translation on June 13 (Husain 9). An article published in the *Hurkaru* on July 1, entitled “Disaffection of Native Troops,” explains that sepoys had “just cause of complaint against the government” (4), and an editorial published on July 3 suggests that the *Englishman* persisted in accusing the *Hurkaru* of instigating the gag by printing the proclamation. This prompted the editor of the *Hurkaru* to justify the printing of the proclamation:

We repeat that the Government sanctioned the Proclamation by not suppressing it during the three weeks that it was in their possession in its original form, and that its subsequent publication in English was a necessary warning to the European community. The reason why the Government did not take some steps in the matter at the proper time was that they were engaged in hushing up the insurrection, in representing it as a partial disaffection of the Native Army,” a “bad feeling among a portion of the native troops”, &c, and in attempting to create the impression that there was not the smallest

danger in Calcutta, where we were surrounded by nothing but loyalty and good faith, so much so that a Volunteer Guard, which we were then advocating, was altogether unnecessary. If such was really the state of Calcutta at the time, the fact was sufficient in itself to make our Proclamation innocuous, even if its contents were not already known to the natives. (*Bengal Hurkaru* 11)

Here, the *Hurkaru* chastises the local government for hiding the fact that Calcutta residents might be in danger. After reminding the members of the Government reading the editorial that it has in the past been deliberate policy of the *Englishman* “to blacken the character of the Government upon every possible occasion” and “malign its members with the bitterest personal abuse,” the writer concludes the lengthy editorial with a retaliatory accusation that the government and the *Englishman* now speak with the same voice: “We congratulate the Government upon the friend that they have secured” and “We congratulate our contemporary also upon his docile submission to the gag” (11). In his account of the Gagging Act, Moitra explains that the *Hurkaru* “had to close down three days for publishing a ‘provocative’ article” but “was allowed to resume its publication after a new editor had been appointed” (130). Moitra also notes that the *Englishman* was not punished “for preaching racial animosity and pouring nasty invectives against Canning’s so-called policy of ‘clemency’” (130). We find in the secondary scholarship on this controversy, therefore, the suggestion that the *Hurkaru* responded to the mutiny by criticizing the East India Company, while the *Englishman* aimed its attacks directly at the native population.

It is perhaps not surprising that these rifts would also emerge in something as seemingly unrelated as a benefit performance patronized by the Royal Navy. Viewed in the context of the gagging act, the caustic critique of the sailors’ benefit theatrical in the *Hurkaru* was an opportunity to vent frustration against the Crown safely. The performance took place just before England dissolved the Company to take a more direct role in governing India (Llewellyn-Jones 10). Jack Tars in Calcutta represented England’s intervention on behalf of British colonials, the Crown swooping in to fix the mistakes of the Ditchers. The critic for the *Hurkaru* states his resentment quite explicitly in an anecdote about the entrance of the patron of the performance, Commodore Watson, and the necessity of standing for the national anthem:

Well, punctual to the time Commodore Watson, C.B. arrived, and the band struck up the National Anthem, when the Officers of H.M.S. *Chesapeake* stood up and we *Ditchers* after a little hesitation (not knowing better manners) took the hint, and stood up too! Probably we are not over loyal subjects of Her Most Gracious Majesty, probably a lengthened residence in this “clime of the Sun” is unfavorable to outward demonstrations of loyalty and is so enervating as to make us consider even the respect due to Royalty, a bore? (“Lyric Theatre”)

Quite contrary to celebrating the sailors as heroic, then, this reviewer is irritated by the display of patriotism attending their performance.

Viewed in this way, the polite puff review in the *Englishman* seems muffled by allegiance to those in power.

We do not think it fair to Amateurs to subject their performances to a severe criticism, the object for the present performance being a most laudable one. Suffice it to say that the house was well filled, the actors exerted themselves to the utmost, and if they did not all enter into the true spirit of the different pieces, and render the most correct reading, they afforded the audience a considerable degree of amusement in one shape or another. (Bamfield n.p.)

This review highlights the generosity motivating the sailors' performance and diminishes any mistakes apparent in their performance.

The *Young Idea* was not subject to Canning's restraints on Calcutta journalists, though such restrictions would not have been necessary. Rather than stating the imperative of speaking truth to power in the preface to the facsimile edition of the newspaper's complete run, McArthur explains,

Newspapers are not generally regarded on board men-of-war, with a friendly eye by the Officers in command, on account of the opportunity which they afford the juniors of quizzing them, thus setting discipline at defiance; – but When I took the editorial pen, it was my fixed determination to exclude all such emanations, and to fill the weekly sheet with nothing but what was amusing without being personal, with narratives of pleasure trips, descriptions of places visited, entertaining anecdotes and instructive information, and with such general matter as in future years should bring to remembrance the occurrences of by-gone days. (McArthur n.p.)

This editorial policy makes sense when one considers the fact that McArthur published his newspaper with resources supplied by the Royal Navy and with permission for publication likely conditioned on it not breeding disaffection.

The response to the Mutiny in the *Young Idea* blends irritation over insufficient information with pride in the English race. On January 9, two weeks before the *Chesapeake* arrived in Calcutta, McArthur describes the frustration:

We now learn that affairs in India wear a very gloomy aspect, indeed! Every arrival of news has brought more wretched accounts. But still there appears to be a vagueness and want of authority in what we have heard; but yet it is evident that every available man is wanted to aid in gulling the disturbances. (McArthur n.p.)

On January 23, as the ship was docked in Calcutta, McArthur reports in his editorial that he “cannot venture to say much” about “the present state of the rebellion . . . on shore, one heard little or nothing of it.” In this same issue, however, he reproduces an article from the *Evening Mail* celebrating the ascendancy of the British race:

The capture of Delhi, and the relief of Lucknow are exploits which challenge our national pride, as well as our national thanksgiving. In every shape which war could take, has the ascendancy of the British race been established. We have succeeded in capturing a strong position and we have succeeded in defending a weak one. As besiegers at Delhi, as besieged at Lucknow, we have been equally triumphant, while the advance of our column to the capital of insurgent Oude, presents little less than a miracle of determination and courage. (qtd. in McArthur n.p.)

More telling than this repetition of national pride is the expression of disappointment from McArthur as he reports that the *Chesapeake* is “too late for the fair” and the ship's company would not be “seeing service before the enemy, as we had hoped,” but instead “assisting the arrival, or departure of vessels, in provisioning, storing, repairing, conveying troops or other equally tame work” (McArthur n.p.).³ The *Young Idea* presents the Mutiny as a battle against a native enemy and indicates that at least a contingent of sailors aboard the ship was eager to fight to defend the colonial project.

Having accounts of the sailors' production from these three periodicals means, of course, that the performance event brought these different groups together. The Calcutta Lyric Theatre was therefore not filled exclusively with spectators who socialized regularly with performers, as was typically the case with benefit theatricals in Calcutta. For the majority of amateur theatricals, spectators knew performers personally or recognized them as members of the community in a capacity other than actor. J. Ellen Gainor refers to this effect when analyzing performances during the early-twentieth-century Little Theatre movement, and I argue that the dynamic is the same in the nineteenth century. Gainor writes:

in a community where the identities of the actors are known to the audience, it is impossible for the audience to 'identify' with the characters, or for the production to convey an unfiltered mimesis, precisely because the audience will not suspend their knowledge of that duality – in fact, it is integral to their enjoyment of the art. (61–62)

That spectators recognized amateur actors for their everyday roles gives rise to one of the most important aesthetic features of amateur theatricals, an effect I refer to as “the aggregate.” I derive this concept from Jane Austen's depiction of a private home theatrical in *Mansfield Park* (1814). In the novel, the narrator explains that when Fanny Price watches Mary Crawford and Edmund Bertram rehearse a scene that implies courtship, she cannot evaluate their performance because she feels “too much of it in the aggregate for honesty or safety in particulars” (119). The concept of the aggregate emphasizes that amateur performances pivoted on spectators' recognition of performers as members of their community; Fanny's sense of the aggregate is informed by her suspicion that Mary and Edmund love one another, and her love for Edmund makes her incapable of judging how faithfully they represent Inchbald's young lovers.

We can understand the aggregate as operating in every instance of embodied performance, an effect of the “ghosting” that Marvin Carlson has so thoroughly theorized in *The Haunted Stage* (2001). Carlson uses ghosting to describe the way spectators' memories of previous performance events inform their experiences of a given production. A spectator of a professional production will see in an actor's performance the combination of the character he depicts in that particular performance and all of the previous heroic, tragic, and comic roles that the spectator has observed. But to a spectator of an amateur production – one in which “actor” is not the performer's primary occupation – the aggregate is in most cases a combination of the character performed and all of the traits the spectator has come to recognize as the performer's personal identity. The former is a blend of performance with performance, while the latter is a blend of performance with reality (or, performance not explicitly announced as such).

One might say that the sailors' greatest mistake was performing for a community that regularly attended theatricals produced by their friends and family, productions in which the resonances of the aggregate endeared performers to spectators. Just three weeks before the sailors' performance, on February 4, 1858, the Calcutta Histrionic Society performed at the Calcutta Lyric Theatre for the benefit of the “Neill Testimonial Fund” (“Calcutta Lyric”). The amateurs offered Charles Mathews' popular comedy *Used Up* and a farce from the previous season in London.⁴ The house was packed and the performance elicited two generous reviews and hearty praise from the drama critic for the *Hurkaru*. One reviewer describes *Used Up*, the comedy by Charles Mathews, as “one of the best pieces of its class upon the stage”

and “always a good opportunity for good actors,” but “a particularly hard text for bad ones who are apt to find the material above their mark” (“Calcutta Lyric”).⁵ The determination of which performers qualify as “good actors,” however, depends on the degree to which they are known to the community:

Fortunately there was no chance of this awkward state of things being felt on Thursday. The Amateurs were well practiced in their work, and had not practiced without making themselves as perfect as is desirable in a kind of performance where an occasional bitch [*sic*] is considered part of the entertainment. (“Calcutta Lyric” 118)

Here, “an occasional bitch” (or, glitch or hitch) is precisely the part of the entertainment most enjoyed. Because spectators would recognize the performers for their role in the community, mistakes contributed to the fun. Successful amateurs are recognizable amateurs.

More specifically, the most successful amateur actors in Calcutta are Ditchers, or European residents in Calcutta. This name was derived from the history of the Maratha Ditch, which Indians and Europeans began digging in 1742 to protect the East India Company’s settlement at Calcutta from Maratha raiders (Nair 12). The ditch was never completed, and proved vulnerable to attack in 1756 when the Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula invaded the city. It nevertheless had an identity-forming function: when Robert Clive eventually defeated the Nawab, he negotiated the East India Company’s acquisition of land in relationship to the ditch (Nair 12). Built for protection, the ditch became a boundary marking the East India Company’s possession of Indian land. Like the label “Jack Tar,” to which I will turn in a moment, “Ditcher” captures the way this group protected itself from dangers attending Britain’s imperial project. While sailors used tar to make the vessels enabling imperialist expansion resistant to sea-water, East India Company officials in Calcutta built a ditch to protect themselves from invasion.

Fellow Ditchers, those viewed as members of the colonial community, could do no wrong in these amateur benefit theatricals. The critic for the *Hurkaru* offers the highest praise to the principal actor, Mr. T. Coe, who is described as possessing “real genius” for his ability to perform the role of the “used up” Baronet Sir Charles Coldstream, who is overwhelmed by ennui at having no particular thing he must do and having already tried everything that might be amusing:

He was as like a baronet of twelve thousand a year as most baronets of twelve thousand a year are like themselves, and if we had been told in confidence that he had thirteen thousand we should not have been at all astonished. . . . Mr. Coe made most of Charles Mathews’s points, and some few of his own, and it would be difficult to say which were the best without running the risk of giving offence either to Mr. Mathews or Mr. Coe, both of which responsibilities we must decline. (“Calcutta Lyric” 118)

Notably, the critic suggests that Mr. Coe is wealthy like the character he performs, but that the pleasure of seeing him perform also arises from recognizing Coe’s imitation of Mathews’ performance of the role. The aggregate created in this performance combines the spectators’ knowledge of Coe as a member of the community and the memory of Mathews’ famous performance of the role, which Coe deliberately imitates. Where his imitation is incomplete, the few points “of his own,” are not disruptive but complementary. This reviewer rewards

him with abundant praise and the polite refusal to state whether he has or has not surpassed the professional who created the role. While Carlson argues that a role haunted by the famous actors who previously inhabited it can be a daunting challenge to a new performer, we see that in an amateur production it can actually add to the appeal (Carlson 79).

Beyond the imitation of Mathews, we find costume malfunctions mentioned, but their negative impact on the performance de-emphasized. For instance, a younger performer playing the older lawyer, Mr. Fennel, had inadequately whitened facial hair:

A captious critic might perhaps have remarked that there was an indecision about his whisker which is seldom the characteristic of the legal profession, and which would at once have indicated him to be in the flower of his youth, even if the flour of somebody else's sack had not been so perceptible on his face. However, to the liberal eye, the effect was only as if he had received a slight sprinkling from the pepper ox of time, and this, we fancy, was just the effect desired. ("Calcutta Lyric" 118)

This liberal eye is offering a generous and playful account of a theatrical, emphasizing all of the features that made it fun: recognizing the amateur, spotting the imitations of and divergences from professional productions, and laughing at costume mishaps.

The second play performed by the Calcutta Histrionic Society, *Fearful Tragedy in the Seven Dials*, follows the hijinks of two merchants, Timothy Slumpington and Muggleton Mulligatawney, who awaken after a night of drinking not recalling what they did, how they know one another, or how the latter came to sleep on the former's couch. Over a nerve-racking breakfast, Mrs. Slumpington mistakenly reads an old newspaper, which leads the two men to believe they have brutally beaten an innocent woman to death. The critic for the *Hurkaru* notes its rather scandalous plot, calling it "principally remarkable for the terrible picture which it reveals of the sufferings endured the next morning by persons who have not conducted themselves properly the night before" ("Calcutta Lyric" 118). Unlike the first play, where the reviewer suggests that Coe had no trouble playing the wealthy aristocrat because this behavior came naturally, this play invites the reviewer to "sincerely hope" that the amateur performing Slumpington, Mr. Browne, "was not himself" in his role as the drunkard. Here we see explicitly that the reviewer knows the performer and is attesting to readers that the role he has been given is incongruous – one imagines to humorous effect. The reviewer, claiming to know Browne's friends, absolves Browne because his friends "say that he wasn't, and we believe them" ("Calcutta Lyric" 118). Of course, this review is funny whether you believe it is telling the truth or not. Either Browne was not really drunk and his acting drunk was enjoyable or he *was* really drunk and that was funny to watch.

Though the reviews describe the amateurs playing the female roles in these plays as Miss T. E. Carter and Madame D'Arcy, men most likely performed these parts. While amateur dramatic societies in Victorian England (like the most famous troupe led by Charles Dickens) avoided the stigma against amateur women performing in public by hiring professional actresses, all-male productions were the fashion for much of the century in India.⁶ In reviews of such productions, it was customary to speak of the female impersonators as women. The tremendous praise the *Hurkaru* critic heaps upon "Madame D'Arcy" for her performance as Mary in *Used Up* signals that critic and reader were sharing a joke:

This brings us to the point we have been wanting to come to for some time – that is to say Mary. What shall we say of Mary? "Stunning" would be a cold word to express her attractions, besides

being a vulgar one, and “sharp as needle” would be but a commonplace mode of describing her lively intelligence, her taste and tact. (“Calcutta Lyric Theatre”)

Given the humorous and irreverent tone of the review to this point, one imagines a decidedly not-stunning man playing the attractive role of Mary.

Like the sailors’ production, the Calcutta Histrionic Society offered this event to raise funds to honor the British victims of the Mutiny. The Neill Testimonial Fund was raising money to erect a statue of the “gallant and heroic” Brigadier James George Neill, who was killed in action in September of 1857 (“Calcutta Lyric”). Neill is the man most associated with the violent retribution against Indians for harm they had done to English women and children (Herbert 4). Though honored at the time with a statue funded by subscription and the proceeds from benefit theatricals, today Neill is known primarily as “the now-controversial commander who massacred an estimated 6,000 Indian men, women, and children in retribution for the uprising” (Llewellyn-Jones 156).⁷ Funds from this performance erected a physical statue to his power, which now resides in an unopened Anthropology wing of the Madras Museum, where it has been since it was removed from public display in Madras in 1952 (Steggles 146).⁸

Just as the Calcutta Histrionic Society was offering their performance at the Calcutta Lyric Theatre, the sailors of HMS *Chesapeake* were exploring Calcutta for the first time. The *Young Idea* includes an article describing first impressions of Calcutta on January 23, 1858, just after McArthur’s editorial lamenting the news that the ship’s company would not be seeing direct action in India. The author describes being “assailed by numbers of importunate palanquin bearers,” procuring a native guide, and visiting the bazaars, “which reminded us forcibly of the like places for vending goods and merchandize in Constantinople.” The author recounts passing “small low shops” on “dirty lanes, for we cannot designate them streets,” and observing the “various costumes of the natives, yellow, blue, red and white, the most part clothed in little save their tawny skins.” Of the English population, the author observes palanquin bearers staggering under the weight of “some corpulent old gentlemen, who perhaps entertained the opinion that the sun might melt him were he to expose himself.” Next to melting gentlemen, we find the insinuation that British ladies are relying on makeup to hide their sun-darkened skin: “the complexions of the ladies did not appear to us to have suffered from the heat of the climate, but we suppose they take care not to expose themselves during the day and thus escape, we could not for one instant entertain an idea of artificial means being resorted to.” He also refers to these ladies as victims of the “immense millinery and bonnet establishments . . . with open doors and temptingly displayed head dresses, robes, mantles, etc.” One detects considerable mockery in the way this contributor characterizes the lengths to which the English go to protect themselves from the inhospitable climate in Calcutta. In this account, the Ditchers are as much a curiosity as the natives.

While Ditchers were not a type known to the sailors when they first ventured into Calcutta, the sailors were known to Ditchers as the all too familiar Jack Tar. British sailors were referred to as Jack Tars since at least the seventeenth century, in part because they made their hats and coats waterproof with the same tar used to protect the ship’s hull from shipworm and the ship’s rigging from rot (Adkins xxix). Etymologically, the term Jack Tar fuses the sailor to the ship – presenting him as one of many tools in Britain’s naval arsenal. The influx of sailors in Calcutta in response to the Mutiny preceded the arrival of the *Chesapeake*; to Ditchers, Jack Tars were disruptive to the stability of the community. One report from “A

looker on" in the *Hurkaru*, from December 1, 1857, relates the experience of observing a row "between some Highlanders and sailors" in a liquor shop directly across from the police station. "Before I reached the scene of the fight," the author explains, "I was half inclined to fancy that the Chittagong mutineers had arrived, and were fighting their way against the Police men." He is disappointed to report that instead he heard only the voices of Englishmen ("A Looker" 238). Expecting that the disruption was the result of an attack on Calcutta by natives – this time mutineers from Chittagong on the Bay of Bengal – this author discovers that it was in fact the soldiers and sailors deployed to protect the British population. This sort of frustration with nameless Jack Tars certainly influenced Ditchers' reception of their performance. But the critic for the *Hurkaru* does not simply dismiss the sailor performers as drunk and disorderly. Though one can imagine a certain degree of Ditcher discomfort in seeing fashionable ladies seated in a theater to watch a performance by a group so associated with disruption, as mentioned above, the critic's impatience with pomp and circumstance attending the performance prompts his emphasis on sailors as representatives of the Crown.

Jack Tars provide a contradictory symbol in that they are both the uneducated laborers of the Empire and also representative of the immense power that Empire wields. The critic uses Jack Tar's symbolic power as a heroic representative of English supremacy against them. Interpreting the sailors' presence in Calcutta as an invasion, the critic wields his review as a protective weapon. One element of that weapon is an extended nautical metaphor that parodies sailor talk. Think, for example, of the heroic sailor William from Douglas Jerrold's wildly popular play *Black Ey'd Susan* (1829), who describes his beloved Susan with this elaborate metaphor:

There's my Susan! now pipe all hands for a royal salute; there she is, schooner-rigged – I'd swear to her canvas from a whole fleet. Now she makes more sail – outs with her studding booms – mounts her royals, moon-rakers and sky-scrapers; now she lies to . . . (Jerrold 173)⁹

The reviewer has fun mocking this supposed sort of sailor talk – a fictional trope:

We were doubtful whether our Amateur Sailor performers could steer into the haven of success, with Melpomene at the helm, and avoid the rude blasts of criticism with which the dark clouds in the shape of newspaper critics, threatened ever and anon to visit that fragile barque. ("Lyric Theatre")

Should anyone have missed his parody of nautical metaphor, the reviewer comments upon it explicitly, writing, "There gentle reader! Haven't we done that nautical metaphor (met *afore*?) in style?" The very act of mocking these sailors by constructing such a metaphor is explained *in* the metaphor as an attack on a "fragile barque." This paradoxical symbolic figure of Jack Tar means that mockery of slang-talking sailors attempting a popular play in the British repertoire can also function as an attack on the fictional heroism of Jack Tar and his role in the Imperial mission.

As they made their way through the streets of Calcutta for the first time, it is possible that the sailor amateurs amongst the crew noticed the announcements for the Calcutta Histrionic Society's performance. They certainly followed the example of the society by securing the services of Von Golder, the manager of the theatre, and planning a performance for a cause that they hoped would find favor with local residents. Based on the review of the performance by the Calcutta Histrionic Society in the *Hurkaru*, which they very likely read, the sailors

may have expected a performance for a popular cause to draw a large crowd and encourage drama critics to excuse or enjoy “the occasional bitch.” They certainly did not expect to be ridiculed in print. With such a variety of expectations for and perspectives on it, we can reconstruct this performance event in considerable detail. Take, for example, the venue. McArthur explains in his review of the performance that the Calcutta Lyric Theatre “is but a poor building” constructed of palm leaves and looking more like a “country barn or tent” than a theater (Bamfield n.p.). He also describes the theater as being located in the Esplanade, “in sight of Government House” (Bamfield n.p.). To Jack Tars, the disconnect between the grand name and the actual structure is worth note, but in newspapers published for Ditchers accustomed to makeshift venues for theatrical entertainment, the poor construction of the theater is pushed aside or euphemized. The reviewer for *The Englishman* politely calls the Lyric “a little theatre,” while the reviewer for the *Hurkaru* calls it a “huge barn-like structure dedicated by Von Golder of the glossy ringlets and the immortal Saxophone, to the Thespian Muse” (“Calcutta Lyric Theatre,” “Lyric Theatre”). The theater emerged in 1857, one of several theaters that filled the void left by the once-integral Sans Souci, which struggled financially after “Mrs. Siddons of Bengal” died from a stage fire there (Gupta 274–76; Shaw 309).

According to the *Hurkaru*, the prologue was the very first thing the sailor amateurs got horribly wrong in their performance, and it led the reviewer to “immediately jum[p] to the conclusion that the Drama which was to follow, would be travestied.” This prologue is not reproduced in the *Hurkaru*, but it is in the *Young Idea*. Following the convention of prologues for amateur theatricals, this one consists of rhyming couplets that assert the performers’ hope to amuse themselves and the audience, and offer assurance that they possess no ambition for fame:

Think not that we aspire to win a “Name”
 In the high path of Histrionic fame:
 Or that misled by fierce dramatic rage,
 We hope like “Lear” to strut upon the stage:
 No ’tis the aim of our most humble Muse
 To please our patrons, and ourselves amuse,
 Just this, no more, as Amateurs we come
 Let this avowal strike the critics dumb. (McArthur n.p.)

Interestingly, this prologue also refers directly to the women in the audience, whom they have deliberately sought as spectators by having the bill printed on silk so as not to blacken white gloves as ink on paper is wont to do.¹⁰ The prologue refers to these women as repaying the sailors’ labor at sea and their labor mounting the play:

With grateful pride, I cast around my gaze
 And see a host of English beauty blaze
 Soft beaming eyes, sweet lips, in smiles arrayed
 Which might have well Herculean toils repaid
 Their praise we covet, may we win the meed
 Our labor’s light, the guerdon great indeed (McArthur n.p.)

The critic for the *Hurkaru* claims that the composition was not the problem. He chooses instead to focus on the “precious mess the person to whom it was entrusted made of it.” The reciter was, “reeling to and fro like a drunken man, and his arms were thrown about like the arms of a Windmill” (“Lyric theatre”).

The first play performed was *The Seven Clerks*, a romantic drama by Thomas Egerton Wilks. The action of *The Seven Clerks* pivots on a miser, Claude Darnaud, who hires a clerk to guard his money every night, but when each morning his gold is missing, Darnaud accuses the clerk of thievery. Seven clerks have been executed before the play begins, and the string of controversial executions leads to a popular uprising against Darnaud in Marseilles. Darnaud has a beautiful daughter named Victorine, who promises to marry Count Adolphe de Briancourt if he solves the mystery of the stolen gold by becoming the next clerk. The danger of the Count’s quest is mitigated by the antics of several comic characters in the play: Simon Siggel, the Miser’s tenant who complains constantly of his hunger, and an international band of robbers who berate one another in the fashion of their national idioms (English, Dutch, and Italian). The count does not solve the mystery and Darnaud’s gold is once again stolen, but just before the count is executed Victorine discovers that her father has been stealing his own money while sleepwalking, and therefore the executions have punished innocent men. Horrified that his accusations led to seven men being executed, Darnaud hallucinates these dead clerks approaching him in vengeance, and crumples to the ground dead.

A Miser sleepwalk-stealing his own money might seem the premise of a hilarious burlesque of a melodrama pitting a capitalist hero against a thieving underworld villain, but this play is called a “romantic drama.” When the reviewer for the *Hurkaru* explains that, as expected, the sailor cast travestied *The Seven Clerks*, he means they did so unintentionally. He attributes the travesty instead to the fact that Victorine, the Miser’s daughter, was played by a male sailor. The critic explains that, “Victorine . . . certainly amused the audience, but the laughter was at the Amateur himself, and not at the character he personated, which might have been entrusted to abler hands.” The dramatis personæ lists the actor playing Victorine as “Miss Connell,” following the convention of playbills for Royal Navy productions listing male sailors as females when they play female roles (Isbell 151–205). Muster records for the *Chesapeake* reveal Miss Connell to be William Connell, a thirty-two-year-old ordinary seaman from London (Muster n.p.). Connell was the most frequently mentioned of the male sailors playing female roles in future sailor productions aboard the *Chesapeake*. He played the romantic lead Victorine in *The Seven Clerks* and the mock-heroine Distaffina in *Bombastes Furioso*. In *Raising the Wind* he shifted to the comic old maid character, Miss Laurelia Durable, soliciting praise from McArthur: “Great credit is also due to Wm Connell for the way in which he played this lady’s part . . . this appears to be his particular forte” (Bamfield n.p.). If *The Seven Clerks* were performed as a straight romantic drama, the only characters to get laughs should have been Simon Siggel and the thieves, notably the lower-class characters in the play who are funny precisely because they are uneducated and speak in colloquialisms. The Count, his love interest Victorine, and her greedy father Darnaud carry the dramatic weight of the piece, and only in the case of travesty, deliberate or otherwise, would they get laughs. The critic for the *Hurkaru* explains that the “gesticulation . . . accent, [and] pronunciation were wretched,” causing the audience to laugh when the lower class sailors attempted to play characters from the upper class; the aggregate effect was comic incongruity instead of believable representation.

The critic's primary complaint is that the sailors do not understand *Bombastes Furioso*, the burlesque they have chosen to perform. This is a common criticism in the period. In *The "A. D. C.", being personal Reminiscences of the University Amateur Dramatic Club, Cambridge* (1880), F. C. Burnand explains that "All commencing amateurs rush for *Bombastes*: few know anything at all about playing it. But, for the matter of that, even professionals make an utter muddle of it, and misconceive its bathos" (6). Burnand describes the popular nineteenth-century burlesque by William Barnes Rhodes as an old-fashioned burlesque that requires some education to understand. He goes on to explain that it was the first play he and his fellow amateurs at Cambridge thought of when planning their first official performance in 1855, in part because Burnand had already performed it in his tutor's rooms at Eton and was well-acquainted with the play.¹¹ It was also the first play performed by the Hasty Pudding Club at Harvard in 1845 (Calnek 12). Sailors wintering in the arctic aboard HMS Assistance included it as the afterpiece in one of their many performances in 1851 (Osborn 31). It was also selected for performance by British war correspondents and diplomatic undersecretaries for a performance at the British legation in Washington D.C. during the Civil War (Foreman 23). These productions were almost certainly all undertaken with an entirely male cast, which would suggest that the appeal of the play pivoted on the comic potential of the love triangle it depicts – comic potential realized through incongruous casting.

Bombastes Furioso was first performed at the Haymarket in 1810.¹² As the title indicates, the one-act play is a burlesque of Vivaldi's tragic opera *Orlando Furioso* (1727), which distills the forty-six cantos of Ariosto's epic (1532) of the same name into approximately three hours of heroism, unrequited love, and tragedy. In his introduction to *Burlesque Plays of the Eighteenth Century* (1969), which includes *Bombastes*, Simon Trussler characterizes burlesque as distinct from satire because it is "formal parody" making fun of "artistic pretensions," while satire "hits at the faults and foibles in real life" (viii). Trussler considers *Bombastes* a poor execution of the genre, since it attacked heroic drama and the bombastic hero, "a target long since pock-marked with scars inflicted by earlier writers" (349). Instead of the fair Angelica at the center of *Orlando Furioso*, the female for whose favor the King and General compete in the burlesque is named Distaffina. The first lover of Distaffina is the General of Utopia, named Bombastes. Soon, however, we learn she is also adored by Artaxominous, the King of Utopia, who already has a Queen named Griskinnisa. The King woos Distaffina away from Bombastes with promises of "half a crown" (Rhodes 359). Once she understands that the crown will grant royalty and not cash (a humorous exchange) she eagerly agrees to replace the King's wife as Queen. When Bombastes discovers their treachery, however, the King immediately repents and restores Distaffina to Bombastes, though Bombastes refuses the maid "who fancies ev'ry man." Angry at the world on account of Distaffina's inconstancy, Bombastes determines to wage a "woful war" [*sic*] on this wicked wanton world," and hangs his boots on a tree with this note: "Who dares this pair of boots displace, must meet Bombastes face to face." When King Artaxominous finds the note he immediately accepts the dare, and Bombastes kills the King (Rhodes 364). When Fusbos, the minister of state finds the slain king, he and Bombastes duel while singing an entertaining duet, and after Bombastes dies, Distaffina arrives. She learns from Fusbos that her two lovers are as dead as "red herrings," and the king and Bombastes awake to sing and dance the finale.

Because the play the sailors chose to perform was so popular, their production invited comparisons to a previous production by the Histrionic Society. According to the critic for

the *Hurkaru*, the same sailor who unintentionally travestied the dramatic role of Victorine in *The Seven Clerks* did just as poorly playing Distaffina, who is written as a deliberate burlesque of the dramatic heroine Angelica. The reviewer extends his criticism to every actor in this play, explaining that even Henry Underhill, who had “admirably sustained” Simon Siggel in the first play – notably a comic role – “failed miserably” as Bombastes (“Lyric Theatre”). The rest of the cast, says the reviewer, “made low buffoons of themselves.” He claims that, “any set of intelligent school boys could do justice to” the play, but that the sailors “did not enter into the spirit of the piece and could not exactly understand its drift.” The reviewer sees the sailor amateurs of the *Chesapeake* as not understanding the target of the parody in the play they perform, placing them below “intelligent school boys.” The sailor performers are, after all, ordinary seamen, the position in the navy requiring the least amount of skill and no education. An education, the reviewer implies, would have enabled them to understand just what the play *should* be mocking. Burlesque can be understood as necessitating a knowing wink (literal or implied) from actor to audience, and this reviewer claims that this performance lacks that sense of knowingness. Where the burlesque play mocks bombast, the sailors’ failed performance ruins the burlesque.

The *Englishman* does not criticize the sailors so harshly, but does politely note their failure to comprehend the nature of the burlesque: “if they did not all enter into the true spirit of the different pieces, and render the most correct reading, they afforded the audience a considerable degree of amusement in one shape or another” (“Lyric Theatre”). An anonymous response to the *Hurkaru* review, published as a letter to the editor of the *Englishman*, attempts to defend the sailors, but nevertheless makes the same assessment. The author of this letter, “Fair Play,” opens with the accusation that the *Hurkaru* critic had goals other than dramatic criticism:

SIR – I think if the Editor of the *Hurkaru* had been less caustic in his critique on the efforts of the sailors of the *Chesapeake*, to amuse the Calcutta public, he would more fairly have represented the opinions of those who witnessed the performance at the Lyric Theatre on Thursday evening. (Bamfield n.p.)

We have in this letter the suggestion that the majority of the spectators were amused by the sailors’ performance though they may have offered an incorrect, perhaps irreverent, interpretation of the popular text. “Fair Play” then details why sailors are not a fair target for the reviewer’s caustic critique, pointing specifically to their lack of education and gentlemanly status:

It should be remembered what are the habits of life of seamen; to them the pursuit of knowledge is really a “difficulty,” they are for the most part self taught; and it is most unfair to compare the endeavors of such men with those of highly educated gentlemen, which it is presumed the “Calcutta Histrionics” are. (“Lyric Theatre”)

In the defense of the sailor amateurs, “Fair Play” presumes that the Histrionic Society’s production was objectively superior. I would suggest, instead, that both productions rely for their success on an audience who knows the performers personally. After such a debut, it is no surprise that the sailor amateurs restricted their future performances to their own ship. Reviews in the *Young Idea*, combined with playbills saved by Bamfield, document many

performances on the quarterdeck of the *Chesapeake* at ports throughout the East India China Station. As one might expect, with spectators who recognize the performers and are eager for entertainment, these performances were a great success. But the specter of the *Hurkaru* critic stayed with the sailors even after they sailed away from Calcutta in March. H. Montagu, the sailor who played King Artaxominous in *Bombastes*, contributed an article to the March 6 issue of the *Young Idea* that begins, “There is nothing spoken, done, written or effected in this world, but the ever ready tongue of criticism is prepared to weaken or destroy its effect.” Of the *Hurkaru* critic, Montagu explains,

We cannot afford the space to pull him to pieces in the manner he deserves, but we must notice one thing. The word “Ditchers.” Such is the very euphonious appellation which the Histrionic Critic of the *Hurkaru* claims for himself and his copeers of Calcutta. We will not now enquire into the origin of the name, but simply observe that such being the title of our assailant, we need not feel surprised to find him such an adept in the art of “flinging mud.” (McArthur n.p.)

One imagines Montagu, swinging in his hammock as the *Chesapeake* gets further and further from Calcutta, still seething from the abusive review, and finally striking upon this little insult. Ah, the feeble retort conceived too late.

Beyond recovering and interpreting this complex performance event and an earlier, more representative benefit theatrical, this essay has explored the nuanced role of amateur theatricals in Calcutta. In “Theatre and Empire,” Daniel O’Quinn suggests that such performances allowed “audiences in Calcutta [to consolidate] a sense of British identity,” but he also notes that, “reviews indicate that plays were presented and interpreted according to the political and social imperatives of British society in Calcutta” (240). I have suggested that rather than consolidate a cohesive sense of British identity, this performance deepened divisions between groups with very different British identities that were shaped by diverging political and social imperatives. Amateur theatricals only consolidated a sense of British identity when they were performed by and for members of the same social group. In the case of the sailor’s production, which brought Ditchers and Jack Tars together, we have evidence that the difficulty of speaking and performing across lines of class and social status only intensified in the wake of the Mutiny.

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NOTES

1. Patrick Brantlinger explains that, “among both British and Indian historians, debate still focuses on whether the uprising was only an army “mutiny,” or a “civil rebellion” as well, or, as Indian nationalists have held it to be, “the first Indian war of independence” (200–01). I follow Brantlinger and refer to the conflict as the Mutiny.
2. Imperfect access to these periodicals makes this analysis challenging. The British Library holds microfilm of the *Bengal Hurkaru* during this period, but the *Englishman* is not available for all of the dates in question. I can reference full issues of the *Hurkaru*, therefore, but often rely on clippings from the *Englishman* included in the Journal of J. W. L. Bamfield. I reference weekly issues of the *Young Idea* throughout this essay, but the actual manuscript pages of the paper that circulated aboard

the *Chesapeake* are not extant. My citations, therefore, are to Bamfield's journal, which includes transcriptions from the newspaper, and to the facsimile edition of the complete run of the paper, which A. D. McArthur had published in London in 1867. My forthcoming digital edition of the *Young Idea* uses the variations between these two witnesses to the manuscript pages to devise a theory of what actually circulated to shipboard subscribers.

3. For an account of the naval heroism to which sailors aboard the *Chesapeake* aspired, see Rowbotham.
4. *The Fearful Tragedy in the Seven Dials A Farcical Interlude in One Act* premiered on May 4, 1857 at the Adelphi (Selby 1).
5. *Used Up* was adapted from the French play *L'Homme Blasé* and enjoyed a very successful run in London from its debut in 1845 (Mathews 3).
6. See Massey's description of "Theatricals without Actresses" (5–11).
7. For more on the ways in which Neill's actions have been interpreted over the years, see Brantlinger 201.
8. S. S. Jawahar, Commissioner of Museums at the Government Museum at Chennai confirmed that the statue was still not available for public viewing in an email on October 10, 2011.
9. For more on the stereotype of the Jolly Jack Tar, see Russell *The Theaters of War*, and Davis "British Bravery or Tars Triumphant: Images of the British Navy in Nautical Melodrama."
10. I thank David Mayer for alerting me to this advantage of silk playbills.
11. Though he doesn't provide documentation, Taylor describes a performance of *Bombastes* in the Long Chamber, a dormitory at Eton, in which a donkey was carried up to the chamber for Bombastes "to ride in triumph into the presence of the King" (36).
12. The play was first performed anonymously, perhaps because Rhodes was unknown to theatergoers (Trussler 349).

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