

Rohan McWilliam

Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge

**The Electric Pleasure District: The West End of London in the Age of Empire,
1880-1914**

Abstract

This study examines the cultural work of the West End of London in the long Edwardian period (1880-1914). It argues that the pleasure district was changed in a number of ways in which electricity was one thread. The coming of electricity affected the character of the area, not only transforming theatre lighting but also introducing new forms of street advertising, notably on Piccadilly Circus. The West End was physically changed by the construction of Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross which then became sites of a wave of theatre building (all of which showed off their modernity by adopting electricity). These theatres, especially the Palace Theatre of Varieties, are examined in terms of the entertainments they offered but also the ways in which they produced forms of cultural capital for spectators. Finally, the study considers another electric medium, the cinema. The West End became known for upscale cinemas which emulated the theatres nearby and sought to make film-going attractive to wealthier customers who, a few years earlier, disdained it. By 1914, the study shows, the West End had, to a large extent, taken on its modern form.

Keywords

West End of London, pleasure district, theatre, cinema, music hall, consumerism, electricity, advertising

Author bio

Rohan McWilliam is Professor of Modern British History at Anglia Ruskin University. He is a former President of the British Association for Victorian Studies and serves on the editorial boards of the *London Journal* and the *Journal of Victorian Culture*. His book, *London's West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800-1914* was published by Oxford University Press in 2020 and he is at work on the follow-up volume which will explore the development of the pleasure district from the Great War to the present. The present article is derived from the third *London Journal* lecture, delivered in June 2021.

A key moment in the making of the modern West End took place on 28 December 1881 at the Savoy Theatre. It was not the opening of the venue, which had occurred a few months before. Nor did it happen at an evening performance. At the end of the second act of the matinee of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, the theatre's owner, Richard D'Oyly Carte, came out to address the audience. The Savoy was, as of that day, the first theatre (and the first building in the world) completely illuminated by electricity. When it opened in October, the auditorium, but not the stage, was lit by electricity (with a gas back-up installed in case it failed). Now the stage itself was electric-lit, creating the possibility of new lighting effects and ways of experiencing theatre. The scenery could be seen more clearly, actors' faces had more definition, and the shift away from gas removed the smell which made theatre visits a bit of a

trial for some. This was an innovation in another sense as the Savoy used the lightbulbs invented by Thomas Edison's rival, Joseph Wilson Swan, who had only perfected the design the year before.¹ D'Oyly Carte's message was one of reassurance in case people were concerned about the dangers of this new form of energy. To prove his point, Carte covered one of the lamps on stage with a piece of muslin. In a *coup de théâtre*, he shattered the bulb and then displayed the muslin to the audience to confirm that it was not singed. The *Times* recognised that it was the first time in which 'an entire theatre has been illuminated by electricity alone, and the marked success of the experiment augurs well for the future of the new light on the stage'. It also promised a reduction in the risk of fire that had been a perennial problem for theatres.²

The gradual addition of electricity to entertainments in central London gave a different personality to the area, associating it with a world of bright lights and hyper stimulation. I aim to explore the cultural work brought about by the new West End which emerged during the long Edwardian period (1880-1914) as part of my ongoing preoccupation with pleasure districts and how they work. Urban history needs to deal further with the character of these areas and their impact on the modern imagination.

In the first volume of my history of the West End I argued that the pleasure district, as we know it, emerged during the mid-Victorian years.³ This was the moment when improvements in transport allowed it to become central to London's

¹ Gavin Weightman, *Children of Light: How Electricity changed Britain Forever* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), pp. 19-32.

² *Times*, 29 December 1881 p. 4; *Era*, 31 December 1881 p. 5.

³ I define the West End as the pleasure district: roughly the area from Bond Street on the west, Oxford Street on the north, (what is now) Kingsway on the east and the river or the Strand on the south. See Rohan McWilliam, *London's West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), especially pp.1-10. The changes of the mid-Victorian period are examined in ch. 6.

entertainment eco-system, the railways and the omnibus bringing in hordes of people from the suburbs and indeed from around the globe. So what was different, then, about the West End in the long Edwardian period? It became a different physical place as new thoroughfares and buildings replaced old landmarks. At an even more profound level, it was a transformed sensory zone. Pivotal to this were changes in visual culture, especially the emergence of a new medium, the cinema. These changes complemented the development of pleasure districts in New York, Paris, Berlin and elsewhere where similar patterns emerged during this period.

I commence with the ways that the West End was both literally and metaphorically electrified in the long Edwardian period. The paper then focuses on two major developments that added to the life of the pleasure district. The first was the creation of both Shaftesbury Avenue and the Charing Cross Road. These became not only major London thoroughfares but also enjoyed a larger iconic dimension in the life of the capital which has not been sufficiently appreciated or explored. They were spaces shaped by assumptions about class and hierarchy but also offered a distinct form of cultural capital with their shops and theatres. Then I move on to explore West End cinemas. They, too, negotiated issues of class and prestige in important ways that determined the character of the area. Bright lights, Shaftesbury Avenue theatres and upscale cinemas were all eruptions of the modern, shaping much of what we associate with pleasure districts today.

A New West End?

The changes to the West End were sensual in that they were marked by new forms of visual and material culture but, above all, electrification. Of course, electricity is not

just a technological process; it is also a social and cultural force, reshaping ways of seeing. It leant itself to forms of entertainment based upon the stimulation of the senses. This is why D'Oyly Carte's smashing of the lamp at the Savoy was a crucial moment. Two years later, the Grosvenor gallery on New Bond Street installed electric light which allowed the paintings on display to be seen more effectively. Its impact, however, was not just aesthetic. For a time Sebastian Ferranti's generator at the Grosvenor ended up supplying a large number of West End addresses with electricity delivered all the way over to Lincolns Inn through a cumbersome arrangement of rooftop wires.⁴ Yet, if we are going to explore the increasing allure of electricity, we need to put this in some perspective. London was slow to move over to electricity. In the period up to 1914 and well into the inter-war years, electricity co-existed with gas and was the minor partner in terms of take up in the home. It possessed, as we saw with the Savoy Theatre, novelty value and its deployment involved the sense that it embodied the future. In 1900, the journalist Ralph Blumenfeld noted

I have just noticed a new form of night advertisement. It consists of boards with prepared surfaces, capable of conducting an electric current. You can arrange any number of letters, attached to the current, and spell out words. They will be useful in front of theatres for, say 'House Full' and other announcements, and the idea has great possibilities.⁵

By 1906 theatres such as the Vaudeville on the Strand were putting the details of a show and its actors up in lights outside.⁶

⁴ Gavin Weightman, *Children of Light*, pp. 61-2

⁵ Ralph D. Blumenfeld, *R.D.B.'s Diary, 1887-1914* (London: Heinemann, 1930), p. 109.

⁶ Gladys Cooper, *Gladys Cooper* (London: Hutchinson, 1931), p. 49.

Further north, an important moment in the history of Piccadilly Circus came in 1908 when an electric sign was erected on the top of the fashionable Café Monico, made up of just three words: 'Drink Perrier Water'. The Café Monico and other shops had been using forms of illuminated advertisement since 1893 but now they offered their frontages to promote products not necessarily connected with their own businesses.⁷ A year later, a similar sign was erected two doors on the corner with Shaftesbury Avenue. Passers-by could not fail to miss the words 'Bovril' and 'Schweppes Ginger Ale' in booming block capital letters.⁸ Artificial light shaped the character of Piccadilly Circus.

The Perrier sign was itself a sign of modernity. Perrier was a fairly new brand, being about ten years old at that time and evoked a cosmopolitan desire for French taste. Bovril was a little older (dating back to the 1870s) but had become a standardised mass product for the home. These signs therefore were a proclamation of relative up-to-dateness. The conjunction of Perrier and Bovril captures two sides of British taste: the cosmopolitan and the domestic. The signs linked Piccadilly Circus to advertisements found in newspapers and periodicals, on hoardings and omnibuses. Artificial light was effective in drawing in people because of its sensual qualities which had a psychic charge, directing the viewer's eye to entertainments and to products. The advertisements for the refreshments Perrier and Bovril made the pleasure district itself feel like a form of refreshment.

Electric lights became integral to pleasure districts as a glance at the Great White Way on Broadway in New York shows. These were examples of a new electric sensibility even though gaslight continued to illuminate the exterior of

⁷ David Oxford, *Piccadilly Circus* (Stroud: Chalford, 1995), p. 39.

⁸ On the Piccadilly Lights, see *Survey of London* (vols 31 and 32 part 2), pp. 85-100

Piccadilly Circus for another two decades (street lighting did not become electric until 1932).⁹ Significantly a number of picture palaces called themselves 'Electric' Cinemas as we will discover. Are we overstating the impact of these new lights? We have one report which suggests that, when the lights were turned off to mark the passing of Edward VII in 1910, it seemed to change the whole character of the West End.¹⁰ Artificial light explains why Piccadilly Circus took on an iconic quality (assisted by the London Pavilion and Eros at its centre), featuring in many illustrations of the period but, significantly, in postcards. This presence of the West End in mass-produced images meant that many people could access it in their imaginations without actually having to go there.

Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road

Shaftesbury Avenue Theatres

Shaftesbury Theatre	1888-1941
Lyric	1888-
Apollo	1901-
Hicks, later the Globe, now the Gielgud	1906-
Queen's	1907-
Prince's (now the Shaftesbury)	1911-

Charing Cross Road Theatres

Garrick Theatre	1889-
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⁹ Gavin Weightman, *Children of Light: How Electricity changed Britain Forever* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), p. 160.

¹⁰ *Lloyd's Weekly News*, 8 May 1910, p. 3

Palace Theatre of Varieties (formerly the Royal English Opera House)	1891-
Wyndham's	1899-
London Hippodrome [on Cranbourne Street but entrance on corner of Charing Cross Road]	1900-

St Martin's Lane Theatres

Duke of York's	1892-
New (now the Noel Coward)	1903-
London Coliseum	1904-

The construction of Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road were important factors in the development of the West End's entertainment economy, cementing the idea of 'Theatreland' (a term that seems to have only come into use after 1900).¹¹

They were part of a new wave of construction that included the creation of grand hotels, spectacular restaurants and gigantic department stores that characterised the West End in this period. But the two new thoroughfares shaped the character of the area in particular ways I want to examine. Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross offered acceptable forms of taste for the middle classes: strong on spectacle, occasionally sexually suggestive, good hearted and not too vulgar.

Shaftesbury Avenue is geographically in Soho but in every other respect it is not. As Charles Booth observed, it did not belong to Soho in cultural or even economic terms: 'step but fifteen paces, and you will find yourself in another world, with another people--other habits, other thoughts and other manners seem to

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https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Theatreland&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2CTheatreland%3B%2Cc0 (accessed 14 June 2021).

prevail'.¹² Yet the proximity of Soho's cosmopolitan world is important. The prospect of collision, of different worlds combining and interacting, gives the pleasure district its almost utopian feeling--or, at least, its sense that the imagination can be unleashed in unexpected ways. Bohemian Soho walked like a shadowy, shape-shifting doppelganger through the brash, commercial world of the West End, enhancing its scope for enchantment.

Between 1888 and 1914, six theatres were built on Shaftesbury Avenue and four on the lower half of the Charing Cross Road (though the circus-like Hippodrome was technically on Cranbourn Street). We might also include the three theatres built on St Martin's Lane, the Duke of York's, the New (now the Noel Coward) and the London Coliseum, which I am not considering in depth here but which give us a total of thirteen new theatres within a short walk from each other. This was a contrast to the early nineteenth century when there was opposition by existing theatres to the construction of new venues, because it was believed that London could not furnish audiences for them. Even after the end of the patent theatre system in 1843, construction of new venues had only been occasional. It was after 1888 that the situation changed dramatically with the new wave of theatres in the area under discussion and this had, I argue, consequences for the character of the West End. A lot of the earlier development of theatres had been confined to a line running from the Strand and Covent Garden over to the Haymarket. Now the centre of entertainment gravity was pushed north up towards Oxford Street (which had its own centres of entertainment including the Princess's Theatre and the Oxford Music Hall). This is why the West End emerged in the form we would recognise in the long Edwardian

¹² Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London* (London: Macmillan, 1889-1903), First Series, vol. 1, p. 182.

period.



Shaftesbury Avenue at the start of the twentieth century (author copy)

Yet, Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road were never created to provide spaces for more theatres. They were the brainchild of the Metropolitan Board of Works which had been concerned for many years about the build up of traffic in the eastern end of Oxford Street. The opening of Charing Cross Station in 1864 had also had the effect of clogging the streets roundabout with yet more vehicles. There was a need for new thoroughfares but it was only in 1877 that an Act of Parliament allowed for the creation of two major road building projects. Shaftesbury Avenue was completed in January 1886 and Charing Cross Road was opened to the public in February 1887 by the Duke of Cambridge who gave his name to Cambridge Circus.¹³

They were conceived very much for functional reasons and this explains why they lacked the spectacle and architectural punch of John Nash's Regent Street. They

¹³ *Survey of London*, vol. XXXIII: Parish of St Anne Soho (London: Athlone Press, 1966), pp.297-312.

also had the effect of removing some dingy housing. Much of Charing Cross Road was taken up by cheap flats for the working classes who had been displaced by its construction. The two streets did not develop the majestic department stores that emerged on Oxford Street although Shaftesbury Avenue had the opulent restaurant, the Café Monico, which was a resort of High Society. If we consult a street directory for 1900, we find that both streets offered a variety of commercial services to locals and to shoppers from the suburbs: bootmakers, tailors, confectioners, leather goods specialists, tobacconists.¹⁴ Charing Cross Road quickly acquired a range of new and second hand book dealers on the street. In 1913 there were seventeen shops associated with the book trade, including the business that became Foyle's at nos. 121-123.¹⁵

Both streets, as we will see, developed spectacular theatres. This in turn shaped their usage. Increasingly, theatrical agents could be found in the area. In 1907, Ashton's Royal Agency was at 140 Shaftesbury Avenue whilst the firm of Richard Warner, which trained chorus girls and had offices in Paris and New York, could be found in the Lyric Chambers also on Shaftesbury Avenue.¹⁶ By 1913, Charing Cross Road had eleven theatrical or variety agents listed as having offices on the street. This was in addition to organisations like the Music Hall Artiste's Railway Association (no. 18 Charing Cross Road) which helped performers going on tour to get around the country by offering reduced fares and which came to offer a wider range of welfare benefits to entertainers. Shaftesbury Avenue had five theatrical agents in 1913 in addition to various music and literary agents. Agents were just one of the tributary businesses that fed off theatreland. There was H. Rayne, the theatrical

¹⁴ *Post Office London Directory* (London: Kelly's Directories, 1900), p. 288, 729-30.

¹⁵ *Post Office London Directory* (London: Kelly's Directories, 1913).

¹⁶ *Era*, 26 October 1907 p. 39.

costumiers at no. 49 Charing Cross Road whilst Whiting and Bosisto, who described themselves as 'theatrical furnishers', were at no. 17 Shaftesbury Avenue.¹⁷ Pubs on the streets, such as the Prince Rupert, just off Shaftesbury Avenue, also did very well with the theatrical fraternity. Walter MacQueen-Pope, chronicler of the London theatre scene, recalled that upstairs at the Prince Rupert was 'Fitz's Bar' run by the actor Aubrey Fitzgerald. Its habitués included 'the remnants of the young men who, in the days of Oscar Wilde, had sported the Green Carnation' (possibly a coded reference to the existence of a gay sub-culture in the heart of the West End).¹⁸ Theatreland meant more than just theatres: it was a wide economy with different forms of enterprise.

The first theatre to be built was the Shaftesbury (later destroyed by aerial bombardment in 1941). It opened in 1888 and was designed by the leading architect Charles Phipps, reflecting current trends in West End theatre design.¹⁹ The *Evening Standard* noted: 'Of late years theatres have become far more luxurious than they used to be'.²⁰ The *Era* commented that previous generations of theatregoers had been accommodated in venues that were only a rung up from barns. This had changed: 'our tastes are more luxurious now, and managers find that the more they study the comfort of their visitors, and the greater pains they take to make their temples of the drama commodious and elegant, the greater is their reward'.²¹ The design of the Shaftesbury got rid of obstructive pillars through the use of cantilevers, creating better

¹⁷ All information derived from *Post Office London Directory* (London: Kelly's Directories, 1913), p. 256, 613-14.

¹⁸ Walter MacQueen-Pope, *Carriages at Eleven: The Story of the Edwardian Theatre* (London: Hutchinson, 1947), p. 176.

¹⁹ Görel Garlick, *Charles John Phipps, F.S.A.: Architect to the Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Entertainment Technology Press, 2016), pp. 289-293.

²⁰ *Evening Standard*, 25 April 1889, p. 3.

²¹ *Era*, 22 December 1888, p. 14

sight lines. A rose shade was used for seating and the upper circle and pit both had comfortable tip-up chairs with a back.²² The Shaftesbury was lit by gas but made it clear that it intended to adopt electricity as soon as possible. When the Lyric opened on Shaftesbury Avenue that same year, it was lit entirely by electricity, using a generator in an adjacent building controlled by an engineer who had worked at the Grand Opera, Vienna. The subsequent theatres on Shaftesbury Avenue all adopted electricity. This was not just about improving the visual look of the theatre, it was also about safety. When the Apollo opened on Shaftesbury Avenue in 1901, it was not only powered by electricity but emphasised that wood had been eliminated from the auditorium to make it fireproof and that the building could be cleared in two minutes which is why its insurance company allegedly only asked for the smallest premium available.²³ The Shaftesbury Avenue theatres therefore felt modern. The presence of electric lighting in West End theatres also made them (for a time) different from provincial theatres, which were gaslit.²⁴

Phipps's design at the Shaftesbury (on a block by itself) employed separate entrances for the different levels of the theatre. A deliberate intention of the design was that there should be no means for audience members to move between the different parts of the auditorium. Hence it was proof against the classes mixing, an example of how social class was etched into the fabric of the West End theatres and the reason why they can be considered conservative institutions that worshipped hierarchy.²⁵ At the Lyric on Shaftesbury Avenue, there were separate entrances set aside for the exclusive use of patrons in the private boxes and the stalls. The stalls

²² *Era*, 27 October 1888, p. 14.

²³ *Era*, 16 February 1901, p.18.

²⁴ St. John Ervine, *The Theatre in My Time* (London: Rich and Cowan, 1933), p. 49.

²⁵ *Era*, 4 June 1887, p. 14.

lavatory also contained a retiring room for gentlemen (perhaps those who had come from a day in the City) who needed to change into evening dress at the theatre.²⁶

Did the coming of this extended theatre district alter the fare that was being offered in the West End? It is difficult to see a clear distinction from what was already on offer in the West End. Indeed, a number of the theatres under discussion opened with transfers of shows that were already popular elsewhere so it is difficult to see them as offering something new. The Shaftesbury Theatre commenced with a production of *As You Like It* and Lewis Waller appeared in Shakespeare at the Lyric later on. More often, however, both streets tended to feature musicals, musical comedies, operettas, farces, variety and middlebrow drama. The latter included the plays of Henry Arthur Jones and Somerset Maugham. The Apollo mainly offered a diet of musicals whilst the Lyric fed the desire for light comedy and operetta, commencing with a transfer of *Dorothy*, the comic opera from the Gaiety. Musical, especially musical comedies, proclaimed themselves as a form that was distinctly modern but also one that appealed to both sexes.²⁷ These shows were thus the ideal form for the night out on the town but were also at odds with the more puritanical aspects of Victorian culture.

We must conclude that two streets that were solidly commercial and consumerist in usage (as we have seen) generated solidly commercial and consumerist forms of art. The *Era* described the Lyric's policy as 'the intention to take advantage of the growing taste for good music in all classes of the community in England, to steer clear of all comparison with adaptations from the work of French and other

²⁶ *Era*, 15 December 1888, p. 10

²⁷ see Len Platt, Tobias Becker and David Linton, 'Introduction' in Platt, Becker and Linton (eds.), *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin, 1890-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 5.

authors, or with the successful productions of the Savoy theatre, and to meet a demand which they believed to exist in all parts of the country for English comedy-opera...'.²⁸ Thus it presented shows like the musical *The Girl in the Taxi* (1912), which made a star of Yvonne Arnaud. When it opened in 1901, the Apollo was designed for all 'who like light, bright entertainments'.²⁹ Note the use of the words 'light' and 'bright' which express much of what this area was all about. It later offered 'Tango Teas during the day where one could indulge in the new tango craze as well as Harry Pelissier's Follies, a pierrot troupe, whose act included burlesquing other West End shows'.³⁰ Robert Courtneidge staged a series of musical comedies and operettas on the street climaxing in *The Arcadians* at the Shaftesbury which proved a huge hit. The Globe Theatre succeeded with the farce *The Glad Eye* (1911). The same lightness of approach is true of the Charing Cross Road. From 1910-14, Gerald Du Maurier took over as actor-manager at the Wyndham's. Unlike contemporaries such as Herbert Beerbohm Tree, he rarely appeared in Shakespeare but opted instead for comedies and dramas such as those written by J.M. Barrie (he was the original Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*). The Garrick, a few doors down, excelled with its version of the Arabian Nights in Edward Knoblock's *Kismet* (1911).

Another feature of the area (though not exclusive to it) was that it was associated with the long run which became a desired commercial objective. *The Belle of New York* played at the Shaftesbury for 698 performances in 1898-9. *Floradora* ran for 455 performances at the Lyric in 1899 and became the first British musical to transfer to Broadway. *The Arcadians* later ran for two and a half years at the

²⁸ *Era*, 15 December 1888, p. 10.

²⁹ *Era*, 16 February 1901, p. 18.

³⁰ H. G. Pellissier, 'The Follies', *The Strand Magazine*, vol. 37 (1909) pp. 688-694; MacQueen-Pope, *Carriages at Eleven*, p. 186, 188

Shaftesbury. *The Belle of New York* was notable for its all-American cast and might be considered an early example of Americanisation: its fast-talking appeal shook up West End musical comedy. Its impact was such that a pantomime at the Garrick in 1900 satirised the way its refrains had become over- familiar and laughed 'at the recent craze for American plays'.³¹ The West End was a key node on an international circuit of theatre, bringing in hit shows from elsewhere but also creating entertainments that could be exported around the world. The Shaftesbury hosted the musical *In Dahomey* in 1903, fresh from Broadway, the first show in London to have an all-black cast. It ran for seven months partly because of its novelty value. In retrospect, the show was part of a revolution in popular music that included ragtime and, ultimately, jazz.³² The tone of the pleasure district was thus cosmopolitan and eager to exploit new trends.



³¹ *Illustrated London News*, 6 January 1900, p.22.

³² Catherine Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), ch.4.

The Palace Theatre of Varieties, Cambridge Circus, c. 1900 (author copy)

This shift to frivolity was epitomised by the Palace Theatre of Varieties, arguably the most spectacular theatre in the West End in terms of architecture. It opened in 1891 and was the creation of Richard D'Oyly Carte, who devised it as an opera house for the performance, initially, of Arthur Sullivan's opera *Ivanhoe*. Carte worked on the design himself. The architect T.E. Collcutt created a spectacular terra cotta frontage on Cambridge Circus for what was then called the Royal English Opera House. As a modern building it, too, was powered by electricity. The *Era* was impressed: 'The materials of the staircase dazzle by their beauty and costliness...the ceilings are ornamented with delicate Italian trceries...'.³³

Ivanhoe was extremely expensive to produce, requiring two companies so that it could be performed every night. As audiences dropped off, D'Oyly Carte was forced to sell the theatre. It was taken over by Augustus Harris, the manager of Drury Lane, who turned it into an upmarket music hall with an interior conversion led by the architect Walter Emden. Harris reopened the venue as the Palace Theatre of Varieties in 1892 and intended the new house to impress, adding a grand saloon which, according to the *Era*, was 'a perfect blaze of electric light, mirrors, carton-pierre decorations, and Maize-coloured upholstery'. It observed: 'Looking glasses are plentiful in all parts of the house; and the apricot plush linings of the private boxes and their pale blue and gold decorations are very tasteful and pretty'.³⁴ Two further brilliant music hall managers went on to make the Palace the talk of the town: Charles Morton and Alfred Butt.

³³ *Era*, 24 January 1891, p.11.

³⁴ *Era*, 17 December 1892, p. 16.

The atmosphere of an evening at the Palace can be conveyed by the opening night. There were a variety of songs and an explanation of how to do magic acts with the orchestra conducted by Jimmy Glover who served as Director of Music at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. The evening included a one act 'tragedietta' called 'The Round Tower'. The play was about an English officer and his wife who find themselves besieged during the Indian Mutiny by sepoys led by the Surajah of Gallypore. They end up killing themselves rather than be taken. There was also a ballet called 'The Sleeper Awakened' which the *Era* thought was 'one of the most beautiful and dazzling spectacles seen in London for some time'. It was based on the Arabian Nights story of Abou Hassan and included beautiful dresses designed by M. Landoff of Paris with damsels wearing fans for head dresses. The set for the Caliph's Palace included 'all the elaborate ornamentation of Oriental architecture'. The evening expressed something of the West End at this moment: a variety performance with magic, songs, orientalism and celebrations of empire as an heroic enterprise that required sacrifice.³⁵

Walter MacQueen-Pope insisted that the Palace was distinct from other music halls: 'Variety held the stage, but there was no trace of the roaring choruses, the noisy bonhomie of the ordinary music hall. Here white shirts and silk dresses filled the boxes, the stalls, and the dress circle'. Although women were a significant part of the audience the theatre retained a masculine atmosphere, which aligned it with other venues such as the Alhambra on Leicester Square. There was a demand for champagne and whiskey in the bars and even a cigar bar in the stalls which only sold superior brands. Many men about town purchased a rover ticket which allowed them

³⁵ *Era*, 17 December 1892, p. 16.

to pop in and stand in order to catch an act or two that they favoured.³⁶ The sounds of the Palace Theatre were shaped by the virtuoso conductor and composer Herman Finck, noted for his 'Melodious Memories', leaping from one well-loved tune to another. An addition to the programme was the Bioscope of Charles Urban, marking the coming of cinema (see below). The Palace became associated with *avant garde* depictions of sexuality. It deployed poses plastiques where models in flesh-coloured body stockings would simulate nudity whilst bringing classical paintings to life. The Palace girls or Tiller girls offered chorus girls engaged in precision dancing. Vesta Tilley danced on the bill in trousers which was rather shocking. Maud Allen's performance as Salome was notorious although it needs to be seen in the context of the kind of orientalist dance that was already being practiced at the Palace. Judith Walkowitz argues that her sensual performances expressed a new form of femininity which was unlocked by the cosmopolitanism of the West End. When Maud Allen performed, Alfred Butt claimed 'The stalls were crowded night after night with the aristocracy, from the Prince and Princess of Wales downwards'. The impact of Maud Allen can be judged by the way in which the male burlesque actor H.G. Pellisier performed impersonations of her in drag. Equally shocking was Lady Constance Stewart Richardson, daughter of the Earl of Cromartie, who danced in oriental dress to the dismay of Edward VII who believed she let down the aristocracy.³⁷

³⁶ MacQueen-Pope, *Carriages at Eleven*, p. 177.

³⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 64-91; H. G. Pellissier, 'The Follies', *The Strand Magazine*, vol. 37 (1909), p. 692; Percy Burton, 'How a Variety Theatre is Run: A Day at the Palace Theatre with Mr. Alfred Butt', *The Strand Magazine*, vol. 37 (May 1909), p. 515.



Vesta Tilley (author copy)

The manager Alfred Butt insisted that the Palace differed from other West End halls because of the way he brought in leading theatre figures (such as Marie Tempest and Lewis Waller) to recite literary works which gave it an air of prestige. He also spent time in Paris and Berlin in search of acts whilst he was also prepared to spend a lot of money to bring in the best of American vaudeville performers such as Marie Dressler.³⁸ The Palace therefore felt (in every sense of the word) classy.

It made sense that the Palace was used for the first ever Royal Variety Performance (then called the Royal Music Hall Performance) in 1912. It was

³⁸ Percy Burton, 'How a Variety Theatre is Run', p. 515.

attended by George V and Queen Mary with other assorted royals. The *Pall Mall Gazette* noted that it set 'the seal of recognition on a profession which has purged itself of many dingy associations and gone far to reform itself in the spirit of the times'.³⁹ Proceeds went to the Music Hall Benevolent Fund. It thus functioned as an emblem of royal philanthropy. People queued from five in the morning either to acquire seats in the unreserved amphitheatre or to get a place to see the royals arriving and leaving. There is a record of one elderly lady sitting in the queue all day on a camp stool; she had done the same in order to attend Ellen Terry's benefit performance. The royal box at the Palace was rebuilt to accommodate the monarch and his retinue.⁴⁰ The bill included comedians George Robey and Little Tich and Harry Lauder doing a rendition of 'Roamin' in the Gloamin'. Anna Pavlova and the Russian Imperial Ballet also danced. The big music hall star who not there was Marie Lloyd, possibly because she was too sexually suggestive. Vesta Tilley, however, sang 'Algy, the Piccadilly Johnnie with a little glass eye'. 'Algy' is clearly a Burlington Bertie figure and a stage door johnny. In the song he is known for being a favourite with the bar maids at the Criterion bar (on Piccadilly Circus) who takes chorus girls out to supper and festoons them with bouquets.⁴¹

The evening may have played a small part in the transformation of the image of royalty. Press accounts emphasised that 'The King and Queen were man and woman, participating in the pleasures of the people' and the royals particularly laughed at the antics of comedian Harry Tate. Audience members were reportedly delighted by seeing the royals laugh. This fed into the idea (integral to the role of

³⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 July 1912, p. 8.

⁴⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 6 July 1912, p. 4.

⁴¹ <https://monologues.co.uk/musichall/Songs-P/Piccadilly-Johnny-With-Glass-Eye.htm> (accessed 15 June 2021).

monarchy in modern popular culture) of royalty as being both exalted but also like everybody else.⁴² The evening ended with 140 music hall artistes grouped around three figures: Harry Claff as St George and emblems of the army and the navy.⁴³ Events like this perform distinct forms of cultural work. They embody a form of cultural toryism which is about yoking icons of national identity (St George) with the kind of characters who peopled the West End, including 'Algy, the Piccadilly Johnny'. Venues like the Palace Theatre provided a literal stage where this kind of pageant could be played out. The evening expressed the kind of populist conservatism at the heart of much mass entertainment: outrageous but essentially deferential. Vesta Tilley, whilst pushing at the level of acceptable taste, later on celebrated British soldiers on stage during the Great War and her husband became a Conservative MP.

My argument is not that Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross created new forms of entertainment. There was little that was original in these performances; they were shaped by the music hall and trends established by the Savoy and the Gaiety. The area did, however, complete the cultural work of the pleasure district, becoming associated with middlebrow and light-hearted fare with an emphasis on spectacle.

The last of the big Shaftesbury Avenue theatres was the Prince's, built in 1911 (and now called the Shaftesbury theatre). It was a sign of the times that, when it was built, a projection booth was installed at the back of the dress circle, presumably so that, if it failed as a theatre, it could be turned into a cinema.⁴⁴

West End Cinema

⁴² Judith Williamson, 'Royalty and Representation' in Williamson, *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London: Marion Boyars, 1986), pp. 75-89.

⁴³ *Daily News*, 2 July 1912 p. 1, *Daily Mirror*, 2 July 1912, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Times*, 19 December 1911, p. 9.

West End Cinemas, 1906-1914.

Hale's Tours of the World, 165 Oxford St, 1906-1910
 Tivoli Tourist Station, 65 Strand, before Sept 1907
 New Egyptian Hall, 170 Piccadilly, circa Dec 1907-1912?
 Jardin de Paris (Haté's Cinema), 6 Ingestre Place, c. Autumn 1908-1916
 Electric Cinema, 532 Oxford street, 9 Nov 1908-March 1933
 Theatre de Luxe, 65 Strand, Dec 1908-Feb 1914?
 Victoria Picture Hall, late Dec 1908-1910?, Strand, Victoria Arcade
 Electric Palace of Pleasures, 176 Drury Lane, c. Dec. 1908
 Circle in the Square, 28a Leicester Square, 5 June 1909-1928?
 Arena Picture Theatre, 173-4 Hungerford Arches, Villiers Street, 7 June 1909-1939
 Casino de Paris, 291a Oxford Street, 18 Sept 1909-1912?
 Charing Cross Fonomatograph, 53 Strand, Nov 1909-c.1922
 Gaiety, 28 Tottenham Court Road, 4 Dec 1909-1940
 Palais de Luxe (Windmill), 17-19 Great Windmill Street, Soho, 20 Dec 1909-1931
 Cinema de Paris, Bear Street/Charing Cross Road, 15 Feb 1910-1988
 Grand Central, 24 Tottenham Court Rd, 12 Feb 1910-1931
 Pyke House, 19-23 Oxford Street, 17 Feb 1910-c.1925
 Piccadilly Circus Cinematograph, 43/4 Great Windmill Street, 5 March 1910-1990
 Fitzroy Picture Palace, 69 Charlotte Street. April 1910-c.1916
 Cinema House, 225 Oxford Street, 14 July 1910-1984
 National Bioscope Electric Cinema, 20 Frith Street, Soho, July 1910-April 1914
 Grand Casino/Terry's Theatre, 24 Oct 1910-23
 Corner Theatre, 134a Tottenham Court Road/4 Warren Street, 16 Nov 1910-1929
 Strand Cinema Theatre, 3-5 Agar Street, Strand, 20 Nov 1910-1953
 Murie-Aeroplane Cinematograph Hall, 43 Oxford Street, Summer 1911
 Pyke's Cambridge Circus, 105-7 Charing Cross Road, 24 Aug 1911-1987
 Court, 268 Tottenham Court Road, c. Oct.1911-1928
 Marlborough Hall, 307 Regent Street, 11 March 1912-
 Majestic Picturedome, 36 Tottenham Court Road, 4 May 1912-1976
 Shaftesbury Pavilion, 101 Shaftesbury Avenue, 19 Oct 1912-1940
 New Gallery, 121a Regent Street, 14 January 1913-25
 Picture House (Academy), 25 January 1913-1986
 West End Cinema Theatre/Rialto, 3-4 Coventry Street, 18 March 1913-1982
 Carlton/ Berkeley, 30 Tottenham Court Road, Oct 1931-1976
 Marble Arch Pavilion, 505 (later 531) Oxford Street, 30 May 1914-1956

Source: Most of the data in this list is derived from Allen Eyles [with Keith Skone], *London's West End Cinemas* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2014).

In 1913, the *Westminster Gazette* commented that 'anyone revisiting London to-day, after a prolonged absence, would find, among other transformations, a number of

exotic and Oriental looking buildings called picture palaces'.⁴⁵ In the first ten years after its emergence the cinematograph had been mainly associated with music halls such as the Palace as well as the Empire and Alhambra in Leicester Square. After 1906, however, there was a cinema building boom throughout the country. Between 1906 and 1914 thirty five cinemas were built in the West End which added significantly to the nature of the pleasure district. This was part of a national shift to producing purpose-built cinemas.⁴⁶

Unlike theatre, cinema was a mass medium which was replicable in a variety of locations. At one level, the viewing of a film in one place was the same as seeing the same film at another location (although musicians in different cinemas gave the showing of motion pictures an individual character in the silent era). Why, then, did people in suburbs go to West End cinemas when they could get something similar closer to home? Cinemas in the centre of town came to enjoy a reputation based on the fact that the pleasure district was well established as a place of enchantment. There was also clearly emulation of buildings nearby. When the Piccadilly Circus Cinematograph (Cine Theatre) opened in 1910 on Great Windmill Street, adjacent to Shaftesbury Avenue, it was noted in the press that it was 'in the heart of the theatre world of London, being surrounded by large and well known theatre playhouses'.⁴⁷ We see the same clustering of cinemas that paralleled the development of theatres within a small area. On the opening of the West End Cinema Theatre (later the Rialto) on Coventry Street in 1913, the *Pall Mall Gazette* informed readers that '...the pictures are set with all the elegant surroundings of a stage-play'. Moreover, it

⁴⁵ *Westminster Gazette*, 5 November 1913, p.1.

⁴⁶ Jon Burrows, *The British Cinema Boom, 1909-1914: A Commercial History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁴⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 30 June 1910, p.28.

claimed '...the aim of the management is to attract the wealthy and cultured, in fact to win over a class of people to whom the moving picture is comparatively little known'.⁴⁸ Cinema had previously been considered vulgar; something suitable for the working classes and for children.⁴⁹ The *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote in 1913 that 'Time was--and but a year or two back--when an empty shop, some weirdly-shaped plaster decorations, and rows of threepenny benches served for "a picture palace"'.⁵⁰ The West End hosted some cheap cinemas, such as the ramshackle Jardin de Paris in Soho, aimed at the poor. Other early cinemas were multi-purpose. The Arena Picture Theatre (on the site of Gatti's music hall on Villiers Street) doubled as a cinema and a location for boxing matches.⁵¹

I want, however, to analyse the emergence of more prestigious venues which helped make the West End a site for elite film going. It shifted the class basis of the cinema industry. One contrast between West End theatres and cinemas is that the former required a strict dress code whereas cinemas (outside of film premieres) tended not to: itself a sign of the democratising potential of the new medium. Moreover, cinema was a cheaper alternative to theatres and music hall. This in itself helped give people a reason to visit the pleasure district. It was also another medium powered by electricity and geared to hyper-stimulation of audiences.

The first purpose-built cinema was Hale's Tours of the World on Oxford Street in 1906. Essentially an American franchise (originally presented at the St Louis International Exhibition of 1904), it was imported by the film maker Charles Urban. The audience sat in a mocked up interior of a railway carriage whilst the entrance

⁴⁸ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 March 1913, p. 2.

⁴⁹ Jon Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures: Film Exhibition in London during the Nickelodeon Era, 1906-1914', *Film History* vol.16 (2004), pp. 60-91.

⁵⁰ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 March 1913, p. 2.

⁵¹ *The Sportsman*, 3 June 1909 p. 3; *Kinematograph Weekly* 10 June 1909 p. 39.

took the form of a railway station ticket office. The 'conductor' acted as projectionist. Films were then projected to create the impression of a journey, allowing about sixty five people at any one time to sample places of natural beauty. These journeys included a trip on the St Gothard railway where the audience members found themselves 'virtually' travelling through mountain gorges and snow. Sound effects were provided of wheels moving and even the jolting of the vehicle. Films were changed each week to produce repeat visits. Contemporaries were impressed by the perfection of the illusion and Hale's Tours could soon be found all over the country, though the Oxford Street venue closed in 1910 when the block was redeveloped.⁵²

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a significant number of film companies were grouped in Cecil Court, off the Charing Cross Road. This was so notorious that it was known as 'Flicker Alley'.⁵³ Film pioneers such as Cecil Hepworth were based in the thoroughfare as well as companies such as Gaumont and Vitagraph. Cecil Court soon gave way to Wardour Street where Charles Urban based his headquarters in the building he called 'Urbanora House'. Other film companies began to cluster on the street, which gave the West End a new identity as the centre of the British film industry as well as the centre of the theatrical profession. By 1913, there were, at a conservative estimate, eight film companies operating on the street.⁵⁴ Films were mostly not shot in the West End but they were financed from there.

Film companies on Wardour Street in 1913

⁵² *Music Hall and Theatre Review*, 11 January 1907, p. 28; *Morning Post*, 25 December 1906, p. 6.

⁵³ Simon Brown, 'Flicker Alley: Cecil Court and the Emergence of the British Film Industry', *Film Studies*, no. 10 (2007), pp. 21-33.

⁵⁴ I am counting all the different Charles Urban enterprises at Urbanora House (number 82) as one company. Similarly I assume the Charles Urban Trading Company at numbers 89-91 were part of the same company.

House number	Name of Film Business
52	Crown Film
80 and 82	Urbanora House: Natural Colour Kinematograph, Colour film distributor, Kinemacolor distributor, Kin-to Cinematograph film makers
84	Pathé Freres Cinema Ltd
86-8	Moving Pictures Sales Agency
94	World's Exclusive Films Ltd
104	London and County Film Service Co.
89 and 91	Charles Urban Trading Company
101	Cricket and Martin Ltd. Cinematographic film agents
169	Union Film Publishing Co.

source: *Post Office London Directory for 1913* (London: Kelly's Directories, 1913), pp. 680-1.

The West End was home to luxurious cinemas that aped the theatres around them but cinema-going was a different and certainly more democratic experience. The *Westminster Gazette* reported that the select were probably happy to 'exchange their ten-shilling stall for a two-shilling seat'. However, whilst there were variations in seat prices in the cinemas, the experience was very different from the theatres which were engineered, as we have seen, to make sure classes did not meet. Instead, the smart set had to encounter 'the commercial and industrial life of London'. The experience of being in a cinema audience differed from what people were used to in theatre where the wealthy paid more to be close to the stage, usually in the stalls. In cinemas they paid more to be further away. The *Westminster Gazette* playfully noted that in cinemas the servants sat in the stalls and the rich in the gallery: an inversion of

normality.⁵⁵ Despite this, cinema-going involved social mixing in a way that contrasted with theatres.

The first major West End cinema (without the Hale's Tour gimmick) was the Electric Cinema on Oxford Street in 1908 (at the Marble Arch end). The use of the word 'Electric' is suggestive, proclaiming its sense of modernity.⁵⁶ The ambience of West End cinemas aimed to attract the select. When it commenced showing films in 1914, the Electric Pavilion on Oxford Street opted not to use vulgar posters which detracted from its classical exterior and merely displayed the titles of the films being shown at the foot of the stone pillars outside. The *Kinematograph Weekly* noted that the cinema was 'built in the style which characterised the superior dwellings of the ancient Egyptians' and claimed that it had 'come to be regarded as the fashionable rendezvous for pictures and music'. It even contained six private boxes, thus emulating the theatre. The cinema offered a form of spectacle in itself.⁵⁷

The cultural upgrading that West End cinemas deployed extended to using illustrious patronage when a cinema opened, again suggesting it was suitable for an upscale audience. The New Gallery on Regent Street was opened by Sir George and Lady Alexander with proceeds going to the League of Mercy. The cinema also included boxes which could be booked through local ticket agencies (confusingly called 'libraries') much like boxes in nearby theatres.⁵⁸ Even grander, the West End Cinema Theatre was opened by Prince Alexander of Teck (cousin of George V). We might want to connect this form of patronage with the Royal Variety Performance. It mixed cultural populism, deference and modernity. Just one hour and a half after the

⁵⁵ *Westminster Gazette*, 5 November 1913, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 27 August 1914, p. 67.

⁵⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 11 June 1914, p. 85.

⁵⁸ *Westminster Gazette*, 10 January 1913, p. 6.

reception of the royal party a film was shown of their arrival (at the time a record turn around for processing and projecting a film).⁵⁹

The Shaftesbury Pavilion on Shaftesbury Avenue was described in 1912 as 'Society's Picture Playhouse'. Its fare in 1912 included Sarah Bernhardt in *Queen Bess*.⁶⁰ The Picture House (later the Academy) on Oxford Street was launched in 1913 with a crystal chandelier in the auditorium, seats coloured gold and some dainty reproductions of Watteau on the walls.⁶¹ Orchestras of various sizes could be found in many provincial and suburban cinemas. Nevertheless, when the West End Cinema Theatre on Coventry Street showed *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1913, it publicised the fact that it used a full orchestra which made it resemble a concert (a souvenir programme was also available for sale like in a theatre).⁶² At the Electric Pavilion on Oxford Street there was an orchestra with ten or twenty (accounts vary) soloists under the leadership of the leading Russian violinist, Frederick Fradkin.⁶³ According to one newspaper, the attraction of the ravishing music was such that 'both of an afternoon and in the evening well-to-do folk alight from motor cabs and taxi-cabs outside the Pavilion just as they are wont to do for a Queen's Hall recital'. This again shows the West End was able to draw on a more upscale audience through music and the feeling of luxury. Henry Bey, manager of the Cinema de Paris at 50 Oxford Street, kept arguing in the *Bioscope* that West End cinemas needed to increase their prices as they provided an orchestra (meaning the public should pay more). More expensive tickets,

⁵⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 March 1913, p. 2

⁶⁰ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 22 November 1912, p. 4.

⁶¹ *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 30 January 1913, p. 1381.

⁶² *Pall Mall Gazette*, 7 Oct 1913, p. 10.

⁶³ *Bioscope*, 4 June 1914, p. 1004; *Kinematograph Weekly*, 27 August 1914, p. 67.

in his view, was the only way to cover the cost of improvements (such as making the cinemas bigger to cope with demand).⁶⁴

West End cinemas also aimed to provide entertainment during the day. The Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly was revamped as a cinema in 1907 and was particularly aimed at female shoppers.⁶⁵ Thus the different elements of the West End fed off one another. This was a space that was open to men and to women and, increasingly, to children. The Cinema House on Oxford Street offered schoolboy matinees in 1911 where the best films from the previous year were reshowed in the afternoons.⁶⁶

West End cinemas also plugged into topicality; the Majestic Pleasure Dome on Tottenham Court Road showed news-making events just after they happened.⁶⁷ It was common to see newsreels of airships and wrestling matches.⁶⁸ However, these cinemas possessed an eye for upscale clientele. The West End Cinema Theatre showed a fashion revue in 1913 using the new process of kinemacolour. Fashions from Paris, London and Vienna were shown with tango frocks in 1913 producing a lot of interest.⁶⁹ Cinemas also stressed their educational value. In 1912, a teacher brought a group of schoolgirls to see a showing of the Italian film version of *Dante's Inferno* at the Theatre De Luxe on the Strand. The manager stated he would give a gold watch to the young lady who wrote the best essay about the film.⁷⁰

Cultural upgrading was evident at the Picture House on Oxford Street. *The Stage* noted that it was 'opened primarily for a better class public'. Its cultural

⁶⁴ *Bioscope*, 18 July 1912, p. 183.

⁶⁵ *The Era*, 14 December 1907, p.28.

⁶⁶ *Bioscope*, 7 September 1911, p.483.

⁶⁷ *The Referee*, 30 June 1912, p. 14.

⁶⁸ For examples, see *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 28 April 1910, p.1385; *Sporting Life*, 2 July 1910 p. 1.

⁶⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 27 November 1913, p.191.

⁷⁰ *Bioscope*, 28 November 1912, p. 13.

pretensions can be demonstrated by its launch event when it showed the religious film *The Miracle* (using a coloured print) in 1913. The frontage of a cathedral was mocked up in front of the screen. At the start, the doors of the cathedral opened so that the film could be projected. The idea was give the audience the feeling of the film 'taking place within the sacred building'.⁷¹ The spectacle of West End cinemas explains why a film periodical was able to claim in 1913 that 'The unjust allegation that the kinematograph appeals only to the lower classes--that what for want of a better description are termed the 'upper classes' give it the cold shoulder as inane and infra dig--is daily being refuted'.⁷² It also explains why Theatreland came to co-exist with Cinemaland.

Conclusion: What's On?

In 1910, Terry's Theatre on the Strand (known for musical comedy) was turned into a cinema. As one contemporary periodical noted '...the transaction represents the first conversion of a legitimate centre of the drama into a cinematograph show'.⁷³ The idea of the 'legitimate theatre' had always been contested in various ways throughout the nineteenth century (especially by the coming of music hall) but now it found itself co-existing with an entirely new medium which was integral to the making of the modern pleasure district. There were concerns that cinema would displace theatre. This did not happen but a lavish visual culture was unleashed in the West End: not just motion pictures but the cinemas which screened them.

⁷¹ *The Stage*, 30 January 1913, p. 22; *Bioscope*, 30 January 1913, p. 75.

⁷² *Kinematograph Weekly*, 20 March 1913, p. 5.

⁷³ *Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore), 9 October 1910, p. 7.

The theatre world of Shaftesbury Avenue and the coming of luxurious cinemas created the West End as we understand it today. They offered urban landmarks drenched with cultural capital: sites of spectacle, fun and entertainment that was not too demanding. They became part of the toolkit of modernity, benefiting from the expansion of the press, which had long had the function of answering the most basic question one should ask of any pleasure district: what's on? An important element of newspapers was publicising times of performance and information about ticket prices. At a deeper level, D'Oyly Carte's smashing of the light bulb on the Savoy stage heralded a new sensory dimension to the pleasure district. The electric fantasia of the West End took over the popular imagination.

This study has examined a number of features which created the pleasure district: the construction of spaces that were thought to align with an upper class notion of culture, of fashion, glamour and style. This is the mode I have described elsewhere as the 'populist palatial' and can be found in the theatres but also the cinemas of the West End.⁷⁴ What is at stake here is the process whereby an elite society came to terms with the democratic potential inherent in popular culture with its preference for spectacle and good-hearted vulgarity. The emergence of glamour (evident in fashion, scent and style) made available a way of life associated with the aristocracy but now suggested it could be something enjoyed by the wider public.⁷⁵

A lot of the cultural history of this period focuses on transgression: the challenge of new view views of gender identity and the emergence of forms of anti-capitalism. Similarly, modern cultural theory about mass culture tends to veer

⁷⁴ McWilliam, *London's West End*, ch. 11.

⁷⁵ Stephen Gundle and Clino T.Castelli, *The Glamour System* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006); Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (London: Zed Books, 2011).

between viewing it as conformist or liberating. But clearly the West End was both. The West End offered the possibility of escapism constructed in particular ways, that validated the current social order and worshipped hierarchy. For that reason the first Royal Variety Performance epitomised a lot of what the West End was about. Yet the promotion of sexualised spaces through dance, song and film pushed at the boundaries of taste and often featured acts of transgression. Cinemas, in particular, became enmeshed with a wider mass culture but so was what was offered at the Palace Theatre. More deeply, modern urban life (as constructed in the West End) was associated with the fleeting and the contingent. We can see this in the rapid turn over of entertainments in variety and in the flicker of the moving image. This was not peculiar to the West End but it became central to its identity. The West End thus something far more than the centre of the metropolis; it was a state of mind or, at least, a place where culture could be re-imagined.

As the poet says, 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree'. If we take the long Edwardian age, Coleridge's line captures something of the promise of the pleasure district. Here was a feast of entertainment and desire fit for a king. When the English Opera House (later the Palace Theatre) opened in 1891, the *Era* was moved to compare its magnificence to what Coleridge had in mind when he composed his epic (but never completed) poem.⁷⁶ In the long Edwardian period, the centre of the metropolis became an eruption of art, commerce, spectacle and splendour. The West End was Xanadu.

⁷⁶ *Era*, 24 January 1891, p.11.