

‘The Elasticity of Her Spirits’: Actresses and Resilience on the Nineteenth-Century Colonial Stage

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ABSTRACT

Eliza Winstanley (1818–82) and Maria Taylor (1805?–41) were English-born actors who were among the early leading performers in Barnett Levey’s acting company at his Theatre Royal in George Street, Sydney. Taylor’s parents were ‘singing actors’ who, in the first years of the nineteenth century, performed at London’s Haymarket and Covent Garden theatres, and were regularly engaged for the summer seasons in provincial theatres. Winstanley also came from a theatrical family – her father was a scenic painter and her younger sister Ann was a performer. This article describes

how Maria Taylor and Eliza Winstanley brought their theatrical skills and resilience to the task of building a theatrical culture in Australia. Both women faced many challenges in their personal and professional lives, but both possessed the capacity to bounce back, continuing to practise and refine their craft in difficult circumstances.

*Winstanley observed and worked with many performers over the course of her thirty-year acting career in Australia, England and America. In the preface to her first book, **Shifting Scenes in Theatrical Life** (1859), Winstanley writes that her narrative is ‘founded on facts, gathered in the course of an extensive professional career’. Winstanley adds that her characters ‘are also equally real, but sufficiently disguised in their portraiture ... to avoid the charge of ill-natured personality’. Her intention in writing **Shifting Scenes**, she claims, is to celebrate the skills, qualities and virtues of performers, which she describes as the ‘best qualities that do honour to human nature’. In this article, I propose that the ‘best qualities’ Winstanley identified in her colleagues can be described as ‘personal resilience’. I reflect on how the resilience of Maria Taylor and Eliza Winstanley was shaped by their personal traits and aspirations. Both women used the press to defend their reputations or confront enemies. However, Maria Taylor’s ‘giddy and volatile disposition’ prompted her to defy convention with bold and risky choices in her personal life. In contrast, Eliza Winstanley placed a high value on conventional respectability, and carefully maintained her reputation as a skilled professional performer and moral servant of the public.*

A close study of the work and lives of leading actresses on the early colonial stage in Sydney and Calcutta reveals that resilience was a crucial factor in their capacity to not only survive but flourish in the unstable and challenging world of their professional environment. Maria Taylor

(1805?–41) and Eliza Winstanley (1818–82) were two of Australia's early theatrical stars. As leading members of the companies of Sydney's Theatre Royal and Royal Victoria Theatre, Taylor and Winstanley often performed together. It is notable that they performed the title roles of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1835, when Taylor was the first actress to play Romeo on an Australian stage. It is likely that Winstanley developed her craft by working alongside Taylor, who was several years older, and had experience on the London stage.

Maria Taylor was a gifted performer who, despite the many challenges she faced in her private life, was known for her flexible and spirited performances. Blessed with natural vivacity, a good singing voice and generosity on stage, Maria Taylor had received 'a thorough musical education'¹ from her parents, both trained singers and experienced performers in the London and provincial theatre. Taylor's life off stage reads like the narrative of a melodrama, with love affairs, lost children, and a tendency to walk on the wrong side of the law. In comparison, her colleague Eliza Winstanley led a blameless and respectable life, and maintained a diligent practice as an actress in Australia, the United Kingdom and America. Later in life, Winstanley reinvented herself as a prolific writer and editor of serialised fiction.

In the preface to her first novel, *Shifting Scenes in Theatrical Life* (1859), Winstanley asserts that contrary to popular assumptions, performers are moral, dependable people. She writes that 'the vicissitudes, the trials, privations, and sufferings, attendant upon the life of a strolling player, may serve to develop some of the best qualities that do honor to human nature'.² She names these qualities as: 'a high sense of moral duty, patience under disappointment and the pressure of hopeless difficulties, together with the constant practice of the Good Samaritan's spirit'. Today

we might describe Winstanley's 'best qualities' as 'resilience'. Elizabeth Wynhausen, in her 2009 monograph *On Resilience*, writes that an 'essential component' of resilience is 'the resistance that determines a person's capacity to bounce back from traumatic events'.³ In addition, Wynhausen identifies flexibility and lateral thinking as fundamental habits of mind in a resilient person's psychological make-up. She writes: 'Resilient people always see a way of coping, and if the first thing they try doesn't work, they try a bunch of other things'. Maria Taylor and Eliza Winstanley both possessed the capacity to try 'a bunch of other things', but their resilience manifested in their personal and professional lives in a manner that was emblematic of their personal traits. Taylor conducted her life with flair and a disregard for convention, while Winstanley carefully maintained her public persona as a respectable, industrious servant of the public.

The 'vicissitudes, the trials, privations, and sufferings' which Winstanley identified in the lives of strolling players were also part of life for the acting companies of Sydney's first permanent theatres in the 1830s and 1840s: the Theatre Royal and the Royal Victoria Theatre. Then as now, Winstanley, Taylor and their colleagues had to cope with fluctuating wages, but unlike their twenty-first-century peers, they were also required to provide their own costumes and memorise up to four new parts per week. They had to stay healthy or lose income in a time when cholera, tuberculosis and influenza were prevalent and debilitating contagious diseases. The Theatre Royal and Royal Victoria acting companies had a variety of challenging workplace conditions and scenarios to contend with: house lights that remained alight throughout each performance; patchy lighting on stage that dimmed as the evening wore on; minimal rehearsal; intoxicated and rowdy audiences who hissed their least favourite actors and cheered those they supported; mismatched scenery

flats when the backstage crew were intoxicated; stage pistols that did not fire; fellow performers who did not know any of their lines; trap doors in the stage unexpectedly left open; audience members climbing on to the stage during a performance to entertain everyone with their version of a Shakespearean soliloquy; fellow performers who addressed every line to the audience, often with a wink or a simper; fellow performers who were so intoxicated that they couldn't stand up; and the challenge of maintaining focus and energy in a programme that began at seven o'clock and finished at one o'clock the next morning.⁴

Female performers needed to be psychologically 'tough' if they were to have a stable and successful career. Tracy C. Davis writes that nineteenth-century actresses were exceptions to their sex because they were autonomous professionals, and the stage was one of the few places where women could have agency and independence.⁵ Davis identifies the skills that women developed in the theatre as: 'indefatigability, worldly knowledge, self-sufficiency, mobility, and the freedom to interact with men as colleagues, admirers, pursuers, and economic equals'.⁶ These qualities could also be identified as aspects of a resilient personality. In addition, actresses required psychological resilience in the face of critical scrutiny in the press. Lisa Warrington has observed that in the early years of the Sydney theatre, 'a critic might serve as cultural watchdog, arbiter of taste and of common sense, *ersatz* director offering hints on acting and stage mechanics'.⁷ The Sydney theatre critics of the 1830s and 1840s provided severe acting notes, comparing actors and actresses to great performers they recalled seeing in London and the English provinces.⁸ Female performers had the additional challenge of cultural prejudices about women who displayed themselves in the public arena of the theatre. Davis notes that female performers 'defied socioeconomic prescriptions

about Good Women, yet by going home as respectable daughters, wives or mothers they denied ideological prescriptions about Bad Women'.⁹ Actresses had to contend with personal attacks in the press, snide comments from reviewers about their dress or figure, and assumptions about their personal morality and sexual availability.

Maria Madeline Taylor (née Hill) arrived in Hobart in October 1833 with her stage manager husband, John Taylor. She was the daughter of two experienced English performers, James Hill and his de facto wife, Eliza Atkins (née Warrell).¹⁰ Eliza Atkins was born into a provincial theatrical family who worked in the Bath-Bristol region 'after extensive experience at York'.¹¹ Eliza trained with eminent Italian male soprano and singing teacher Venanzio Rauzzini (1746–1810), who had settled in Bath in 1780. She married the performer William Atkins in 1796, and performed as a singer and actor with critical success at London's Haymarket Theatre and Covent Garden throughout the 1790s and early 1800s. In the early 1800s, Eliza and William Atkins separated, and Eliza commenced an 'irregular' relationship with James Hill, a fellow singer and performer, who was also a student of Rauzzini.¹² Hill was an accomplished singer who had a brief career at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, playing in comic operas with the famous tenor John Braham (c.1774–1856).¹³ Eliza Atkins and James Hill had at least three children: Maria Madeline, and two sons, Charles and John. Maria became a talented singer and performer, and her brothers, also performers, became managers of the Surrey and Brighton theatres.¹⁴

When Maria and her husband John Taylor arrived in Hobart in 1833, her first performance there was at a concert presented in the Hobart Courthouse, where she sang two popular songs. *The Colonist* critic writes that 'a breathless stillness prevailed' in the audience as Taylor began her rendition of 'Come, Where the Aspens Quiver', and that she demonstrated



Figure 1: A portrait by Samuel De Wilde of Maria Taylor's mother, Eliza Atkins, dressed as Selima in George Collier's *Selima and Azor*, 6 December 1805. © British Museum Trustees.



Figure 2: A portrait of Maria Taylor's father, James Hill, as Leander in Dibdin and Bickerstaffe's short opera, *The Padlock*. This 1805 drawing by Samuel De Wilde was completed a few weeks before De Wilde's portrait of Eliza Atkins. As the child of a theatrical family, it is likely that Taylor received her musical and theatrical training from her parents. © British Museum Trustees.

a 'flexibility of voice'.¹⁵ After her theatrical debut in December 1833 in Kotzebue's *The Stranger*, with actor-managers Samson and Cordelia Cameron, Maria Taylor became a favourite with Van Diemen's Land theatre-goers. Critics and audiences were bitterly disappointed when this new star of the nascent Van Diemen's Land theatre and her stage manager husband left for Sydney a few months later, in early 1834. An article in the *Colonial Times* informs the public that the Taylors 'both anticipate to

be engaged at the Sydney theatre', and somewhat unkindly predicts that they 'will have cause and leisure to repent of the abrupt and uncourteous manner they have treated the Van Diemen's Land public, who have shown such a wish to support them'.¹⁶ The Camerons had worked hard to establish Hobart's first theatre, and the departure of their popular leading performer and experienced stage manager must have been a setback.

Once she had established herself in the acting company of Sydney's Theatre Royal, Maria Taylor was soon known as 'the Queen of the Sydney stage'.¹⁷ The Sydney critics were unanimous that 'One so lady like in her manner is indeed a rarity in this part of the world'. In addition to her 'desirable stature of person, neither diminutive nor masculine – the graceful air of step – and the clear, distinct enunciation of voice',¹⁸ Taylor was praised for her ability to represent a diverse range of characters. 'Mrs Taylor is here quite unrivalled as an actress; as the versatility of her genius in such opposite characters as Don Giovanni and Mrs Haller ... and many other characters of an equally opposite nature, can fully testify.'¹⁹ Taylor was also applauded for her naturalness, and her ability to play the emotional truth of a text:

[I]t was the perfect manner in which Mrs Taylor inhaled the spirit of the part that caused her to give so much satisfaction; her ease, vivacity, playful humour, then her deep emotion – were all evinced with the nicest discrimination; it was all emphatically natural.²⁰

By 1835, Maria Taylor had separated from her husband, and John Taylor returned to Van Diemen's Land. Oppenheim notes that 'when Samson Cameron invited both the Taylors to join him in Hobart "on very liberal terms", only John Taylor arrived to become his stage manager'.²¹ Over the

next six years, Maria Taylor lived openly in de facto relationships with a number of high-profile men. Critics commented on her offstage behavior, accusing her of impropriety and adultery.²²

Despite the conservative view of Taylor as a 'brazen-faced strumpet',²³ she was a diligent and hard-working performer. Just before Christmas in 1838, Taylor proved her commitment to her craft when she suffered a serious accident at the theatre. The critic in *The Australian* writes:

By some neglect, the scene shifters placed the wrong scene in readiness, unknown to the performers on the stage, and, as Mrs Taylor was making her exit from the second scene through the cottage door in the flat, she was suddenly precipitated through a vacancy in the stage (which was arranged for the hold of a ship) a distance of twenty feet to the earth; she was scarcely missing before moanings were heard under the stage – persons proceeded immediately below and carried her up to the green room; surgical aid was procured, and after the process of bleeding, Dr Smith, who attended, lent her his carriage to convey her to her residence.²⁴

The Colonist reported that Taylor had hit the edge of the stage as she fell, and had 'blood streaming from both her mouth and her nose'.²⁵ She was 'determined not in any way to put the proprietor to inconvenience in the forthcoming Christmas novelty, having already given information of her intention of appearing on Wednesday night, in the character allotted to her in the drama'.²⁶ In a poetic and creepy coincidence, the role that she was to play in the Christmas novelty was 'Asteria, the Fallen Star'. But this theatrical star had had a bad fall, and ultimately found that she was not well

enough to play *The Fallen Star* after all, so Eliza Winstanley took her place. After witnessing Winstanley's performance as Asteria *The Fallen Star*, the critic for *The Australian* writes: '[W]e think the character of Asteria to be deficient in the personation of Miss Winstanley, of the suavity and elasticity that ... it would receive in the hands of Mrs Taylor'.²⁷ A few months later, the *Sydney Monitor* critic writes of Winstanley's performance in the farce *Noddy's Secret* that she should find 'a style of her own' rather than imitate Maria Taylor.²⁸ It is possible that early in her career, Winstanley emulated Taylor's spirited and vigorous comic style.

From 1836, Maria Taylor's private life became as discussed in the press as her elastic performances. Described by one critic as 'a pleasing lively little brunette, with a sparkling and expressive black eye, not particularly pretty, but far from plain'²⁹ and another as possessing a 'Vestris-like' spirit, she had many male admirers, and was prepared to defend herself in the press, all of which earned her the moral condemnation of conservative churchman Reverend Dr Lang and his followers. The widespread view of her 'abandoned character' is apparent in a short item in *The Colonist* in 1836. The writer observes in a sniggering tone that 'some bickering' had taken place between the organisers of an oratorio 'regarding the propriety of permitting Mrs Taylor to appear among the other performers. Mrs T, we hear, had offered her services to sing "Hail Holy Virgin".'³⁰ However, Taylor continued to bounce back, retaining her flirtatious and spirited performance style, even though in the end she was undone by the unwise choices she made in her personal life.

In 1836, it was well known that Taylor was in a relationship with a con man, John Thomas Wilson. In 1834, Wilson had ruined the reputation of Marianne Cavell, a respectable free emigrant who had an affair with Wilson, and became pregnant. In November 1834, Wilson organised for

Cavell to leave Sydney for Hobart aboard the *Rossendale*, promising to join her at a later date.³¹ In a 'wretched and dejected state of mind' and suffering from 'extreme seasickness', Marianne Cavell miscarried on the journey to Hobart and was abandoned by Wilson.³² Her brother, Andrew Wyllie, published a lengthy account of his sister's plight in *The Colonist* in 1836, in an attempt to expose Wilson as an immoral philanderer. By this time, Wilson and Maria Taylor were in a de facto relationship. Wyllie writes that he witnessed Wilson walk with a prostitute to a house of 'ill fame', and implies that Maria Taylor was also a prostitute, as he had, on another occasion, observed her walking with Wilson to her residence. 'I need say no more about her', Wyllie writes, 'as she is generally known to be a woman of abandoned character'.³³ Two days later, Maria Taylor responded with an emphatic notice to the public in the *Sydney Monitor*:

In answer to ANDREW WYLLIE'S assertions, in a letter of this day's *Colonist*, respecting myself, I take leave to proclaim him, a MEAN, DESPICABLE LIAR! And if any of my relatives were in the Colony, he dared not apply such assertions to me, publicly, or privately.³⁴

Taylor goes on to defend her reputation, outlining her financial difficulties since her husband had 'left myself and my child'. She appeals to the sympathy of the public, asking them to consider how 'an injured and oppressed female has deserved the unmerited reproaches of a few heartless enemies'. However, given her reputation as a flirt and an adulterer, Taylor's angry letter to the editor may not have convinced the public that she was an 'injured and oppressed' woman.

John Thomas Wilson fell into considerable debt and fled Sydney in October 1839, leaving the wife of a convict pregnant, as well as driving to

suicide the captain of a trading ship, whose wife he had also seduced.³⁵ A few months after Wilson's departure, Taylor began a relationship with Pierre Largeteau, captain of the recently arrived French whaler, *Ville de Bordeaux*. Even though he did not own the *Ville de Bordeaux*, Largeteau sold it for £3,000 in July 1840, and, pocketing the funds, he and Taylor departed for Calcutta a week later. It is not known what became of Taylor's teenage daughter, although one account claims that after Taylor's departure, the young woman fell pregnant to her Balmain employer, and was rescued from an attempted 'double suicide' in Darling Harbour, and sent to a charitable institution.³⁶

Once in Calcutta, Taylor and Largeteau renamed themselves Count and Madame Dhermainville, where they lived the high life. What stories did the Dhermainvilles tell the British community in Calcutta? Maria Taylor must have been a willing accomplice in this ultimate act of flexible theatrical shape-shifting. It is easy to imagine how readily she fell into the role of an actress married to French nobility.

Pierre Largeteau contracted cholera and died in early 1841. Shortly after her lover's death, Maria Taylor (aka Madame Dhermainville) made her Calcutta debut in *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Sans Souci Theatre. Her prologue before the curtain was an appeal for sympathy from the audience. Adopting the persona of Madame Dhermainville, had she represented herself as being French-born during the first heady weeks in Calcutta with Pierre Largeteau? If so, was she now compelled to continue the ruse, and speak her prologue with a French accent?

As one Adversity has stricken low,
 Is she, who humbly pleads to you now,
 Oh! Had I the power to utter what I feel,

Then should he know the force of this appeal
 And own as sympathy relaxed each brow
 The Woman, not the actress speak'd now.³⁷

Taylor's justification for her decision to perform so soon after the death of her 'husband' is a heartfelt example of resilience born of necessity:

Alas! Too soon must I retain the mask –
 Necessity commands me to the task –
 And bid my features mimic feeling shew,
 Whilst dark and heavy lies my heart below;
 Pause to remember this, ere ye upbraid
 And let my faults tonight be lightly weighed.

Sometime after arriving in Calcutta, Taylor had become romantically entangled with Captain George Hamilton Cox, Secretary of the Fire Insurance Company. This affair could have been fostered by Taylor as another income stream while Pierre Largeteau was still alive, or perhaps Taylor took up with Cox in the weeks after her lover had died, when she was alone and in financial difficulties. According to the *Sydney Monitor*, George Cox had 'formed an injudicious connexion'³⁸ with Taylor, and had been 'labouring under great depression of spirits in consequence of his wife and children being daily expected from England'. On 29 April 1841, Cox spent the afternoon with Taylor, attended her performance that evening, and after the play went back to his lodgings at the Bengal Club, sat in a cupboard, and 'blew his brains out with a pistol, literally shattering to pieces the whole of his head'. Cox left on his table a number of letters addressed to his family,

his colleagues, Maria Taylor and to the Coroner. The letter ‘to his actress-friend’³⁹ was not made public at the inquest, but the letters to his employer and his family were reproduced in the colonial press. The tone of Cox’s letters is rational – he was adamant that he should not be judged insane. ‘It was unhappiness; you will find no more, search as you will.’ The proceedings of the inquest into Cox’s suicide, some of his final letters and mention of his liaison with Taylor were published in *The Englishman*, a Calcutta colonial newspaper. Thus Maria Taylor’s name was yet again associated with another sensational series of events in the colonial press.

Two weeks later, Maria Taylor also succumbed to cholera. When news of her death reached Sydney, the critic of the *Sydney Gazette* wrote:

As an actress this lady was more successful than any other that ever trod the Sydney boards. The versatility of her talent and the elasticity of her spirits knew no bounds. In private life, whatever indiscretions she might have been guilty of, were rather the result of a volatile and giddy disposition, inseparable from her professional pursuits, than of a bad heart.⁴⁰

The inscription on her gravestone in Calcutta is recorded in *The Bengal Obituary* and reads ‘sacred to the memory of Maria Madeline Taylor who died 13th May 1841, aged 27 years’.⁴¹ This ‘fascinating actress’ who brought the traditions, acting methods and stories of the London stage to Van Diemen’s Land, New South Wales and Calcutta; who navigated whole worlds of misfortune, tragedy, diverse stage experience and professional challenge with a spirited and inventive form of resilience, was finally beaten by an infectious disease. Taylor’s lateral thinking in the face of adversity – the trait that Wynhausen calls ‘trying a bunch of other things’ – could not save her

from the dreaded 'King Cholera', as the disease was called in an 1852 cartoon.⁴² Towards the end of his life, Joseph Simmons, leading performer and sometime manager of the Theatre Royal and Royal Victoria Theatre in the 1830s and 1840s, wrote to the editor of Sydney's *Evening News* reminiscing about his former theatrical colleagues. In his account of the theatre of fifty years earlier, Simmons identified Maria Taylor as 'without exception, the most versatile actress that has ever trod the boards of colonial theatre – a second Madame Vestris and Mrs W. West combined'.⁴³



Figure 3: 'A court for King Cholera' by John Leech, *Punch* 23 (25 September 1852) 139. Leech's cartoon depicts the filthy conditions associated with London's working poor, where diseases including cholera were rife. Note the children playing in the rubbish heap, the child's coffin being carried above the crowd on the far right, and the misspelt 'cockney' signs which read 'Logins for thraavelers'. Maria Taylor may have lived in similarly squalid conditions in Calcutta. Image courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London.

While Maria Taylor attracted various scandals, Eliza Winstanley lived a life free of impropriety. According to the critic who reviewed her performance in *The Tower of Nesle* for the *Van Diemen's Land Chronicle*, the worst thing Winstanley did was to marry an Irishman. The critic writes: '[I]t is only Mrs O'Flaherty's acting which could reconcile us to the name of O'Flaherty'.⁴⁴ However, like Maria Taylor, Eliza Winstanley kept bouncing back, and trying new things. In his seminal book *Theatre Comes to Australia*, Eric Irvin describes Winstanley as 'an indomitable battler, who ... managed to achieve what she had set out to achieve entirely by her own efforts. If what she wanted could not be had in one place, she moved on to another.'⁴⁵ From her debut as a sixteen-year-old until she was in her early twenties, Eliza Winstanley honed her craft, performing intermittently as part of the acting company of the Theatre Royal, and then more regularly at the Royal Victoria Theatre. By the time she was twenty-two years old, Winstanley's colleagues Maria Taylor and Ellen Douglass Hatch had both died, and Eliza, healthy, versatile and diligent in her practice, was ready to step into the leading comic and tragic roles once played by her older peers.⁴⁶ It is possible that Winstanley's personal resilience was also accompanied by vigorous ambition. Once she had fewer competitors for theatrical engagements, Winstanley seized the professional opportunities offered to her and, throughout 1841 and 1842, she rose to prominence. In 1842, the *Sydney Gazette* bestowed on her the ultimate praise, naming her the 'Mrs Siddons of Sydney'.⁴⁷

In late 1840, Winstanley began a relationship with Henry O'Flaherty, a tall blond Irish violinist who was employed in the Theatre Royal orchestra. Richard Fotheringham has described how their romance became public during the Cabbage Tree Affair, when Winstanley and her companions were attacked by a gang of rowdy youths as they walked home from the

theatre one night.⁴⁸ These youths identified themselves as 'native-born', and wore distinctive hats woven from the leaves of the cabbage tree palm. Winstanley and her sister Ann, also a performer, had been heckled by the Cabbage Tree Mob for a number of years because they were English-born performers. The *Sydney Monitor* describes the Cabbage Tree Mob 'getting up a cry of "Winstanley v. the Natives"' when the Winstanley sisters were on stage.⁴⁹ The Cabbage Tree Mob were vocal in their support of Mathilda Jones, a young Australian-born actress who had made her theatrical debut alongside Ann Winstanley when they were children. Now fifteen years old, 'Tilly' Jones was very popular with the Royal Victoria audience, and the Cabbage Tree Mob were her champions. In September 1840, Winstanley performed the role of Lady Roskelyn in *St Clair of the Isles*, and was subjected to constant interruptions from the Cabbage Tree Mob in the pit. An article in *The Colonist* describes the difficult environment that Winstanley had been enduring throughout 1840, and indicates that she was considering abandoning her acting career.

It was known that Miss Winstanley was not well ... it really is too bad that a deserving actress should be worried and insulted by a set of scamps who act from malice of their own, or because they are incited to it by others, envious of the well-merited popularity of Miss Winstanley ... We trust that Miss Winstanley will altogether forgo her intention of leaving the boards, nor allow herself to be annoyed by the hisses of a few blackguards, who are altogether incapable of judging her merit.⁵⁰

The interjections by the Mob were taking their toll on Winstanley, but her decision to leave the theatre for the remainder of the season appears to

have fanned rather than cooled the flames of Currency resentment against her. Winstanley placed a notice in the press to justify her ‘non-appearance at the Theatre for the last few evenings’ even though her name ‘day after day has appeared in the bills’.⁵¹ Winstanley’s letter to the editor indicates that threats were being made against her, and that her performances would continue to be sabotaged by the Cabbage Tree Mob.

I should not deem this explanation necessary but from the dissatisfaction evinced at my not playing, after my name appearing, and the illiberal intentions expressed by a large body of persons in the habit of frequenting the theatre, should I again appear on the boards before them.

As Maria Taylor had done four years earlier, Winstanley chose to defend her reputation in the press, but unlike Taylor, she did not resort to personal insults, and maintained a lofty and respectable tone. Winstanley’s description of her tormentors as ‘a large body of persons’ is in cool contrast to Taylor’s description of Andrew Wyllie as a ‘MEAN, DESPICABLE LIAR!’

In early 1841, Winstanley and O’Flaherty were married, and O’Flaherty began playing small theatrical roles at the Royal Victoria. From July to December 1841, Winstanley and O’Flaherty made a successful tour of Hobart and Launceston, playing the leading roles in melodramas and burlettas. The decision to leave Sydney and spend six months performing in Hobart and Launceston removed Winstanley from the heated atmosphere generated by Sydney’s Cabbage Tree Mob. As a visiting leading performer from the Sydney theatre, Winstanley had an unrivalled status as a theatrical star. Descriptions of Winstanley’s performances in the Van Diemen’s Land press suggest that she had developed some of Maria Taylor’s qualities, playing with confidence, ease and flirtatiousness. ‘Mrs

O'Flaherty wore the breeches with becoming grace',⁵² writes one, while another remarks: 'There is only one fault in her acting; even in the most pathetic and tragic scenes a bewitching smile sometimes steals across her countenance'.⁵³ Marriage and the opportunity to perform on new stages for new audiences allowed Winstanley to remake herself, burnishing her image as a theatrical star, and displaying some of the elasticity and effortless glamour that had been a hallmark of Maria's Taylor's playing style. When she returned to Sydney in early 1842, it was announced in the press that 'her first appearance since her return to the colony' would be as a member of the company of the Australian Olympic Theatre, Luigi Dalle Case's sparkling new tent theatre in Hunter Street.⁵⁴ The Olympic Theatre had faced a number of setbacks, not the least of which was the concerted opposition of Joseph Wyatt, owner of the Royal Victoria Theatre. Wyatt did his utmost to maintain his theatrical monopoly in Sydney, but Dalle Case was finally granted a licence to present theatrical entertainments in his pretty tent theatre, which featured decorative panels painted by the artist John Skinner Prout. Winstanley's decision to join the company of a new theatre in Sydney again suggests her resilience, and her confidence in her own capacity to play a leading role in a risky new theatrical venture. There was an air of excitement around the opening of the Olympic Theatre, which promised an alternative repertoire to Joseph Wyatt's Royal Victoria. Eliza's sister Ann Ximenes was also engaged as a member of the Olympic acting company.

The sisters' commitment to their craft was tested when their father William Winstanley, who had once been a scenic painter at the Theatre Royal, died suddenly at 5.30 p.m. on the opening night of the Olympic Theatre. The Winstanley sisters went ahead with their performance. The *Sydney Gazette* critic writes: 'We were astonished how these ladies could

find nerve enough to continue the performance after receiving so distressing a blow'.⁵⁵ But Eliza Winstanley's first performance at the Olympic was also her benefit night. With so much at stake financially and artistically, she and her sister bounced back and honored their professional commitments. Perhaps Winstanley could not allow her bereavement to jeopardise her debut at the Olympic Theatre. This new professional venture was an opportunity to recover from the disruptive campaign of the Cabbage Tree Mob and cement her reputation as Sydney's star female performer. An echo of Winstanley's resilience and professional ambition is evident in her fiction set in the world of the theatre, where her actress-protagonists are ambitious, each 'with financial requirements and an awareness of her professional worth'.⁵⁶ Indeed, Winstanley claimed that the events and characters in *Shifting Scenes in Theatrical Life* were based on her own experiences in the theatre. In the preface to the novel, Winstanley writes that her narrative is 'founded on facts, gathered in the course of an extensive professional career'. Her characters, she claims, are 'also equally real, but sufficiently disguised in their portraiture, it is hoped, to avoid the charge of ill-natured personality'.⁵⁷ Like the hard-working and skilled actresses portrayed in her theatrical fiction, Eliza Winstanley had a strong drive to work and succeed as a professional artist.

In April 1846, Winstanley made herself a new path when she and O'Flaherty departed for the United Kingdom and America. At the time of her departure from Sydney, Winstanley had been performing as 'Mrs O'Flaherty' for five years. When she made her English theatrical debut at Manchester's Theatre Royal in November 1846, she had reverted to her maiden name, playing as 'Miss Winstanley'.⁵⁸ For the rest of her life she would perform and then write as 'Mrs Winstanley'. After successful seasons in New York and Philadelphia, and then at London's Drury Lane,



Figure 4: Miss Winstanley as Lady Clutterbuck in *Used Up*. *Theatrical Times* (14 August 1847). This theatrical portrait appeared nine months after Winstanley's English debut at the Manchester Theatre Royal. Reproduced with the permission of Senate House Library, University of London.

she was engaged as a member of Charles and Ellen Kean's company at the Royal Princess, where she remained for nine years. It is not known what became of Henry O'Flaherty during this period. It is possible that he earned a modest income teaching violin and Spanish guitar, as he had done after his arrival in Sydney in 1840, or perhaps he found employment in one of London's many theatre orchestras. He appears in the 1851 Census, with his occupation listed as 'Musician'. This census also tells us that O'Flaherty and Winstanley were visiting or staying at 123 Camden Road, the home of Winstanley's sister Ann and her husband Henry Ximenes. The Ximenes had left Sydney for London in 1849, and now lived there with their four-year-old daughter, Eliza. O'Flaherty died in 1854 at the age of thirty-five, and is buried in the old Highgate Cemetery. Over the next decade, Winstanley was engaged as a second-tier performer in London, and became an editor and prolific writer of novels and short stories for 'penny weekly' magazines. By 1865, she was no longer working as a performer, and earned her income as a writer and editor.

Resilience was a quality that Winstanley explored in her fiction, especially in her novels set in the world of itinerant performers, and in the theatres of London, the English provinces and in the Sydney of her youth. Her beautiful actress heroines are brought to the brink of despair, contemplate suicide, and are abducted. They watch their children die of starvation, their husbands kill themselves with drink, and are wrongfully transported to New South Wales. Despite these many trials, Winstanley's heroines bounce back, soldier on, learn their lines, repair their costumes, defend their honour, love unceasingly, their hearts and minds ennobled by the high emotion and ideals of the plays they commit to memory as part of their working lives. Actors and actresses who were born into theatrical families, writes Winstanley in *Shifting Scenes in Theatrical Life*, 'are

constantly in the society of thinkers and brain-workers; they hear daily the language of Shakespeare, Otway, Sheridan, and other great writers, and their plastic minds receive lessons beyond all school-teaching'.⁵⁹ Winstanley also adhered to the 'lessons' and 'best qualities' that she had learnt in the theatre as an adolescent.

Eliza Winstanley returned to Sydney in 1879, perhaps with the intention of spending her old age near her brother Robert and his family. Her working life as an artist had spanned three continents and a vast repertoire. She had been a star on the early Sydney stage, had performed numerous times with the Keans at Windsor Castle for Queen Victoria, and worked with many of the great mid-century performers who trod the boards of America and England in the 1850s and 1860s. Her sensational melodramatic fiction was popular, published under her own name, and was adapted for the stage for successful seasons in the 1860s and 1870s. Yet once she was back in Sydney after thirty-three years, she lived and worked there in relative obscurity, earning her living as the manager of Eldridge's Aniline Dye Works in York Street. In 1882, Winstanley died of diabetes and exhaustion at the dye works. She was sixty-four years old.

Throughout her life, Winstanley demonstrated her knack for adaptability and resilience, traits which complemented her ambition, her work ethic and her high ideals for her profession. Living as a widow for most of her adult life, and working as an actress who saw employment opportunities dwindle as she aged, she displayed an indefatigable belief in her professional self, in her own ability to bounce back. Her particular resilience certainly was, to use her words, born out of 'a high sense of moral duty', and the practice of 'patience under disappointment and the pressure of hopeless difficulties'.⁶⁰ Eliza Winstanley, like Maria Taylor, changed her name to transform her professional self and support her

theatrical identity. Both women achieved critical and popular success, but ultimately Maria Taylor could not sustain a long career. Taylor's buoyant and playful nature, which enabled her to represent emotional truth on the stage, also opened her to life's wilder possibilities, and her choices led her into risky scenarios. Her last months in Calcutta were more flamboyant than Eliza Winstanley's last years in a Sydney dye works, but both women lived productive and creative lives. They made a significant contribution to the development of performance craft and the theatre industry in the first years of the Australian theatre. Their adaptability and determination in the face of professional and personal challenges is an inspiring example for contemporary theatre practitioners. A century and a half later, their industry, skill and resilience impress us now, a beacon shining across the long gaps in our knowledge of Australia's early female theatre practitioners.

NOTES

- 1 *The Colonist and Van Diemen's Land Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser* (3 December 1833): 1.
- 2 Eliza Winstanley, *Shifting Scenes in Theatrical Life* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, 1864) iii–iv. All quotes from this edition.
- 3 Elisabeth Wynhausen, *On Resilience* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2009) 3–6. And following quote.
- 4 Lighting: *Sydney Monitor* (10 January 1835): 2, and Eric Irvin, *Theatre Comes to Australia* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1971) 120; Actors not knowing their lines: *The Australian* (20 September 1836): 2, and *Sydney Monitor* (10 March 1837): 3; Mrs Taylor flirts with an individual in the audience: *Sydney Gazette* (17 October 1837): 2; A member of the audience interrupts a performance of *Hamlet* to demonstrate 'the way the King might have been done': *Sydney Monitor* (15 September 1841): 3; Eliza Winstanley is harassed for four years by the Cabbage Tree Mob: see Richard Fotheringham, *Australian Plays for the Colonial Stage: 1834–1899* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2006) 204, and *Australasian Chronicle* (31 December 1840): 3; Length of theatrical programme: see Irvin, *Theatre Comes to Australia*, 86–7.



Figure 5: *Carte de visite*. Eliza Winstanley, the successful writer in the 1860s. TCS 19 Houghton Library, Harvard University.

- 5 Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991) xi.
- 6 *Ibid* 16.
- 7 Lisa Warrington, 'Acting the Moor: Critical Response to Performances of "Othello" in Australia and New Zealand, 1834–1866', *Australian Studies*, 6 (2014): 1.
- 8 See *Sydney Monitor* (18 October 1834): 3, 'Knowles as Rob Roy played and was dressed worse than any other character we recollect to have seen him enact'; *The Australian* (24 October 1834): 2–3, 'With respect to Mr Palmer, who chose *Richard the Third* on his night, and enacted the chief character himself, we scarcely know whether to commend his courage, or condemn his presumption'; *Sydney Gazette* (24 December 1835): 3, 'The genius of our immortal bard has again hovered over the Sydney boards, but it is too gigantic to be sustained by our theatrical fabric'; *Sydney Monitor* (24 October 1836): 2, 'Miss Douglas, if she were in London, would become a second, if not a first rate actress'; *Sydney Gazette* (15 March 1842): 3, '[T]he Victoria and the Olympic are not Covent Garden and Drury Lane; Knowles is not Macready, Nesbitt is not Kean, Prout is not Stanfield, Sydney is not London. But while we do not compare, we can at least imitate. If we know, or think we know, the cause which produced the great effects alluded to in the theatres at home, why may we not ... put the same causes in operation here, and look with confidence to similar results?'
- 9 Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, 71.
- 10 Taylor's date of birth is not known. The headstone on her grave records her age as twenty-seven at the time of her death in 1841, yet Maxwell claims that she left behind a sixteen-year-old daughter when she died. See C. Bede Maxwell, *Wooden Hookers: Epics of the Sea History of Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1940) 123. Maria Taylor's parents had commenced living together c.1804–05. At some point after the birth of Maria and her two brothers, James Hill abandoned Eliza Atkins and their children, and died in 1817. If the age recorded on Taylor's headstone was intended to be '37 years', this would put her birth date at 1804.
- 11 Phillip H. Highfill, Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans (eds), *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) 1.167–8. And following quote.
- 12 See Paul F. Rice, *Venanzio Rauzzini in Britain: Castrato, Composer and Cultural Leader* (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2015) 192.
- 13 See Graeme Skinner, 'Taylor, Maria Madeline', *Australharmony*. Online: <http://sydney.edu.au/paradisec/australharmony/register-T.php> (accessed 12 February 2016); *Sydney Gazette* (11 March 1834): 2. For reference to rivalry with Braham, see *Colonial Times* (5 November 1833): 2.
- 14 *Evening News* (19 November 1892): 7. And following quote.
- 15 *The Colonist* (5 November 1833).
- 16 *Colonial Times* (25 February 1834): 6.

- 17 *Sydney Gazette* (29 March 1834): 2. And following quote.
- 18 *Sydney Gazette* (18 March 1834): 2.
- 19 *Sydney Gazette* (5 November 1835): 2.
- 20 *Sydney Gazette* (30 January 1836): 3.
- 21 Helen Oppenheim, 'Colonial Theatre: The Rise of the Legitimate Stage in Australia [unpublished typescript] (Mitchell Library, ML Mss 3266, Microfilm reel CY 854) 140–1.
- 22 See *Sydney Gazette* (13 October 1836): 2; *The Colonist* (4 August 1836) 6; *Sydney Gazette* (17 October 1837): 2.
- 23 *The Colonist* (4 August 1836): 6.
- 24 *The Australian* (25 December 1838): 3.
- 25 *The Colonist* (26 December 1838): 3.
- 26 *The Australian* (25 December 1838): 3.
- 27 *The Australian* (8 January 1839): 2.
- 28 *Sydney Monitor* (8 April 1839): 3.
- 29 *The Colonist* (5 November 1833): 3.
- 30 *The Colonist* (22 September 1836): 3.
- 31 *The Colonist* (7 April 1836): 3–4. And following quote.
- 32 For an account of Marianne Cavell's life after her affair with Wilson, see Catherine Bishop, *Minding Her Own Business: Colonial Businesswomen in Sydney* (Sydney: New South Publishing, University of New South Wales, 2015) 163–7.
- 33 *The Colonist* (7 April 1836): 3–4.
- 34 *Sydney Monitor* (9 April 1836): 3.
- 35 Online: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wilson-john-thomas-2804> (accessed 17 February 2016).
- 36 Maxwell, *Wooden Hookers*, 123.
- 37 *Bengal Harkaru* (7 April 1841), in Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsii, *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2010) 24–5. And following quote.
- 38 *Sydney Monitor* (26 November 1841): 4.
- 39 Elliot Walter Madge, 'A Forgotten Calcutta Actress: Madame Maria Dhermainville', *Bengal: Past and Present*, 2.2 (1908): 499.
- 40 *Sydney Gazette* (28 September 1841): 3.
- 41 Holmes & Co. (eds), *The Bengal Obituary: or, A Record to Perpetuate the Memory of Departed Worth* (Calcutta: Holmes & Co., 1851). Online: <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=T-HwSiLns14C&pg=PA280#v=onepage&q&f=false>, 280. I am indebted to Dr Graeme Skinner for this reference. See also <http://sydney.edu.au/paradisec/australharmony/register-T.php>.
- 42 'A Court for King Cholera' by John Leech. Online: <http://www.victorianweb.org/science/health/cholera.html> (accessed 10 April 2016).
- 43 *Evening News* (19 November 1892): 7.

- 44 *Van Diemen's Land Chronicle* (13 August 1841): 2.
- 45 Irvin, *Theatre Comes to Australia*, 176.
- 46 Ellen Douglass Hatch (1812–38) was six years older than Winstanley and made her Sydney theatrical debut at the same time. According to the *Sydney Gazette* of November 1834, she was an actress of 'superior theatrical attainments'. She died after a protracted illness in 1838, at the age of twenty-six.
- 47 *Sydney Gazette* (15 March 1842): 3.
- 48 See Fotheringham, *Australian Plays for the Colonial Stage*, 49–50.
- 49 *Sydney Monitor* (1 January 1841): 2.
- 50 *The Colonist* (3 October 1840): 2.
- 51 *Sydney Monitor* (19 October 1840): 2. And following quote.
- 52 *Cornwall Chronicle* (9 October 1841): 2.
- 53 *Launceston Courier* (20 September 1841): 3.
- 54 *Australasian Chronicle* (5 February 1842): 3.
- 55 *Sydney Gazette* (10 February 1842): 2–3.
- 56 Catriona Mills, 'Women at Work on Page and Stage: The Work of Eliza Winstanley' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2011) 27.
- 57 Winstanley, *Shifting Scenes in Theatrical Life*, iii.
- 58 Irvin cites a *Manchester Examiner* review dated 21 November 1846, which critiques the performance of 'Miss Winstanley' (Irvin, *Theatre Comes to Australia*, 175). A portrait of Winstanley as Lady Clutterbuck in *The Theatrical Times* (14 August 1847) introduces her as 'Miss Winstanley'. In 1849, the *Hobart Courier* reports that while enjoying a successful season at the Park Theatre in New York, 'Mrs O'Flaherty ... has resumed her maiden name'. *Hobart Courier* (14 March 1849): 2.
- 59 Winstanley, *Shifting Scenes in Theatrical Life*, 24.
- 60 *Ibid* iii–iv.

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