

DRAMA

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When I became a Fellow in 1971, Darwin was not an easy place to put on plays. In the Dining Hall, the only practicable indoor venue, there was no stage lighting and no proper stage. A small acting area, with a simple set, could indeed be set up opposite the entrance. But with no backstage area, and the Entertaining Room the only dressing room, performers had to enter and exit through the audience. And for many of the audience, ranged along the dining tables, and sideways on to an unraised stage, those entrances and exits were often the most visible parts of a show, especially when the performance required actors to sit or lie down.

Nor could we easily make plays more visible by staging them in the round in the centre of the Hall. Not because we had to put the dining tables against the walls and rearrange all the chairs: that was manageable, even if the consequent delay tempted diners to seek postprandial entertainment elsewhere. The real problem was lighting. With no overhead lighting bars, stage lights could only be mounted on floor stands which, since they had to be set aside for meals, had to be replaced, re-angled and re-focused for each performance. More seriously still, they couldn't be high enough to downlight a central stage without blinding the surrounding audience.

Two innovations solved some of these problems. One was the lighting bars that still top the Dining Hall walls, with movable spotlights on them that can be placed, angled and focused as required. Sockets for these are wired to sockets in the alcove by the Hall entrance, where a portable console can be used to design and run lighting plots. The other, which alleviated the sightline problem, was the acquisition of stage blocks to form raised stages to make performances visible to more people. None of this of course made Darwin Hall a proper theatre. It couldn't be blacked out; there were still no proper dressing rooms, nor anywhere to prepare or store sets, props or costumes; and performances fitted round meals inevitably entail a tedious shuffling of tables and chairs, and a small ill-furnished stage with little if any wing or backstage space.

What Darwin drama needs is an auditorium which, like Robinson's, is as well-designed for plays and concerts as for lectures. There need be no lack of good plays to put in it, judging by the list in Figure 1 below, ranging from Chekhov (*The Bear* and *The Proposal*) to *Lord of the Rings* (sic!). All of these productions were staged in the Hall except for *Aria da Capo*, staged in the Old Library, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, in the garden. The *Dream* I recall especially: a magical production in June 1990, with the audience seated in a circle between the Hall and the copper beech while the action went on all round them.

The only other productions I remember as vividly, because I was involved in them, were done in the 1980s. Some were shorts, staged within mainly musical entertainments, like Stoppard's 10-minute abridgement of *Hamlet* in Darwin's 1982 May Week concert, and Shaw's *How He Lied to Her Husband* in the 1983 concert. Others were longer, like a captivating 1985 adaptation of part of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, directed by François Penz, whose characters, in an urban setting, were not animals but people. But for me the highlights of 1980s Darwin drama were two plays from *The Hour of One*, a collection of Gothic melodramas published in 1975. One was the 1986 production of H. M. Milner's 1826 adaptation of Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, featuring a green-lit monster behind a gauze, melodramatic acting to match, and a brilliant realisation (on the Hall's balcony) of as much as was safely feasible of the final stage directions –

The Monster ... rushes up to the apex of the mountain [Etna] – the Soldiery rush in and fire on him – he immediately leaps into the Crater, now vomiting burning lava, and the Curtain falls.

The other, three years earlier, was of J. R. Planché's 1820 *The Vampire, or The Bride of the Isles*, set in Scotland, and predating Bram Stoker's *Dracula* by seventy-seven years. That too, as Figure 3 shows, had satisfyingly over-the-top acting.

A projected production of *Dracula* itself nearly followed in 1995, but in the end didn't, prompting Donald Nicolson, to whom Darwin drama owes so much, not only as an actor, but as a lighting designer, set builder and archivist, to an elegy:

*Iste comes notus, qui non – sic fabula dicta –
umquam mortem obiit, Dracula vivit adhuc,
mox surrecturus per scaenam Darwinianam
ut nostri actores drama iterum facient?
Nam credebamus vivum illum etiam bene habentem
esse in Purfleeto. Non tamen est ita. Vae?
Quae ratio est? Tandem est caesus vereque sepultus.
Fixa Apathia sudes lignea pectori inest.*

(Does Dracula still live, that famous count who – so the story is told - has not ever met death, soon to rise again on the stage of Darwin, when our actors once again perform a play? For we believed he was still alive and well in Purfleeto. It is not so however. Alas! What is the reason? At last he has been slain and truly buried. The wooden stake of Apathy lies fixed in his breast.)

Donald's elegy proved depressingly prophetic, since apathy killed off Darwin drama too at the end of the last century, since when it has produced no new productions. It will be a sad reflection on a once-cultured graduate community if today's Darwinians fail to revive the proud tradition of drama recorded in Figure 1.

Year	Month	Days	Dates	Title
1985	March	W, F	13, 15	<i>Winnie-the-Pooh</i>
1986	February	W, F	19, 21	<i>The Fate of Frankenstein</i>
1987	December	W-F	4-6	<i>The Gypsy's Revenge</i>
1988	March	W-F	2-4	<i>The Castle Spectre</i>
1989	March	W-F	1-3	<i>Lysistrata</i>
1990	March	W-F	7-9	<i>The Bear and The Proposal</i>
	June	W-Sa	20-23	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
	November	Tu-Sa	6-10	<i>The Persians</i>
1992	May	W-F	6-8	<i>The Marriage of Figaro</i>
	December	W-F	2-4	<i>A Day in the Life of...</i>
1993	March	W-F	24-26	<i>The Real Thing</i>
1994	December	M-W	5-7	<i>Mandragola</i>
1995	December	F, Sa	1-2	<i>The Bald Prima Donna and The Room</i>
1996	May	Th-Sa	9-11	<i>Aria da Capo</i>
	December	Th-Sa	5-7	<i>The Physicists</i>
1997	December	W-Th	3-4	<i>Dogg's Hamlet</i>
1998	June	Th-F	18-19	<i>Lord of the Rings</i>
	November	M-Th	23-26	<i>A Man for All Seasons</i>
1999	February	Th-Su	25-28	<i>Amadeus</i>
	June	Tu-Sa	15-19	<i>The Tempest</i>
2000	November	W-Th	29-30	<i>The Terrible Fate of Humpty Dumpty</i>

Figure 1: Darwin Drama 1985–1999



Figure 2: *Frankenstein*: Donald Nicolson as the Creature



Figure 3: *The Vampire*