

Theatre

James Moran

D.H. Lawrence was the author of eight full-length theatre scripts and two unfinished dramatic pieces:

- 1) *A Collier's Friday Night* (written 1909)
- 2) *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* (drafted 1910, revised 1913)
- 3) *The Merry-go-Round* (written 1910-11)
- 4) *The Married Man* (written 1912)
- 5) *The Fight for Barbara* (written 1912)
- 6) *The Daughter in Law* (written 1913)
- 7) *Touch and Go* (drafted 1918, revised 1919)
- 8) *Altitude* (incomplete play, written 1924)
- 9) *Noah's Flood* (incomplete play, written 1925)
- 10) *David* (written 1925)

Yet Lawrence enjoyed scant success with these works in production, and when he died in 1930, only two of his playscripts had ever reached the stage. An amateur group in Altrincham gave the UK premiere of *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* in 1920, leading Lawrence's friend Catherine Carswell to complain that aspects of the play were 'theatrically unacceptable'.¹ Seven years later, the Stage Society premiered *David* in London, and the *Observer* moaned that 'We were bored, bored, bored'.²

¹ A Correspondent [Catherine Carswell], "'The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd", an Amateur Performance', *The Times*, 12 March 1920, p.14. Carswell, *The Savage Pilgrimage: A Narrative of D.H. Lawrence* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), p.135.

² St John Ervine, 'The Week's Theatres', *Observer*, 29 May 1927, p.15.

Furthermore, only three of his plays could be read in print during Lawrence's lifetime. His first published play, *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*, appeared in 1914; followed by *Touch and Go* in 1920; and *David* in 1926. But this is a bewilderingly disparate group of scripts. *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* dates from the early period of Lawrentian playwriting when his dramatic impulse set him exploring the realistic dynamics of domestic Eastwood. *Touch and Go* is a political play of 1918-19 about labour relations that draws heavily on Lawrence's novel *Women in Love*. *David*, meanwhile, is a late-stage, highly experimental biblical drama which incorporates music and chanting as part of a proto-Brechtian montage. Nonetheless, in 1933 Martin Secker published this jarringly diverse trio of plays together under the seemingly definitive title '*The Plays of D.H. Lawrence*'.

Little surprise, then, that for many years a low estimation of Lawrence's playwriting tended to guide his critics, with Lawrence's drama often being viewed as the poor relation of his writing in other forms. Richard Aldington, for example, knew Lawrence well, and in 1950 wrote that, aside from *David*, 'I don't think he had any real "theatre" in him. The play was not his form'.³ When Lawrence's literary reputation was being forged and debated by key critical figures such as F.R. Leavis, the plays were largely absent from the discussion.

By contrast, Lawrence himself treated the world of the stage with great seriousness, and had an abiding interest in practical theatre-making. He would long remember one of his earliest childhood memories: watching a touring version of *Hamlet* when he

³ Aldington, *D.H. Lawrence: An Appreciation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), p.30.

was about seven years old. The young Lawrence had felt fascinated by Old Hamlet, who intoned:

‘‘Amblet, ’Amblet, I am thy father’s ghost.’

Then a voice from the audience came, cruelly disillusioned:

‘Why tha h’arena – I can tell thy voice.’

Then I wanted to go dismally home – it was all untrue, and the Ghost wasn’t a ghost.⁴

That production of *Hamlet* was given a clear local inflection (‘Amblet’), with the dialect and audience interaction suited to the East Midlands, and Lawrence’s own theatrical work would strive for something of Shakespeare’s dramatic achievement, with Lawrence often relocating quotations or plot-lines from Shakespeare to the distinctive twentieth-century context of Eastwood.

Lawrence’s youthful enthusiasm for Shakespeare was endorsed by Jessie Chambers, with whom Lawrence spent time play-acting at Hagg’s Farm, rehearsing the lines from *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, and *Hamlet*. By November 1909, Lawrence had shared with Jessie his earliest dramatic script, *A Collier’s Friday Night*, which drew extensively on his own family home in Eastwood. In Lawrence’s play, real-life Eastwood had merged with Shakespearean impulse, and so we find the son of a Nottinghamshire mining household, Ernest, who enjoys a Hamlet-style bond with his

⁴ Lawrence, ‘The Theatre’, in Lawrence, *Twilight in Italy and Other Essays*, ed. by Paul Eggert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.69-80, p.77.

mother, making the father jealous. Jessie Chambers herself was fictionalised as Maggie Pearson in the play, and confessed that this drama 'troubled me deeply'.⁵

After *A Collier's Friday Night*, Lawrence went on to write another four plays with a similar setting. *A Collier's Friday Night*, *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*, *The Merry-go-Round*, *The Daughter-in-Law*, and *Touch and Go* all take place in or around recognizable versions of Lawrence's hometown. Yet Lawrence was no parochial writer: he was also a prolific reader of European drama, and his scripts draw upon that wider range of material. For example, Lawrence felt deeply affected by a short play by the Irish writer, John Millington Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, and Lawrence tried his hand at writing his own version of that drama. Hence in Lawrence's work *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* we find a number of close parallels with Synge's play: both scripts feature mother-figures who mourn in similar ways, and both scripts culminating with the arrival and exposure of a dead body.

What characterises D.H. Lawrence's early playhouse scripts, then, is the vivid Eastwood dialogue that Lawrence knew from his own time in the area; as well as a colourful collection of characters who often display a Shakespearean wit and profundity; and an unsentimental view of provincial life that recalls the no-holds-barred approach of J.M. Synge. Nonetheless, Lawrence remained a playwright who could potentially have grown yet more theatrically sophisticated. His best-known scripts undoubtedly reveal structural problems that may have been ironed out by a writer who had managed to gain experience of working professionally with actors and directors. The plot of *A Collier's Friday Night*, for instance, could really have done

⁵ Chambers, *D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* by E.T. (London: Frank Cass, 1935), p.109.

with reshaping to allow a more complete narrative arc to emerge, whilst the final pages of *A Daughter-in-Law* resolve the story with such alacrity that it is difficult to avoid the impression that the writer had simply grown tired of the script.

Indeed, Lawrence sometimes revised the endings of his plays in a way that perhaps shows something of the neophyte dramatist's uncertainty. In the handwritten manuscript of *The Daughter-in-Law* which is now held at New York Public Library, Lawrence changed the very last words of this script. Originally the character of Luther had the final line:

Minnie. Oh my love! (She takes him in her arms)

(He [Luther] suddenly begins to cry saying Minnie, Minnie!)

Curtain.⁶

But Lawrence then crossed through the lines 'saying Minnie, Minnie', making the ending – and Luther's reconciliation with his wife – decidedly less affirmative.

Similarly, Lawrence changed the final words of his later play *Touch and Go*:

Lawrence originally planned that in that script the colliery manager would, after a violent confrontation with the workers, promise that 'I'll put up notices tomorrow about what we'll do'.⁷ Yet in the revised version, the same character makes no such vow, and instead, when he is reminded that the workers remain dissatisfied about existing levels of inequality, he simply demands that they move away from him.

Likewise, Lawrence continued revising *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* for a long time

⁶ NYPL, Berg Collection, 59B6782, D.H. Lawrence, *The Daughter-in-Law*, Holograph Play, Signed, Undated, 63P, fol.63.

⁷ *Touch and Go* Autograph Manuscript, Nottingham University Manuscripts and Special Collections, La-L-13/3/2, f.71.

after he had first penned it in 1910, declaring in April 1913 that ‘It wants *a lot* of altering. I have made it heaps better’ (*Letters* II, 58).

Lawrence’s uncertainty about how to bring his dramas to the attention of theatre makers and into the practical realm of playhouse production also appears to have discouraged him from focusing very much on writing for the theatre as he went beyond his late twenties. Indeed, Lawrence had an almost comical run of bad luck when trying to interest producers in his dramatic writing. In 1911, he sent copies of his first three plays to the writer and critic, Ford Madox Hueffer, emphasizing that these plays were designed to be seen on the stage. As Lawrence told Hueffer, *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* was ‘an act-able play’ and *The Merry-go-Round* ‘shall be playable’ (*Letters* I, 199).⁸ But rather than assisting Lawrence, Hueffer’s only response was to lose two of the three scripts, which were the only copies of the plays in existence.

Hueffer did eventually retrieve those papers, and forwarded *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* to the influential theatre-maker Harley Granville Barker. Granville Barker had made his name by producing uncommercial drama that, as Desmond MacCarthy puts it, took ‘a critical and dissenting attitude towards contemporary codes of morality’.⁹ But Lawrence’s play now appeared in Granville Barker’s hands with terrible timing, just at the moment when the producer had no need for such work. The previous year, Granville Barker had tried to run a repertory theatre based on new work ‘all grounded in a naturalistic style’, which would have dovetailed with

⁸ See also Violet Hunt, *The Flurried Years* (London: Hurst & Blackett, [1926]), p.151.

⁹ MacCarthy, *The Court Theatre* (London: A.H. Bullen, 1907), p.15.

Lawrence's approach: but that season had proven a box-office disaster and had been critically savaged because 'the morbid and the sour-visaged predominated'.¹⁰ When Granville Barker read Lawrence's script, the director was instead enjoying a smash hit with Shaw's comedy *Fanny's First Play*, a play that would pack in audiences throughout the year.¹¹ Barker therefore returned his copy of *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* with a note saying 'read it with much interest but afraid I don't want it' (*Letters* I, 298).

Lawrence drew a similar blank with Ben Iden Payne, another theatre director who appeared well suited for Lawrence's work. After all, Iden Payne had worked at playhouse with a reputation for staging work in non-standard English that dealt with life outside metropolitan locations, having been employed at Dublin's Abbey Theatre and its English offshoot, Annie Horniman's company at the Manchester Gaiety. Lawrence certainly thought the fit was a good one, declaring his excitement about the prospect of working with Iden Payne: 'it's ripping to think of my being acted' (*Letters* I, 384). However, like Granville Barker, Iden Payne failed to offer a proposal of a production, merely suggesting changes to one of Lawrence's existing scripts, and Lawrence found his attention drawn away from Iden Payne in London theatreland by that burgeoning relationship with Freida Weekley.

Thus, by the end of 1913, it appeared that the prospect of a successful production of Lawrence's plays had receded over the horizon. Lawrence also found himself being guided away from writing new plays and towards writing new novels instead by

¹⁰ Dennis Kennedy, *Granville Barker and the Dream of Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.100-101.

¹¹ C.B. Purdom, *Harley Granville Barker* (London: Rockliff, 1955), p.127.

Edward Garnett, a figure who nursed his own bitter experience of trying to get dramas staged in the playhouse. Thus, after 1913, Lawrence increasingly focused his attention elsewhere, and after that year he only wrote two more full-length scripts during the rest of his life.

Nonetheless, a love of acting and charades remained with Lawrence. For many subsequent years he continued creating theatrical roles in domestic settings with friends including John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield, Richard Aldington, and Hilda Doolittle ('H.D.').¹² The artist Dorothy Brett remembered watching Lawrence acting opposite the professional American actor Ida Rauh in New Mexico, and viewed the two performers as 'stars'.¹³ Mabel Dodge Luhan felt that 'The only time he appeared to relax' was at tea-time dramatic performances, remembering fondly that 'He loved to act and was perfectly unselfconscious about it [...] We used to laugh until we were tired'.¹⁴

Indeed, it was his contact with theatre makers that tempted Lawrence back towards the dramatic form when he created his final full-length plays. He created *Touch and Go* in 1918 in the wake of having befriended the playwright Herbert Farjeon, and he drafted *David* in 1925 as a play for his actor-friend Ida Rauh. By contrast with the naturalism of the early dramatic scripts, it is clear that by this end-point in his playwriting career, Lawrence was searching for a theatrical technique that moved

¹² For detail of some of those private theatrical performances see John Middleton Murry, *Between Two Worlds* (London: Cape, 1935), pp.321-22. Lawrence, *Letters II*, 256. Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *D.H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.425.

¹³ Brett, *Lawrence and Brett: A Friendship* (London: Martin Secker, 1933), p.52.

¹⁴ Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Lorenzo in Taos* (Santa Fe: Sunstone, 2007), p.68, p.190.

more closely towards ritual, montage, and music; and drawing on ideas that would reach a clearer articulation in the work of Artaud and Brecht.¹⁵

Although Lawrence wrote only two full-length plays after 1913, his theatrical concerns are also manifested in his novels that are based around characters who regularly perform in theatres, such as in *The Lost Girl* and *The Trespasser*.

Lawrence's repeated references to the playhouse in other novels and short stories; the lively self-presentation of his own character in his letters; and the dialect voice of his poetry, also attest to his deeply theatrical temperament. In fact, Lawrence's entire writing career is bookended by two singularly theatrical pieces of work. An amateur acting show is the subject of the very first text Lawrence ever published – his short story, 'A Prelude' – which the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* printed in December 1907. And at the other end of his career, an amateur acting show was also the subject of the very last story that Lawrence ever completed, when he drafted 'The Blue Moccasins' in the summer of 1928. Today, indeed, many people will have encountered Lawrence's work for the first time not through reading his words on the page, but by seeing one of the many dramatic versions of his novels on film or television.

Furthermore, since the second half of the twentieth century, a subset of Lawrence's plays have belatedly enjoyed success when staged in the playhouse. In the 1960s, a young playwright and director, Peter Gill, heard second-hand reports about Lawrence's drama *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*, and thought that he might like to produce it. Gill was then working as assistant director at the Royal Court and

¹⁵ I have explored these connections more thoroughly in *The Theatre of D.H. Lawrence: Dramatic Modernist and Theatrical Innovator* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp.82-83, pp.132-33, pp.112-13.

believed the piece would suit the playhouse, so contacted the British Drama League to request a copy of the script. By mistake, the League sent him another Lawrence play, *A Collier's Friday Night*, which Gill read and found beautiful, and decided to stage at the Royal Court in 1965.¹⁶ Gill's pared-down and relatively modest production was well received, and so he opted to follow up that work by producing a version of *The Daughter-in-Law*, which had just been published by Heinemann. At about this time, Gill also realised that *The Daughter-in-Law*, together with *A Collier's Friday Night* and *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*, might form a trilogy of work all set in the domestic spaces of mining towns that resemble Eastwood. Between February and April 1968 Gill therefore staged these three plays together in repertory for a season at the Royal Court, and received much praise from critics. When Heinemann had first published Lawrence's complete plays in 1965, the *Times Literary Supplement* commented in a withering review that 'this volume will hardly increase his reputation or win him new friends'.¹⁷ Yet after the Royal Court had started to put the trilogy into production, Irving Wardle wrote in *The Times* that Peter Gill had 'exploded' the idea 'Lawrence the dramatist could safely be ignored', with Wardle finding himself 'amazed that such a work could have been neglected'.¹⁸ Since that time, the plays of this 'Eastwood Trilogy' have tended to be grouped together, although no-one – including Lawrence himself – had a conception of these plays forming a tripartite whole before Gill's recovery work.

Of course, the British theatrical landscape of the mid-1960s was ripe for the discovery of Lawrence as a playwright. The appearance of Lawrence's work at the Royal Court

¹⁶ See Peter Gill, 'A Director's Perspective: Peter Gill, in Conversation with James Moran', in James Moran, *The Theatre of D.H. Lawrence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp.143-55, p.146.

¹⁷ Gomme, Andor, 'Writing the Play', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 November 1966, 1041.

¹⁸ Wardle, 'Lawrence Play with a Strindberg Touch', *The Times*, 17 March 1967, p.12.

came in the wake of John Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back In Anger*, a contemporary, realistic drama about the dissatisfactions of existence in the English Midlands.

Osborne's success – followed shortly afterwards by that of Arnold Wesker – heralded the arrival of the 'angry young men', who felt willing to offer a penetrating critique of society, even if that analysis involved the upsetting or unpalatable. By these lights, as one later critic put it, Lawrence was producing 'kitchen sink drama from a time before most people had indoor plumbing'.¹⁹ When John Osborne himself handed Peter Gill an award for the Lawrence productions, Osborne reportedly commented that the shows 'were so good that even critics couldn't fail to see their quality'.²⁰

Peter Gill had thus brought into the theatrical repertoire three of Lawrence's scripts that were largely unknown. After all, only one of these works – *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* – had appeared onstage or in print before Lawrence's death in 1930. The second of those plays, *A Collier's Friday Night*, was unpublished until 1934, and remained unseen onstage until 1939, when it was presented by an amateur group in Yorkshire. Meanwhile the original text of the third script, *The-Daughter-in-Law* – praised by both director Richard Eyre as Lawrence's 'masterpiece' and by Lawrence's biographer Mark Kinkead-Weekes as arguably 'Lawrence's best, and his most original play' – went neglected for more than half a century after its composition before being published in 1965.²¹ But after Gill's intervention, the three plays were staged in a variety of venues during the ensuing years, with *The Widowing of Mrs*

¹⁹ 'A Little-Known Gem from D.H. Lawrence', *Stoke Sentinel*, 1 October 2012, <
<http://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/little-known-gem-d-h-lawrence/story-17014953-detail/story.html>>
[accessed 9 October 2016].

²⁰ Osborne quoted by Michael Billington, *The 101 Greatest Plays: From Antiquity to the Present* (London: Faber, 2016), p.263.

²¹ Richard Eyre, 'Foreword', in James Moran, *The Theatre of D.H. Lawrence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp.iix-x, p.ix. Kinkead-Weekes, *D.H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.60.

Holroyd being named by the National Theatre in 1998 as one of the ‘100 Plays of the Century’; *The Daughter-in-Law* being named in 2015 by Michael Billington as one of the world’s ‘101 Greatest Plays’; and Gill’s Lawrence trilogy being named by Benedict Nightingale in 2012 as one of the ‘Great Moments in the Theatre’, ranking alongside the first performances of *Hamlet* and *The Oresteia*.²²

Subsequently, one of the most radical restagings of Lawrence’s drama came on 19 October 2015, when the National Theatre opened a theatre piece by the Eastwood author in a particularly well-resourced staging at the Dorfman auditorium. The show ran here in London between October 2015 and January 2016, and subsequently at the Royal Exchange in Manchester in February and March 2016. For this production, titled *Husbands and Sons*, the National Theatre engaged the film-star Anne-Marie Duff in one of the leading roles, brought in the high-profile director Marianne Elliott, and engaged as dramaturg the *Wunderkind* figure of Ben Power, who had been appointed deputy artistic director of the theatre half a year before the show opened.

The production won a great deal of critical praise. In the *Stage*, Natasha Tripney called the show ‘potent and atmospheric’ and ‘never less than engaging’; whilst in the *Independent*, Paul Taylor described ‘A magnificent evening of revelatory marvels’, and added, ‘I would happily have watched this quietly towering three-hour achievement all over again’.²³ The *Daily Telegraph* had, in 1994, condemned D.H.

²² Warren Roberts and Paul Poplawski, *A Bibliography of D.H. Lawrence*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.24. Billington, pp.263-66. Benedict Nightingale, *Great Moments in the Theatre* (London: Oberon, 2012), p.140.

²³ Tripney, ‘Husbands and Sons Review at the National Theatre – Potent’, *Stage*, 27 October 2015, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2015/husbands-and-sons-review-at-the-national-theatre-potent/>> [accessed 14 September 2016]. Taylor, ‘Husbands and Sons, Dorfman, National Theatre, Review’, *Independent*, 28 October 2015, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/husbands-and-sons-dorfman-national-theatre-review-a-magnificent-evening-of-revelatory-marvels-a6712056.html>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

Lawrence's playwriting as the work of an 'appalling bearded loony' whose theatre comprised 'a hilarious parody of all the clichés of Northern working-class drama'.²⁴

Yet in 2015, the *Daily Telegraph*'s reviewer Dominic Cavendish now described *Husbands and Sons* as a 'compelling evening' of 'gritty lyricism and hard-won wit'.²⁵

Of course, D.H. Lawrence had never actually written a play called *Husbands and Sons*. This production was a composite piece, which melded together the three works of the 'Eastwood Trilogy' that Peter Gill had brought to popular attention in the 1960s. The production of *Husbands and Sons* at the National Theatre in 2015-16, then, reprised the same theatrical trilogy that Peter Gill had established, but significantly reinterpreted the work. In Gill's production of the trilogy, as one of his actors remembered, 'Water steamed when it came from the hob, meals steamed and there was a wonderful smell of freshly baked bread and Yorkshire pudding'.²⁶ By contrast with such naturalistic precision, the 2015-16 National Theatre production presented an in-the-round set with houses largely rendered as schematic diagrams on the floor, and actors miming the opening of doors, the eating of food, and the putting on of outdoor clothing. This was Lawrence's theatrical vision updated for audiences in the era of Dogme filmmaking, when teaching of Brechtian theory had become widespread in British schools, and when European theatre directors had grown accustomed to making increasingly creative decisions about the playwright's script. After all, according to the theatrical philosophy that had, by this time, become primarily associated with German theatre, the literary text is ripe for adaptation and

²⁴ Spenser, 'A Long, Bad Friday with D.H. Lawrence', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 July 1994, p.16.

²⁵ Cavendish, 'National Theatre Dorman, Review', *Telegraph*, 28 October 2015
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/husbands-and-sons-national-theatre-dorman-review/>> [accessed 14 September 2016].

²⁶ Eddie Peel quoted by Nightingale, p.140.

should only be the starting point of any director's interpretation. For example, when Thomas Ostermeier directed *Richard III* in 2016, he observed that, 'it has become possible to tell the play's full narrative even without all the business of the battle that makes up the play's final 20 or so pages'.²⁷ This approach, then, was also the one taken by Ben Power in bringing Lawrence's work to the stage of the National Theatre in 2015-16. Power spliced and moulded Lawrence's texts to allow certain thematic resonances to develop, and the boldest editorial interventions came at the end of *Husbands and Sons*, when the pit death that we originally find in *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* brings together the characters from Lawrence's three different plays.

Although some might baulk at such significant structural changes being made to the work, Lawrence himself had acknowledged that some of his playwriting might need 'weeding out a bit' (*Letters I*, 500-501), and suggested that 'My idea of a play is that any actor should have the liberty to alter as much as he likes – the author only gives the leading suggestion' (*Letters I*, 509-510). Ultimately, the critical acclaim which greeted Ben Power's work in 2015-16, as well as the praise heaped on the very different approach of Peter Gill fifty years earlier, showed that Lawrence's scripts – like the greatest works of the English stage – retain the capacity to be revisited and reclaimed by theater-makers of contrasting styles, and to speak anew to audiences in different historical and cultural contexts. We might remember, of course, that Lawrence himself had a profound wish for his dramatic writing to appear before live audiences. After he had completed his final play *David* in May 1925, Lawrence

²⁷ Ostermeier, 'Embodying Dark Desires', *Richard III*, *Schaubühne Berlin, Lyric Theatre Programme* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh International Festival, 2016), p.22.

declared, 'I am a bit tired of plays that are only literature [...] I wrote this play for the theatre, and I want the theatre people to see it first' (*Letters* V, 274).