



Theatre

Pinero's A Wife Without a Smile, October 1904

Pinero's A Wife Without a Smile, banned thanks to a 'jigging' doll, at Wyndham's Theatre, October 9 1904

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There can't be many plays that have been banned on account of a dancing doll, but Arthur Wing Pinero's "comedy in disguise", *A Wife Without a Smile*, suffered precisely that fate. The clue was in the stage directions: the doll was not just any doll but a toy bought by Pinero's hero Seymour Rippingill in an attempt to cheer his humourless wife.

So keen is he to make her smile that when his friends come to visit, he bores a hole in his own ceiling, ties a string to the springs of the upstairs sofa and attaches the other end to the doll, so that, as the *Illustrated London News's* critic drily pointed out, the doll "acts as indicator of the different degrees of amorousness of persons using the couch". Occasionally, this went so far as to result in a "wild jigging".

As a way of representing sex on stage, it seems pretty decorous now. The couple was married, the sex was implicit rather than explicit and it was, after all, a farce. At first the critics didn't seem to mind. Pinero was, as the *Illustrated London News's* critic put it, "our premier dramatist" and while his social dramas (such as *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*) had made him a rival of George Bernard Shaw, he was most famous for his farces.

The *Times* defined the doll as an "erotometer" but the *Illustrated London News's* critic protested that there was no need "to take [the] joke, even if it is rather broad, at more than its face-value". He went so far as to nominate "the doll itself" as "the most important member of the cast at Wyndham's and the most popular". His only cavil was that Dion ("Dot") Boucicault, son of the flamboyant Irish actor-playwright of the same name, was "too serious an actor for farce" and wasted in the role of the joker husband.

The Observer also pitied Boucicault, who was required "to laugh consumedly" during the first act "an invidious task". Its critic concluded that "it was the dancing doll that won the trick"; the toy was funnier than Pinero's "glancing wit" or his "gallery of contemporary foibles". The only person who wasn't laughing was the wife (played by Lettice Fairfax), who cracked only a smile when it transpired that her marriage to Rippingill was, quite literally, a farce - his previous marriage had not been properly annulled.

The trouble came on October 15, when Brigadier Surgeon Lieutenant-Colonel JBB Myers wrote to Lord Clarendon, the Lord Chamberlain, in a fury. He hadn't seen the play; he had only read a review of it in the Sunday Referee, but he was incensed. "There can be but one inference from the movements of the dancing doll in plain language of sexual intercourse taking place," he wrote. "If my surmise be correct could anything be more repugnant to every sense of decency?"

Clarendon went to see the play and concluded that: "Although the doll incident might be indelicately construed, it might also be regarded as a childish accessory." But a week later, a review appeared in The Free Lance under the headline The Dirty Drama, describing the doll as "grossly indecent", and the play as the latest in a slippery slope "from Ibscenity to unashamed obscenity". The critic also singled out Clarendon for not having "saved the British stage a greater degradation than it ever suffered at the hands of the Restoration dramatists".

Clarendon started to lose the courage of his convictions and arranged a meeting with the management at Wyndham's, who vowed to take action and told him that they had "moderated the transports of the doll considerably". But this was not enough; Clarendon came under pressure from so many people (including the Bishop of London, who asked him "to relieve London of what many felt to be a degrading spectacle") that he withdrew the play's licence, forcing it to close.

It didn't significantly dent Pinero's glittering career; he continued to be the toast of the West End, and five years later, after the success of another farce about marital distress, Mid-Channel, he was knighted. But there doesn't seem to have ever been a revival of The Wife Without a Smile.

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