Introduction: Why Conrad’s Plays?

Of all things, why Conrad’s plays? Why write about such an unfulfilled enterprise if not downright failure? What’s the point of venturing into such a shallow and stagnant backwater of both literary and theatrical history?

There is no doubt that Conrad’s dramatic oeuvre is modest: the one-act *One Day More* (performed 25–27 June 1905); the two-act *Laughing Anne* (written in 1920 but not produced in his lifetime) and his only full-length play *The Secret Agent* (performed 2–11 November 1922). But in addition we are justified in including Basil Macdonald Hastings’s dramatisation of *Victory* (performed from 26 March to 6 June 1919) in a study of Conrad’s theatre because Conrad was actively involved in the project in an advisory and creative capacity. These four works will form the focus of this study and together they provide a rich terrain for analysis. All four works are “reconstructed fictions”: adaptations of two short stories and two novels which represent a full range of Conrad’s fiction. The book also provides an opportunity to discuss neglected works like “To-morrow” and “Because of the Dollars” as well as the chance to offer new readings of novels more securely in the canon: *Victory* and *The Secret Agent*. The dramatisation of these works is a complex process with far-reaching implications regarding Conrad’s craft and the type of drama that he aspired to: all of the plays, regardless of result or reception, were nothing if not ambitious. The plays certainly not only exploit existing theatrical conventions such as melodrama but can also be appreciated as endeavouring to challenge the traditional and well-made drama of the period: in these plays we find surprising precursors to the Theatre of the Absurd and echoes of and parallels with theatrical Symbolism, Grand-Guignol and Expressionism that are best understood within a world more than British context. All
of Conrad's plays feature women in central roles and as Susan Jones writes:

In his plays, *One Day More* and *Laughing Anne*, Conrad explores the issue of female entrapment in the web of domestic relations and the histories of male identity. (Jones, 1999, 56)

This comment can be easily extended to include *The Secret Agent* and *Victory*, and, taken as a whole, in Bessie, Anne, Winnie and Lena we find fascinating examples of stage heroines in the epoch of the “New Woman” in theatre.¹ Conrad's plays are more comfortably European or signpost what will happen in modern theatre: just as Conrad is an innovative proto-modernist of fiction, it seems that his small collection of plays suggest, albeit fragmentarily, the various directions that modern theatre will follow. Even if this argument is contentious, Conrad's plays are certainly remarkable for their resistance to the contemporary trends of British theatre: he wrote the plays that he desired and consequently they are not in the least Shavian and neither do they echo, despite expectations, the dramatic works of John Galsworthy or J. M. Barrie. However, even if Conrad's process of writing and adaptation produced peculiar works of drama, this small body of drama received the direct attention and even involvement of many of the greatest luminaries involved in the British theatre of the period: George Bernard Shaw, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, William Archer, Max Beerbohm, J. T. Grein, Marie Löhr, Russell Thorndike and so on.

Conrad's interest in the performing arts was not restricted to the four plays we will be analysing. Conrad's only published translation from Polish was his rendition of Bruno Winawer's play *The Book of Job* (1921). In 1920 (although he had entertained the idea since 1915), Conrad adapted “Gaspar Ruiz” into his only screenplay *Gaspar the Strong Man*. It was never filmed but remains a nonetheless remarkable exploration of a comparatively new media by a writer who would die in 1924. It also becomes apparent with further investigation that Conrad considered but declined other dramatic enterprises in his career including collaborations with Stephen Crane and Perceval Gibbon, and even an original play about a faked old master painting. Conrad feels a “great longing” (CL6, 28) to adapt *Under Western Eyes* in early 1917 and, around the same time, wants to “launch myself out single-handed” (CL6, 31) as a playwright with an adaptation of *The Arrow of Gold*. But even as early in his writing career as 1897 Conrad confesses, “I greatly desire to write a play myself. It is my dark and secret ambition” (CL1, 419).