Conclusion: A Terribly Searching Thing

It is all too easy to pull Conrad’s plays apart. In fact, it is a traditional sport that begins with the theatre critics who sharpened their pens with acerbic delight at the prospect of a great “man of letters” straying into their domain of the London stage. This attitude can subsequently be traced through John Galsworthy publishing, in the year of Conrad’s death appropriately enough, what amounts to a depressing obituary of Conrad’s drama, a lead followed by generations of literary critics. There are problems with his plays: as an adaptation a play like *The Secret Agent* is perhaps overly loyal to the original novel and yet the greatness and ingenuity of the source is compromised by the play’s strict chronological linearity. Some of Conrad’s suggestions for *Victory* may attempt to reconstruct the complexity of the novel but, as Neill R. Joy, suggests, they present “psychoneurotic intricacies (that) would tax a master dramatist” (Joy, 2003, 213). Some of Conrad’s dialogue is possibly afflicted with the fault that in 1923 Shaw locates as a redeemable but stubbornly peculiar fault of many self-adapting novelists: “there is a literary language which is perfectly intelligible to the eye, yet utterly unintelligible to the ear even when it is easily speakable by the mouth” (James, 1949, 765). But Conrad had his defenders and we should not forget that many of the theatre reviews were not as thoroughly negative as they are usually assumed to be (including by Conrad). Max Beerbohm, Arnold Bennett and leading adapters of our own time like Christopher Hampton have recognised the innovative quality of Conrad’s plays but were also not surprised that the British theatre context contemporary with Conrad stifled them out of existence. As Alison Wheatley argues:

> Early distaste for his innovative dramaturgy can be explained by a contemporary preference for the well-made play. However, the
continued critical neglect of Conrad’s three plays is less easily explained since, in all three, he not only experiments with genre, transforming his own story or novel into drama, but stretches theatrical conventions, mirroring characters’ sometimes unconventional attitudes towards social standards and boundaries, and giving his plays characteristics of modern absurdist drama that present-day audiences more readily accept. (Wheatley, 1999, 1)

It is to be hoped that Wheatley’s robust defence of the Conrad plays signals the way forward. Regarding Wheatley’s comment that Conrad’s plays are proto-absurdist, we must concur but can extend matters further: as a whole, Conrad’s plays are extremely eclectic and intertextual.

We have seen Conrad’s scorn for certain figures in the history of world drama that are generally perceived as being of monumental importance, such as Ibsen and the realist stage, or Maeterlinck and Symbolist theatre. But Conrad is ambivalent: he is disparaging towards Grand-Guignol and the way it “destroyed the imagination” (Allen, 1967, 86), yet the prospect of a practical British experiment in this quintessential form of French popular theatre makes Conrad feverishly run to his desk and write his own dramatic experiment in Grand-Guignol. Moreover, it is clear that Conrad assimilates, appropriates and reflects major developments and tensions in modern drama in his modest body of ambitious plays. In the mood and orchestration of One Day More we see thematic features of Symbolism and technical evocations reminiscent of Impressionism and Expressionism. In Laughing Anne and The Secret Agent we witness a struggle between the forms of melodrama, Grand-Guignol and Expressionism. In The Secret Agent we also find a thematic manifestation of the clash of political and social ideology and the depiction of matrimonial collapse, themes that have been seen in Ibsen and Strindberg and will reverberate in Ernst Toller, Jean-Paul Sartre and beyond. Certainly, Conrad was not dictated to by fashion: he wrote the type of plays that he wanted to write and he was generally resistant to patronising or pandering to the audience. The fact that Henry James never did this – and his plays were an unmitigated failure – is best illustrated by his statement on the methodology of the dramatist: “your maximum of refinement must meet the minimum of intelligence of the audience… the intelligence, in other words, of the biggest ass it may conceivably contain” (James, 1949, 52). Conrad did not fall into this trap with the result that the plays he did write were too original and disturbing for many people. Perhaps this makes Conrad’s plays excitingly unorthodox, or maybe George Bernard Shaw’s statement