

A Delightful Realist: Stanley Houghton

By Maya Cantu

An industrious playwright from Manchester, Stanley Houghton (1881-1913) “startled England with the brilliant originality of his comedies of Lancashire life” (*The New York Times*), as well as with the sensational 1912 debut of his enduring *Hindle Wakes*. Blending truthfully observed, dialect-driven realism with shrewd comic grit and “supremely sophisticated dexterities” (*The Manchester Guardian*), Houghton wrote over a dozen plays, many of which called for women’s sexual and economic freedom.



Stanley Houghton (1881 - 1913)

Born on February 22, 1881 in the town of Ashton-upon-Mersey, Cheshire, William Stanley Houghton moved as a child to bustling Manchester, where his father prospered as a cotton merchant. After graduating from Manchester Grammar School—where he distinguished himself, despite delicate health, as a prize-winning student—Houghton entered his father’s business as a commercial clerk. However, he devoted most of his spare hours to the theater. As an amateur actor, Houghton appeared in dozens of roles with the Manchester Athenaeum Dramatic Society, while writing one-act plays. In 1905, he was hired to

write stage reviews for *The Manchester City News*, soon after becoming assistant drama critic for *The Manchester Guardian*.

Under the aegis of theater manager Annie Horniman, who pulled his one-act comedy *The Dear Departed* (1908) from out of “a fearsome pile of manuscripts” (*The Stage*), Houghton professionally picked up his playwright’s pen. He soon became the most popular resident playwright at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, founded by Horniman as Great Britain’s first repertory theatre. With his first full-length play, *Independent Means* (1908), Houghton introduced the free-thinking “woman of ideas” animating his work. He also stimulated the Gaiety’s audiences with *The Younger Generation* (1910), a portrait of youth in gentle revolt, as well as the Wildean one-act comedy *Fancy Free* (1911). *The Guardian* called *The Younger Generation* (to be presented as a Mint Further Reading on February 5th) “a veracious and highly amusing piece of social satire” in which “the realism is delightful.”

As produced by Horniman, the controversial 1912 London premiere of *Hindle Wakes* at the Incorporated Stage Society, and then Coronet and Playhouse Theatres, launched Houghton as one of his generation’s preeminent young dramatists. Although many critics proclaimed *Hindle Wakes* the year’s best play, its themes of female sexuality provoked letters of outrage (the play, wrote “Another Playgoer” in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, “produced in me the sensation as if someone had spat in my face”), while the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University attempted to put the play “out of bounds.” Although a commercial failure on Broadway, *Hindle Wakes* played to sold-out audiences at Chicago’s Fine Arts Theatre in 1913, and earned praise from American critics. *The New York Times’* Lucian Cary observed, “Mr. Houghton has written the freshest drama in a long time.”

Now able to quit the Manchester cotton trade, Houghton embraced newfound fame in London. Despite the failure of two full-length plays contracted by West End managers, *The Perfect Cure* and *Trust the People* (1913), many critics considered his prospects undimmed. *The British Review’s* Edward Storer urged Houghton to create “an artistic representation of metropolitan life” away from the “fertile but savage North.” Instead, Houghton fled to Paris, where he applied his wry and attentive eye to an (unfinished) first novel, *Life*. In the novel, heroine Maggie Heywood longs to escape provincial “Salchester,” and to “see all sorts of life. I only see such a little narrow side of it now.”

Tragically, Houghton fell seriously ill while staying in Venice. After a series of complications from viral pneumonia, he died in Manchester of meningitis on December 11, 1913, at the age of thirty-two. *The New York Press’s* Robert Allerton Parker memorialized the Manchester playwright: “The death of Stanley Houghton has taken away a real force in making the English drama cosmopolitan rather than insular, in widening its appeal while deepening its insight.” On February 15, 1915, the woman with whom Houghton’s work was so closely intertwined—producer Annie Horniman—unveiled a memorial tablet at Manchester’s Central Reference Library, inscribed with lines from his 1910 play: “The younger generation is bound to win. That’s how the world goes on.”

From the Abbey to the Gaiety: The Shocking Miss Horniman

In the midst of *Hindle Wakes’* controversy, its producer described herself to the censorious Vice Chancellor of Oxford as a “London suburban dissenting middle-aged middle-class spinster.” Annie Horniman (1860-1937) never married and frequently dissented, as she pioneered the English repertory theatre with her passion for new plays drawn from

real life. In her varied establishing roles with the Abbey Theatre and, then, the Gaiety Theatre, “Miss Horniman” was, according to George Bernard Shaw, “the lady who really started the modern movement.”



Annie Horniman (1860 - 1937)

Raised in a prominent family with Quaker roots, Annie Elizabeth Fredericka Horniman was born in Forest Hill, London, on October 3, 1860. Her father, the tea merchant, museum founder, and politician Frederick John Horniman, encouraged Annie’s independent spirit and devotion to women’s suffrage. Starting in 1882 as a student at London’s Slade School of Art, “Tabbie” flamboyantly embodied the New Woman: “she smoked, she bicycled, she went to theaters, she belonged to a secret mystical society, she studied astrology,” according to biographer Sheila Gooddie. Belonging to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, she befriended fellow member William Butler Yeats.¹

That close friendship, as well as her continental travels, pivoted Horniman to the stage. In Germany, she admired a culture of municipal theatre, and, as Rex Pogson notes, “the natural ways in which the theatre was treated as an integral part of ordinary daily

life.² Awakened to the new realist drama of Ibsen and Shaw, Horniman anonymously financed an 1894 London season at the Avenue Theatre that included Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire* and Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (the latter's commercial breakthrough). In 1904, she accompanied Yeats to Dublin to sew costumes for his *The King's Threshold*, and to support the emerging Irish National Theatre Society of Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J.M. Synge.

Here, Horniman transformed the modern stage with her funding of the Abbey Theatre. She not only commissioned an all-Irish architecture and design team but pledged the company a generous annual subsidy. However, Horniman received little credit for her work with the Abbey. Self-conscious about her Englishness, Horniman declined to appear at the playhouse's opening night on December 27, 1904; she later permitted her name to be excluded from the Abbey's board of directors. As the Abbey shaped itself into a beacon of Irish nationalist drama, with increasingly little welcome for Horniman's input, she withdrew from the company.

Wounded by her experience with the Abbey, yet inspired by its example, Horniman returned to more familiar English grounds. She resettled not in London but in Manchester: a thriving industrial and cultural hub also on the vanguard of suffrage, labor, and social reform movements. Teaming in 1908 with B. Iden Payne as the company's founding Artistic Director, Horniman converted the Gaiety music hall into Great Britain's first repertory theatre. Horniman became synonymous with the Gaiety, dazzling opening-night theatergoers in her high-necked, brocade gowns. Yet she led the theater with collaborative openness and practical expertise, symbolized by the sailing ship above the Gaiety's stage.

Over the course of nine years, the Gaiety presented an eclectic rotation of classics and topical new plays. Horniman also cultivated the "Manchester School" of regional playwrights, led by Stanley Houghton,

Harold Brighouse, and Allan Monkhouse, whose *Mary Broome* premiered in 1911. The Gaiety's renown soon inspired the formation of repertory companies in Glasgow, Liverpool, and Birmingham. Following several visits to Canada and the United States (where visits by the Gaiety nurtured the development of the Little Theatre Movement in Chicago), the Gaiety produced the spectacular 1912 London premiere of Houghton's *Hindle Wakes*.

Ironically, *Hindle Wakes's* success played a role in dispersing the Gaiety's famous ensemble, as the company moved increasingly "from a single city's delight into a universal provider of intelligent drama" (*The Manchester Courier*). After the theater's permanent closure in 1920, Horniman retired from active theater production. She received a Champion of Honour distinction in 1936, and died at her home in Surrey, on August 6, 1937. According to Goodie, "the letters that appeared in the press after her death suggested that Miss Horniman would be remembered more for her distinctive style of dressing than for her pioneer work for British drama."

In recent years, Annie Horniman's legacy has drawn increasing recognition for what Edward Garnett anticipated, in 1909, as her "potent and far-reaching influence:" as a nurturer of new plays, a trailblazer of the repertory theatre and Little Theatre movements, and a theater manager of exemplary inspiration. The playwright Eden Phillpotts observed in 1912: "... You are emphatically a great artist and the weird power to make your fellow artists greater than they would have been had they not known you, is creative." As a close collaborator with Stanley Houghton, Annie Horniman's less visible but no less distinctive artistry and vision contributed greatly to the vitality of *Hindle Wakes*.

¹ Sheila Goodie, *Annie Horniman: A Pioneer in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1999).

² Rex Pogson, *Miss Horniman and the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester* (London: Rockcliff Publishing, 1952).

JEREMY BECK (*Alan Jeffcote*) London's West End: *Shakespeare's R&J* (Arts Theater). Off-Broadway: *The Cocktail Party*, *Widowers' Houses*, *She Stoops*, *The Gravedigger's Lullaby* (with TACT, company member); *Girl Crazy* (Encores!); *Betrayed* (by George Packer, Culture Project); *Bury the Dead* (Transport Group); *Pink* (SPF); *The President and Her Mistress* (Abingdon). Regional: *Wittenberg* (Peterborough Players) *Quartermaine's Terms*, *She Loves Me*, *A Flea In Her Ear* (Williamstown); *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *She Loves Me* (Huntington); *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* (1812); *The Notebook of Trigorin*; *The Field* (Keegan). Other/Off-Off: *Couriers and Contrabands* (by Victor Lesniewski); *Beowulf – A Thousand Years of Baggage* (A.R.T. & U.K. tour with Banana Bag & Bodice); *The Ring Cycle*; *A Dog In The Manger* (co-adaptations with David Dalton); *Forth* (by Tommy Smith); *The Second Tosca* (by Tom Rowan) Film: "Gods and Generals"; "The Stressful Adventures of Boxhead and Roundhead" (independent animated feature). Television: "Law & Order"; "Person of Interest"; "Unforgettable".

REBECCA NOELLE BRINKLEY (*Fanny*) is a New York City based actress and fight choreographer and an alum of the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Recent credits include "Law and Order SVU" (dir. Alex Chapple) *Dead Man Walking* (dir. Francesca Zambello) at the Washington National Opera, "Shifting Gears" (dir. Jason Winn), "The Three Musketeers" (dir. Jeremy Skidmore), "Street Scene" (dir. Carl Forsman). A huge thank you to everyone involved in the production, and an even bigger thank you to Gus Kaikkonen for all of his time and care.

EMMA GEER (*Beatrice Farrar*) Off-Broadway: *How To Transcend a Happy Marriage* (Lincoln Center Theater); *Where has Tommy Flowers Gone* (Workshop Theater). Regional Theater: *4,000 Miles* (Shakespeare & Company); *Up the Hill* (The O'Neill); *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Madison Repertory Theater); *Peter and the Starcatcher* (Smith-

town Performing Arts Center). Film: "In The Treetops" (world premiere at the Los Angeles Film Festival, 2015). Graduate of The University of North Carolina School of the Arts, 2016. Website: emma-geer.com

JONATHAN HOGAN (*Nathaniel Jeffcote*) The Mint: *The Madras House*, *A Picture of Autumn*, *London Wall*. Broadway: *Comedians*, *Otherwise Engaged*, *Fifth of July*, *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*, *As Is* (Tony and Drama Desk nominations for Best Actor), *Burn This*, *Taking Steps*, *The Homecoming*. Circle Rep: *The Hot l Baltimore*, *The Mound Builders*, *Balm in Gilead* (in collaboration with Steppenwolf – Drama Desk Award for Best Ensemble). Other performances Off-Broadway include *Book of Days*, *Molly Sweeney*, *Pocatello* (2015 Drama Desk nomination for Outstanding Featured Actor), and Kenneth Lonergan's *Hold Onto Me Darling* (Lucille Lortel Award nominee for Outstanding Featured Actor). Films and Television: "In Country", "The House On Carroll Street", "A Fish In The Bathtub", "Revolution #9", several "Movies of the Week", "L.A. Law", "Quantum Leap", all the "Law & Orders", "House of Cards", "40 North", and next year's "Woody Allen's Summer Project". Mr. Hogan is a graduate of The Goodman Theatre and School of Drama.

SARA CAROLYNN KENNEDY (*Ada*) was born in Kansas City and based in New York City. This is her Off-Broadway Debut! Other credits include: *Wittenberg*, *Doctors Dilemma* (Peterborough Players), *Shout!*, *Quilters* (Maples Repertory Theatre), *MotherFreakingHood!* (Moonshine Variety Co.), *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (The Coterie Theatre), *Hands on a Hardbody*, *Heathers* (Unicorn Theatre), and *The Addams Family Musical* (New Theatre Restaurant). Special thank you to the *Hindle Wakes* team for having me and to my amazing family: Mom, Dad, Scott, Bethany, and Vik! Sarackennedy.com @SaraCKenn.