

“A Most Dreadful Position:”¹

Amateur Reputations in a Professional World

EILEEN CURLEY

By 1890, Mary Nevins Blaine, the estranged daughter-in-law of United States Secretary of State Blaine, had moved to New York to embark upon a professional acting career, but was sidelined by illness. In February, Daniel Frohman and other theatre community members produced a benefit performance for Blaine, who was financially struggling to support herself and her young son due to rheumatic inflammation. The actors in the final benefit performance included amateurs and professionals, but Frohman dropped the amateur performers, Alice and Rita Lawrence, from the event, claiming a full bill. In response, Alice Lawrence sent a panicked letter not to Frohman, but to Herbert Kelcey, his leading man. In this letter, she claimed innocence (about unclear infractions), disparaged Frohman, and begged Kelcey to save her reputation with others in the Lyceum Company. Her tantalizing letter reveals the proximity of amateurs to the professional stage while implying concerns over the propriety of this connection. The source of her histrionic defensiveness and the potential taint to her reputation remains unclear, however. The sisters hired professional coaches and sometimes actors for their amateur charity theatricals; a mixed performance was not scandalous. And yet, the letter hints at unspoken concerns about a nebulous and potentially damaging interpretation of the sisters' involvement, be it their motives for participating in the benefit, the performance environment, or perhaps the choice of charity.

Alice Lawrence's letter to Herbert Kelcey alludes to events and presents some facts that can be corroborated by other documents in the historical record. On Tuesday, 18 February 1890, a benefit performance was held in the Broadway theatre for Marie Nevins Blaine, a socialite turned performer who was meant to lead a professional company on a tour for Daniel Frohman during the 1889–1890 season.² Her decision to go on the stage appears to have led to the estrangement of the couple, although her divorce pleading in 1891 suggested that her husband abandoned her.³ Blaine was thus separated from her husband when she fell ill in the fall of 1889, thereby preventing her debut under Frohman. The benefit performance consisted of

signed letter. Please read it, and show it, and this letter of mine, to Mr Wheatcroft. He saw me on Monday evening with Miss Layman, after I had left Mr Frohman, and I could not possibly speak to him. I did not know what sort of a person Mr Frohman

was, or I would not have entered into the affair. I send this to you instead of Miss Layman, because I know she would not care to take the trouble to send Mr Frohman's letter back to me, which I will ask you to please be sure and do. Also show it to Mrs Kelcey, if she still feels any interest in us -
Yours very sincerely
Alice Lawrence.

58, WEST ELEVENTH ST.

My dear Mr Kelcey,

I send this to the theatre, as I do not know your address now. I want to tell you what has happened, for Mr Frohman has told me so many lies of late, that I do not know how he speaks of us - if he has spoken at all.

He asked us to play for the Blaine benefit - we did not seek it in any way. He acknowledges this, both to Papa and myself,

and in his letter. We expected to go with pleasure to the Blaine benefit, and to enjoy seeing it. Not content with that, Mr Frohman led us into it, tricked us into it, and then insulted us in the eyes of the other amateurs. He saw me three times, talked it over most conclusively, let me send for Mr Morrell, arrange with Mr de Cordova, a professional, who was sent me by Miss Otis, also let us engage Mr Bond to coach us - we engaged him on our own account, as no coach, of course, was allowed by the management.

I asked Mr Frohman on Saturday if any changes were possible, as I was to see Mr Bond and the others Sunday evening. He assured me it was all right. I made all arrangements, and then on Monday, he sent his secretary to say he did not want us. I did not know such discourtesy was possible - I have never heard of such a thing before. Papa and I went to his office on Monday evening, and he ^{got from him} ~~gave~~ a letter of explanation to show our case - towards whom I am placed in a most dreadful position. I send you a copy of Mr Frohman's

multiple acts, including performances by Mrs. Kendal, Richard Mansfield, The Lyceum Theatre Company and at least two shows contributed by amateur performers who were friends and sometimes co-stars with the Lawrence sisters in amateur theatricals.⁴ Lawrence's letter claims that Frohman had requested their participation but then dropped them from the bill, and a typed statement that Frohman issued to the Lawrences confirms this version of events.⁵ That the Lawrences were originally part of the bill is clear from the letter to Kelcey, the statement from Frohman and an early announcement about the benefit that clearly lists the Lawrences as participants.⁶ Thus, scholars can piece together a production history, but the interpersonal relationships and character slights at which the letter hints remain hidden from view.

In the case of this letter, the historian's quest to divine the background situation is hampered by a number of difficulties, not the least of which is the relative lack of extant documentation available for amateur theatre performances. Archival practices privilege commercial theatre, and yet the historian of amateur theatricals is provided with significantly more information about the Lawrence performances than most amateur productions through a number of sources: the Lawrence sisters' scrapbooks, housed at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, newspaper coverage of amateur theatricals in New York in the 1880s and 1890s, and Rita's 1936 memoir. The fact that Alice and Rita chose to format their scrapbooks as an archive of information about their amateur theatrical career provides invaluable documentation, but programs, reviews, receipts and correspondence can only hint at the underlying social issues which seem to have driven their production choices and which clearly haunt Alice's letter to Herbert Kelcey. Rita's memoir partially augments the story, but the social issues that might explain Alice's tone and panic in the letter remain largely unspoken in each of these sources. Further, while many of the involved parties are well known to theatre historians, the Lawrences are not, except insofar as they have recorded their amateur theatrical careers in the scrapbooks and memoir.

Even though it is clear that Alice meant to save evidence of this dispute, the letter to Kelcey is one of only two items in the scrapbooks about the conflict or the benefit; the other is a statement from Frohman about the event. None of the scrapbooks contain any other information about the Blaine benefit; however, this is not particularly remarkable, as the scrapbooks are almost entirely a record of *their* theatrical activity. A few other notable scandals punctuate the sisters' theatricals, archived variously: sometimes the documents relating to these affairs were collected together in one envelope that was pasted into the scrapbook; later, archivists removed most loose materials, documents, and photographs for preservation purposes; sometimes the empty envelope remains in the scrapbook. In this case, the envelope labeled "Frohman" is included with the letter in a separate archival folder, and page 65 of Alice's first scrapbook contains materials from late 1889 and early 1890, as well as a section where it appears an envelope might have been removed.⁷ This envelope and Alice's request that Kelcey "care to take the trouble to send Mr Frohman's letter back to me"⁸ implies that she intended to save a record of the event as a distinct conflict with Frohman. The letter to

Kelcey might be an original or a copy, but the crossed out section where she replaces “gave us” with “got from him”⁹ points, perhaps, towards this particular document’s status as a draft or a copy maintained, in either case, for posterity.

While this episode is a sufficiently important event for Alice and Rita to intentionally document in their historical materials, a minor dispute with two amateur performers does not appear to factor heavily into the broader historical record.¹⁰ What seems to be an emotionally charged episode for the amateurs was apparently a momentary business hiccup to Frohman. Upset by the decision, Alice and her father went to Frohman to get a written explanation, which enables us to learn why Frohman says that he dropped them from the bill: “I regret that my action in the making up of the programme necessitated my having to omit from the bill the last three attractions secured. . . . in order to make no distinction I was compelled by reason of securing several important professional attractions, to curtail the programme on account of its length, and omit several important features.”¹¹ Why they were cut seems logical from a producer’s standpoint, and other materials support Frohman’s claim about the length of the program. Initially advertised as a 2 pm start,¹² the start time was pushed back to 1 pm and a series of reminders of the “unusual length” of the event appears in articles leading up to the benefit: “Holders of tickets for the testimonial performance for the benefit of Mrs. James G. Blaine, Jr., at the Broadway Theatre this afternoon are requested by the ladies of the committee to be in their seats early. The unusual length of the programme will compel the raising of the curtain promptly at 1 o’clock.”¹³ As predicted, the performances “closed just before dinner time,”¹⁴ with the Lyceum Company production of the comedy *Gabrielle* serving as the final piece of the bill.¹⁵

This apparently simple business decision does not, however, resonate well with Alice’s response in her letter to Kelcey, and this is where her letter becomes most problematic for the historian, who has no ability to truly divine what was driving Alice’s panic. Potential hints are scattered throughout the letter, but none lead to a conclusive interpretation of the event or her reaction. Envisioning that Alice thought they were dropped because of a perceived slight on her talent makes some sense at first, but little in either letter suggests that as a root cause of her distress. Alice writes that “Mr Frohman . . . insulted us in the eyes of the other amateurs,”¹⁶ while Frohman comments that he needed to make space for “several important professional attractions.”¹⁷ This combination of comments could be construed as a suggestion that the other amateurs, many of whom did indeed eventually turn professional,¹⁸ were somehow more talented than the Lawrences. But, so little of Alice’s letter addresses talent or the other amateurs that this interpretation remains easy but unsatisfying.

Parallel content in her letter and his statement suggests that her concern might center not on talent but instead on how the sisters came to be part of the original bill. Alice, after calling Frohman a liar, repeatedly protests that she and Rita did not ask to be part of the bill: “He asked us to play for the Blaine benefit—we did not seek it in any way. He acknowledges this, both to Papa and myself and in his letter. . . . Mr Frohman led us into it, tricked us

into it.”¹⁹ The statement which she and her father “got from” Frohman “to show our cast”²⁰ echoes this concern: “Last Wednesday I asked the Misses Lawrence to take part in a benefit that is being gotten up for Mrs. Blaine for February 18th. They did not volunteer their services.”²¹ Were they seen as presumptuous or crossing boundaries by offering their services, or did Alice suspect this might be the case? Such character aspersions, perceived or real, might be sufficient to cause Alice to react so vehemently to Frohman’s decision and to feel a need to protect her reputation. If not a critique of their talent, then is there, hidden within the lines of the letter, some condemnation of the Lawrences’ aspirations and increasingly elaborate charity theatrical productions?

By 1890, the Lawrences had established reputations as amateur performers who would loan their talents and fundraising abilities to a variety of charitable organizations. They regularly performed theatricals in public theatres, raising thousands of dollars for charities across greater metropolitan New York and in summer resorts. There was, however, a lull in their public performance activity during the fall and winter of 1889–1890; rather than the usual series of fully-staged entertainments at the holidays and in the late winter, they participated in a few parlor events and variety nights. Alice’s defensive declarations to Kelcey that they did not seek this performance opportunity, combined with the production lull, might suggest a parental or societal condemnation of their activities; however, there is simply no concrete evidence to suggest why they were not performing as much in the months leading up to the Blaine benefit. Their production habits returned to normal levels shortly after the Blaine benefit as well, so if this lull was related, then it was short-lived. Furthermore, their parents approved their participation in the Blaine benefit.

Another potential source of scandal might have been that the sisters would have performed in public alongside professionals. Alice notes that they “expected to go with pleasure to the Blaine benefit, and to enjoy seeing it,”²² but perhaps performing in the benefit might have appeared unseemly while attending it would not have been problematic. This notion is quickly undermined by their production history, for they had already performed alongside professionals in charity productions and hired professionals such as Frederick Bond, Nelson Wheatcroft, and David Belasco as coaches and stage managers. In the previous spring, they had even thanked Daniel Frohman for allowing them to perform in the theatre in a program from April 11, 1899.²³ Two of Frohman’s Lyceum Company members, Walter Bellows and Mrs. Thomas Whiffen, also appeared in this benefit performance, albeit in the second show on the bill, *A Wild Idea*; Alice and Rita performed in the first show, *The Dead Shot*, but their performance record up until this point reveals that working with professionals apparently had not been problematic.

This relationship with the professional stage seems to be the crux of Alice’s concern in the letter, but why? After all, not only had they hired and performed with professionals, they quite clearly had ongoing relationships with multiple members of Frohman’s company. The whole final section of the letter is full of pleading to save their reputations with the company

members, which seems to contradict the story they told Frohman during their visit. Indeed, Frohman's statement does not mention the professionals Alice hired for this production; instead, he suggests that the Lawrences told him that they were concerned about how he "apparently placed[d] them in a somewhat distressing position with the friends whom they had asked to assist."²⁴ While Alice does write, briefly, about the cast, "towards whom I am placed in a most dreadful position,"²⁵ this line seems almost a throwaway when it is followed by a full discussion of how she would like Kelcey to show her letter and Frohman's statement to others in the Lyceum Company. The letter to Kelcey is an attempt to clear her name with the members of the company, revealing a relationship that is further underscored by her very first comment: "I send this to the theatre, as I do not know your address now";²⁶ clearly she used to know it. Rita's memoir confirms the closeness of their relationship with the Kelceys but without time references.²⁷ Mrs. Caroline (Hill) Kelcey was to attend a matinee with Rita in early February 1890, but she reportedly fell ill.²⁸ Does this missed matinee have anything to do with the concurrent Blaine situation, or am I looking for connections that are not there? Was she ill, was she embarrassed by their behavior, or is Alice blowing things out of proportion when she includes as the last line of her letter: "Also show it to Mrs. Kelcey, if she still feels any interest in us."²⁹ The letter seems to point mostly towards Alice's desire to remain untainted in the eyes of the Lyceum Company, but what had she done to deserve the opprobrium that she so clearly feared? Why attack Frohman and, frankly, why were those choice words not seen as problematic?

As noted above, the Lawrences left more than the usual amount of information about their amateur theatricals, and I had hoped that Rita's memoir might shed some light on the situation. It does not:

After we had been acting many times at the Lyceum, Mr. Daniel Frohman, who had always been so nice to Alice and to me and whom we liked very much, suddenly became offended at something and withdrew the offer he had made to have us play at a Charity benefit in which Elsie de Wolfe and Miss [Elita] Proctor [Otis] were to have separate plays. He wrote an apology immediately afterwards and a letter to show our company but he did not explain what had angered him or who had made the trouble between us. After that, he continued to give us the Lyceum Theatre whenever we wished it, and everything was done for our comfort as before. We were never sure who had made the trouble between him and ourselves.³⁰

Clearly, a memoir published 45 years after the event is an equally troublesome document. Rita's narrative is rarely marked by historical placeholders and is structured in a stream of consciousness fashion. Her tone, throughout, reveals a fascination with the commercial theatre and a frustration with gender dynamics of the period. Despite her gloss on the situation, lingering damage to their relationship with Frohman is implied by the historical record, although it is unclear whether his refusal to include them in the bill or Alice's reaction was the source of their failed relationship. For, while Rita writes in her memoir: "he continued to give us the Lyceum Theatre whenever we wished it, and everything was done for our comfort as before,"³¹

there is a distinct reduction in their use of the Lyceum after the Blaine Benefit. While the sisters staged seven events at the Lyceum Theatre between 1887 and the Blaine Benefit in February 1890, they appear to have staged just one more event on 9 May 1890. After this time, the sisters continued to use a variety of theatres, as they had prior to 1890, but a significant number of their shows were staged at the Berkeley Lyceum and the Madison Square Theatre and notably not at the Lyceum Theatre.

Rita's implication that someone spoke ill of the sisters does parallel another odd situation at the Lyceum in the late winter of 1890, though. Operating underneath and concurrently with the Blaine benefit saga was the disintegration of Belasco's relationship with Frohman and the Lyceum over Mrs. Leslie Carter, yet another actress who might have been too close to Alice and Rita's social standing and theatrical desires. Winter suggests that Georgia Cayvan was responsible for Frohman's edict that Belasco no longer rehearse with Carter at the Lyceum; Belasco resigned at the end of March, 1890.³² The Lawrences, too, had worked with Belasco over the years, and yet historians are left to reach for connections here that cannot be proved, grasping at what may be mere coincidence.

Thus, the only significant differences between the Blaine benefit and the Lawrences' other charity productions were the nature of the charity and the fact that this was a professional bill to which they had been invited rather than vice versa. While the professional setting might be problematic for their reputations, the mixed nature of the bill and the participation of their fellow amateur performers—with whom the Lawrences performed regularly—renders it less likely that society might have condemned their choice.³³ The reviews offer no critique to support this notion either. This particular charity opens up a potential line of inquiry that is also potentially undermined by that very same critique. Thus, I am left wondering whether the letter is an over-reaction by someone that Nelson Wheatcroft reportedly called "too super-sensitive"³⁴ or if we can read anything into her unspoken fears. Was Marie Nevins Blaine, fallen socialite and ill would-be actress who never embarked on her professional career somehow an inappropriate charity? Or, were the sisters inappropriately attempting to parlay their relationships with the Lyceum into pseudo-professional acting opportunities? For an historian looking for reasons behind the seeming scandal which causes Alice's reaction in the letter, the events at the Lyceum Theatre in late winter of 1890 provide an alluring if unclear layering of society women interacting with the professional stage, despite lingering societal and familial concerns that a professional stage career might have been an inappropriate choice for members of the New York elite, as it certainly was for the Lawrences in the eyes of their parents.³⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York. I must extend my grateful thanks to the staff at the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library for their assistance with this collection over the years. This paper was made possible in part by grants received from Martin Shaffer, Dean of Liberal Arts, and Thomas Wer-

muth, Dean of Faculty, at Marist College. I am also indebted to my research assistants at Marist, Amy Jacaruso, Thomas Lotito and Ashleigh Whitfield, for their assistance corralling traces of the Lawrences from the contemporary press and constructing a performance history.

² "Mrs. Blaine Too Ill to Act," *New York Times*, 30 August 1889, 5. See also "Mrs. Blaine an Actress," *The Pittsburg Dispatch*, 29 January 1889, 6; "Theatrical Gossip," *New York Times*, 11 September 1889, 8; "Stage Whispers," *The Pittsburg Dispatch*, 15 September 1889, 12; "Marie Blaine's Wrongs," *New York Times*, 30 September 1889, 1; "Farce at the Lyceum," *New York Times*, 22 October 1889, 5.

³ For various interpretations of their marital woes and financial situation, see for example: "Marie Blaine's Wrongs," *New York Times*, 30 September 1889, 1; "Young Blaine's Answer," *The Salt Lake Herald*, 7 October 1891, 1; "Mrs. Blaine's Divorce Suit," *The Sun*, 5 December 1891, 3; "Marie Blaine is Firm," *Pittsburg Dispatch*, 24 December 1891, 7.

⁴ See, among others, "Young Mrs. Blaine's Benefit," *New York Times*, 19 February 1890, 4.

⁵ Daniel Frohman, Statement about Alice M. and Rita Lawrence, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

⁶ "Theatrical Gossip," *New York Times*, 2 February 1890, 16.

⁷ Alice Lawrence to Alice Lawrence book 1, 1874–1890, 65. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Flat Box 281. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

⁸ Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

⁹ Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

¹⁰ A brief mention that Frohman asked Belasco to train Blaine in 1888 appears in William Jefferson Winter, *The Life of David Belasco*, vol 1 (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918), 340. The episode is not mentioned in his memoir, Daniel Frohman, *Memories of a Manager* (New York: Doubleday Page, 1911). The Lawrences are largely absent from searchable archival finding aids, aside from their own, which is logical from an archival standpoint since they are not well-known entities in the theatre of the time.

¹¹ Daniel Frohman, Statement about Alice M. and Rita Lawrence, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

¹² "Advertisement," *New York Times*, 5 February 1890, 7.

¹³ "Theatrical Gossip," *New York Times*, 18 February 1890, 8.

¹⁴ "Young Mrs. Blaine's Benefit," *New York Times*, 19 February 1890, 4.

¹⁵ "Cavalier Georgia Cayvan," *New York Times*, 17 February 1890, 8.

¹⁶ Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

¹⁷ Daniel Frohman, Statement about Alice M. and Rita Lawrence, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

¹⁸ In particular, Elita Proctor Otis and Elsie de Wolfe turned professional over the next few years. Edward Fales Coward continued to act as an amateur but wrote professionally about the theatre.

¹⁹ Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

²⁰ Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

²¹ Daniel Frohman, Statement about Alice M. and Rita Lawrence, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

²² Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

²³ Alice Lawrence, Alice Lawrence book 1, 1874–1890, 63. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Flat Box 281. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

²⁴ Daniel Frohman, Statement about Alice M. and Rita Lawrence, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York

²⁵ Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

²⁶ Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

²⁷ Rita Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors of the 19th-20th Centuries (American, English, Italian)*. (Menton, France: Imprimerie Mentonnaise, 1936), 119.

²⁸ Herbert Kelcey to Alice M. Lawrence, [4 February 1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

²⁹ Alice Lawrence to Herbert Kelcey, [1890]. Alice and Rita Lawrence Papers 1874–1935. Box 1. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

³⁰ Rita Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors of the 19th-20th Centuries (American, English, Italian)*. (Menton, France: Imprimerie Mentonnaise, 1936), 159.

³¹ Rita Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors of the 19th-20th Centuries (American, English, Italian)*. (Menton, France: Imprimerie Mentonnaise, 1936), 159.

³² William Jefferson Winter, *The Life of David Belasco*, vol 1 (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918), 367–369.

³³ However, it is worth remembering that some of those other amateurs did eventually turn professional.

³⁴ Rita Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors of the 19th-20th Centuries (American, English, Italian)*. (Menton, France: Imprimerie Mentonnaise, 1936), 148

³⁵ Throughout her memoir, Rita comments upon how their father tolerated their theatricals and enjoyed them, but would never have permitted them to have a professional career. Their mother, on the other hand, reportedly viewed the stage as a viable profession, but only in the event of destitution. See, for example: Rita Lawrence, *Amateurs and Actors of the 19th–20th Centuries (American, English, Italian)*. (Menton, France: Imprimerie Mentonnaise, 1936), 147.