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# 1

## *Actress: early performing career*

She was a queer-looking child, handsome, with a face suggesting all manner of possibilities. When she stood up to read the speech from *Richard II* she was nervous, but courageously stood her ground. She began slowly, and with a most 'fetching' voice, to *think* out the words. You saw her think them, heard her speak them. It was so different from the intelligent elocution, the good recitation, but bad impersonation of the others! 'A pathetic face, a passionate voice, a *brain*', I thought to myself. It must have been at this point that the girl flung away the book and began to act, in an undisciplined way ... but with such true emotion, such intensity, that the tears came to my eyes ... It was an easy victory for her. She was incomparably better than any one. 'She has to work', I wrote in my diary that day. 'Her life must be given to it, and then she will ... achieve just as high as she works'. Lena Pocock was the girl's name, but she changed it to Lena Ashwell when she went on the stage.<sup>1</sup>

Thus wrote Ellen Terry, describing the occasion in 1890 when she distributed medals at the Royal Academy of Music while her daughter, Edith Craig, was studying there. Although she didn't know it at the time, Terry's response to Lena Pocock influenced not only this young woman's future, but also future directions in English theatre, which continue to resonate today.

Lena Margaret Pocock was born into a close-knit family of intrepid and determined individualists. Her father, Charles Ashwell Pocock, to whom she was devoted, was a Clerk in Holy Orders and a Royal Navy Commander.<sup>2</sup> His uncle was the sea artist Nicholas Pocock, and there was a seafaring tradition in the family. Lena was born on 28 September 1869<sup>3</sup> on board the *Wellesley* training ship, berthed on the river Tyne and 'commanded' by her father as a home for 'boys "unconvicted of crime" but under suspicion'.<sup>4</sup> Her mother, Sarah Stevens, was also from a seafaring family. Lena, always called Daisy by her family, was the second youngest of seven children, one of whom died when the family was in New Zealand. She was closest in age to Roger, Ethel and Hilda, while her eldest siblings, Francis and Rosalie, left home when she was very young.

Her early schooling was in England, but when she was eight, Lena's father's health broke down and the family moved to Canada, living in a wood cabin near

Brockville, overlooking the St Lawrence River. 'Here was great beauty; but also great discomfort. No water laid on in the house, no drainage, no gas nor electric light, no modern conveniences whatever.' But there was 'a river to swim in, a canoe to sail or paddle, a forest to wander in, and at home, plenty of hard work'.<sup>5</sup> An avid reader, she 'had a passion for words and their sound ... "illegitimate" had a swinging kind of sound, and I liked to sing it'.<sup>6</sup> She attended a government school, but her education was interrupted by expulsion (perhaps because of the above), illness and a family move to Toronto. In 1887 her mother, aged 48, died in a carriage accident. Lena and Hilda became boarders at Bishop Strachan's School for Young Ladies, where Lena established a pattern to be repeated throughout her life. Determined to work hard, she rose before dawn and matriculated at the University of Toronto fourteen months after her mother's death. Devastated by the loss of his wife, Pocock gave up his Treasury of God work and moved to Europe with his three daughters.

Lausanne, Switzerland, was their destination, where Lena attended a French-speaking school and studied music at the Conservatoire. She was preparing to be a governess, but on hearing her sing, an English cathedral organist recommended study at London's Royal Academy of Music. Lena's father disapproved and she 'was torn between my love for my father and my determination to follow my dream and be an opera-singer'.<sup>7</sup> Helped by a wealthy school friend, Belle Hevener, she managed to go to London and stayed with some unwelcoming cousins until, on her acceptance into the Academy, her father, Ethel and Hilda joined her and they set up house together.<sup>8</sup>

Encouraged by Ellen Terry, after graduation Lena Ashwell (taking her name from her father's family) set her sights on a theatrical rather than musical career. She described herself as 'passionate and terribly nervous', in which state she made her professional debut at the Islington Grand Theatre on 30 March 1891.<sup>9</sup> Her role, a servant girl in *The Pharisee*, was notable mainly because, overcome with stage fright, she left the stage without uttering the four words assigned to her.<sup>10</sup>

Between this small debacle and October 1900, Ashwell's career took a similar path to that of many aspiring actresses, although she was based mostly in London and did not learn her trade on tour or with provincial companies. She sought employment from producers such as Frederick Harrison at the Haymarket, who promised not to forget her, should an opportunity arise, after her appearance in *That Dreadful Doctor*.<sup>11</sup> Initially, she did not impress George Alexander and was disappointed when not given a promised role in London following a minor part (at Terry's intervention) in his 1892 touring production of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. As she describes in her autobiography,

the control of the theatres was in the hands of the actor-managers, most of whom had been through every kind of experience ... in the provinces before they arrived in London. To be engaged in these managements was as if you were permitted to pay a visit to some distinguished house where your host was always present to see that all the fine traditions and accepted laws of hospitality



1.1 Ashwell (Martin) in *The Pharisee*, Islington Grand, 1891  
(photographer unknown, author's collection)

were conformed to and where everyone knew his or her position in the general scheme of life.<sup>12</sup>

Ashwell was cast in some noteworthy productions (and some less memorable), making her West End debut in two curtain-raisers, *Through the Fire* and *Two in the Bush* (which preceded the comedy *Gloriana* at the Globe between November 1891 and early February 1892), where she conformed to the practice of playing a small role and understudying. She established friendships with Eva Moore and Gertrude Kingston, and was a member, briefly, of the ill-fated Amy Roselle's company, in *Man and Woman* at the Opera Comique in early 1893.<sup>13</sup> The *Referee* noticed that 'Miss Lena Ashwell, a refined and sympathetic young actress, made a big step forward', but Moore sensed Ashwell was unhappy.<sup>14</sup> It appeared Roselle did not like her and did nothing to make things easier for her. According to Moore, 'Lena, in those days, was a vague person, which was rather extraordinary, as she was a very fine athlete, and the two qualities did not seem to go together.'<sup>15</sup>

Through Terry, Ashwell met producer Joseph William Comyns Carr, who engaged her to understudy Winifred Emery in *Frou-Frou* at the Comedy in June 1893.<sup>16</sup> On signing a two-year contract with him, she had guaranteed work but little choice of roles. While understudying Rosamund in Grundy's *Sowing the Wind*, she played in

the curtain-raiser, *In Strict Confidence*, and from mid-December to early February 1894 appeared in daily matinees of *The Piper of Hamelin*.<sup>17</sup> She had a minor break, replacing the indisposed Emery on the third night of *Frou-Frou* and impressing the company and the small audience who remained. Alice Comyns Carr ‘plied her with *sal volatile* during the intervals, but I don’t think she really needed the stimulant ... the minute she was back on the stage all discouragement slipped from her. She was an artist, and enthusiasm and excitement ... her best restoratives ... Perhaps the greatest tribute ... was Emery’s rapid recovery ... the understudy was only allowed to play the role for one night!’<sup>18</sup> Mrs Comyns Carr described her as ‘the gentle girl with the good voice ... very adaptable ... and though very modest about her own capabilities, took her new vocation with the utmost seriousness, and studied almost night and day to fit herself for the part’.<sup>19</sup> Ashwell, aware of her inexperience, observed later that at the time she might not have been able to repeat the performance, which was ‘inspired by a sudden opportunity ... Acting is a curious, elusive art and difficult to really learn ... it is necessary not only to make an effect but to know exactly in what way the effect has been produced.’<sup>20</sup>

She then played in Buchanan’s comedy *Dick Sheridan* and, when *Frou-Frou* returned to the repertoire, played Pauline for the matinees, taking the lead when it went into the evening bill. Like many actresses, she had special admirers, including Reginald Golding Bright, who became an agent and apparently enjoyed talent spotting.<sup>21</sup> His letters, signed ‘your sincere admirer’ and commenting on her performances, provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of her acting:

Your only fault on Saturday was that you spoke your lines too quickly and consequently the audience lost much of what they should have heard ... you will of course remedy this defect ... the part is a poor one ... after all it is only a question of time, for talent and genius such as yours cannot long remain hidden.<sup>22</sup>

Golding Bright sent stamps so that she could send him a telegram if called to play Gilberte Brigard in *Frou-Frou*. He could not resist giving her advice: ‘Work it up deliberately until you reach “crescendo” (the meaning of which you as a musician will comprehend).’<sup>23</sup> On 9 April 1894, when Ashwell played Emery’s role, Golding Bright wrote with praise tempered with criticism: ‘you rose to a height which even I had scarcely expected of you ... though I fear the strain rather told upon you’. She was very nervous, had taken some prompts and he felt she hurried her words on occasion. He wrote two notices of her performance, sent to the *Star* and the *Sun*, the latter publishing a shortened version, under his *nom de plume* Leonard Fanfare. He hoped her elevation to the top ranks would mean he could write more detailed praise of her work.