

It is widely accepted that the English-language theatre tradition in colonial Singapore was established by the arrival of Mrs. Deacle, the “first professional actress” in the Settlement, in May 1844. This belief has persisted; as recently as 2020, a book chapter on colonial Singapore theatre credited Mrs. Deacle with creating Singapore’s English-language theatre tradition. However, an examination of newspaper articles, advertisements, and published personal recollections of life in the mid-19th century reveals that while Mrs. Deacle was indeed an important figure in the theatre of 1844, just as much if not more credit belongs to a group of British theatre aficionados in Singapore who called themselves the Gentlemen Amateurs. This paper attempts to correct the historical record by documenting the existence of the Gentlemen Amateurs and sharing the more nuanced and, frankly, more interesting story of how the Gentlemen Amateurs and Mrs. Deacle worked together to establish an English-language theatre tradition in the Singapore settlement.

In order to set the historical record straight, it is necessary to understand Singapore’s population at this time. From its inception as a free port in 1819, Singapore’s population consisted primarily of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and European residents.

This paper is exclusively concerned with Anglophone theatre of the colonial period, not the Chinese, Malay, and Tamil language theatre traditions that undoubtedly developed simultaneously. In the longer version of this paper, I go into detail about the population shifts and changes from 1819 to 1849; for the sake of time, I will omit the majority of this analysis and simply relate that by the 1840 census, 35,389 people lived in the Singapore Settlement and less than 3% of this population was European.

According to those Europeans, before 1844, there was very little to do in Singapore. As early as 1827, residents wrote to the local newspaper to request that those with dramatic flair ought to put their talents to good use on the stage. An editor's response to someone with the pen name Thespis read, in part, "we hope so laudable an ambition may soon be gratified by the establishment of a Theatre."¹ Although a few unnamed Gentlemen Amateurs produced a few poorly-received plays in 1834², nobody answered the call with gusto and a permanent English-language theatre space until W.H. Read arrived in 1841.

¹ Anon. "Proposed Theatricals." *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*. (Singapore), Apr. 12, 1827.

² Anon. "Theatre." *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*. (Singapore), Jul 24, 1834.

Although advertisements for the plays of these unknown Gentlemen Amateurs appear in the *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register* archives, no reviews of the performances exist and Charles Burton Buckley does not reference them in his *Anecdotal History*; unfortunately, significant details of these first performances have been lost.

Read lamented in his memoir Play and Politics: Reminiscences of Malaya that, at first, there was not much to do in Singapore beyond lose at cards. He and two friends set out to change this by establishing a racecourse, a library, and a theatre by 1846. As Read recounted, using the Malay term for new arrival, “the ‘*Baroe Datangs*’³ had, in a couple of years, changed the face of society.”⁴ While W. H. Read complained that there was nothing to do in Singapore, he was most likely biased in his assertion – there was little to do in Singapore that was accessible to the English-speaking, predominantly male, European minority that governed the city.

The theatre that W. H. Read credited himself and his friends with founding was the Theatre Royal, a stage space at Mr. Gaston Dutronquoy’s London Hotel on North Bridge Road. The *baroe datangs* began collecting subscriptions to fund the formation of the theatre in May of 1842.⁵ Nearly two years later, on 12 March 1844, they inaugurated their performance space with a double bill of *Charles the Second or The Merry Monarch* and the farce *The Spectre Bridegroom*.⁶

³ W. H. Read, *Play and politics: recollections of Malaya by an old resident*. (London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co. 1901), 5. Read mis-spells *datang baru*, “new arrival” in Malay – a title contemptuously bestowed on Read in 1841 by the Europeans who had been in Singapore for the preceding twenty years.

⁴ W. H. Read, *Play and politics: recollections of Malaya by an old resident*. (London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co. 1901), 6.

⁵ Anon. “Page 1 Advertisements Column 4.” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. (Singapore), May 19, 1842.

⁶ Anon. “TBS FREE FEES.” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. (Singapore), Mar. 7, 1844.

In the year 1901, an historian named Charles Burton Buckley attempted to document the work of the Amateurs. Unfortunately, his dense work did not make it into our contemporary understanding of the Anglophone theatre of the period. Buckley's book, An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore, devoted an entire chapter of the 700-page tome to "Singapore Theatricals" and matched the pseudonyms found in newspaper records with the given names of the men in the community, revealing the rest of the Gentlemen Amateurs' identities. Nearly all the Amateurs performed under stage names that bore little resemblance to their actual names. Given that the population of European residents in Singapore at this time was so small and that most of the Gentlemen held positions of great responsibility in commerce, military, and government, it is reasonable to assume that while the Amateurs craved entertainment on the island, their association with an institution as controversial as the theatre might have raised an eyebrow or two within what passed for society in Singapore at this time.

Some of the Gentlemen had been explicitly encouraged to avoid the stage, such as Thomas Dunman, who became the Deputy Magistrate and Superintendent of Police of Singapore in 1843.

The Governor of Singapore rightly decided that crime rates would fall and governance would be significantly smoother if someone who already lived in the settlement were given the authority to do something about the rampant crime.⁷ Historians relate that Dunman gave up his comedian dreams when he was awarded the post, but Buckley's anecdotes reveal that this is not true – Dunman continued as a Gentlemen Amateur, performing under the pseudonym Mr. Johnson until his last performance in November 1846.

Other Gentlemen Amateurs performed under pseudonyms that reflected the fact that their onstage personas were of an entirely different gender. Advertising material for the shows in which the 'ladies' were to perform published their female names, but the illusion extended to offstage interactions as well (according to Buckley). Miss Petowker, in particular, liked to have her fun offstage. Buckley related that Miss Petowker, with "the smallest waist, and smallest foot, of any lady in Singapore ... the envy of all the sex," once fooled a lady visitor to the island for an entire evening of socializing.⁸ Miss Petowker was actually Mr. W.H. Read himself.

⁷ Anon. "Page 3." *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. (Singapore), Oct. 5, 1843

⁸ Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*. (Singapore: Fraser & Neave, 1902), 743.

Whether they performed under pseudonyms or not, the Gentlemen Amateurs were well-respected members of society, and their influence extended beyond their theatrical endeavors.

How did Mrs. Deacle compare to the amateurs who founded the theatre tradition? The first record of Mrs. Caroline Deacle appeared in 1831 when a prominent court case made the rounds in British newspapers. A farmer and a histrionic woman found themselves at the epicenter of a scandal when the woman was allegedly assaulted whilst resisting arrest.⁹ After Mrs. Deacle had taken the stage name Miss Caroline Darling and began appearing in productions at the Adelphi Theatre in 1836, the *Manchester Times* explicitly connected the Adelphi's Miss Caroline Darling to the crime.¹⁰ She only appeared onstage at the Adelphi for the 1839-1840 season, in just eight minor roles.¹¹ After a one-year stint as beleaguered manageress of the Theatre Royal in Dover in 1840, the young actress answered an advertisement by Joachim Haywood Stocqueler to travel to Calcutta and perform at the newly constructed Sans Souci Theatre under the name Mrs. Deacle.

⁹ Anon. *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*. London: T. C. Hansard, 1832.

¹⁰ "Local Intelligence." *Manchester Times*, 2 Apr. 1836. *British Library Newspapers*.

¹¹ "The Adelphi Theatre Calendar: A Record of Dramatic Performances at a Leading Victorian Theatre," Alfred L. Nelson, Gilbert B. Cross, and Joseph Donohue, last modified 2016, accessed 10 January 2021, <https://www.umass.edu/AdelphiTheatreCalendar/m39d.htm>.

The salary offered by Mr. Stocqueler was reportedly significantly higher than what an actress could make on Drury Lane.¹² Mrs. Deacle became well-known in Calcutta for playing tragic roles opposite the famous male actor James Vining. However, Mr. Stocqueler noted that Mrs. Deacle's "devotion to Bacchus interfered with her attention" to the roles she played, and he believed that had this not been the case, "she might have been valuable."¹³ Mrs. Deacle featured prominently in the English-language gossip columns of the *Bengal Harkaru* and the *Calcutta Star*.

There were hints of an ongoing rivalry between Mrs. Deacle and the Sans Souci Theatre's beloved manageress, Mrs. Esther Leach. Mrs. Deacle played second fiddle to Mrs. Leach, taking on supporting instead of leading roles. After just four years in Calcutta, Mrs. Deacle accepted a post as manageress of the Grant Road Theatre 2,000 kilometers away in Bombay. However, that theatre was not yet built, and Mrs. Deacle had some time to spare.

Mrs. Deacle elected to spend the unexpected holiday in the Singapore settlement, ostensibly "for the benefit of her health."¹⁴ She arrived on 25 May 1844 from Calcutta, traveling with a Captain Andrews.

¹² Ranabir Ray Choudhury. 1978. *Glimpses of old Calcutta, period 1836-50*. Bombay: Nachiketa Publications, 78.

¹³ Joachim Hayward Stocqueler. *The memoirs of a journalist*. (Bombay: The Times of India, 1873), 117.

¹⁴ Anon. "THOUGHTS ON THEATRE." *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (Singapore), May 23, 1844.

It is not accurate that Captain Andrews appeared onstage in Mrs. Deacle's performances in the summer of 1844, as has been erroneously published by recent historiographers.¹⁵ Captain Andrews was only credited to appear onstage during the brief time Mrs. Deacle returned to Singapore in 1856. It is more likely that Captain Andrews, an officer in the 52nd Regiment of Native Infantry, only had theatrical ambition inasmuch as it allowed him to develop a relationship with Mrs. Deacle; the two eventually married, as reported in the British newspaper *The Era* in September 1844.¹⁶ Mrs. Deacle's personal life aside, she arrived in Singapore at an opportune time. The Gentlemen Amateurs had already produced two performances and announced their third. The *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* recognized the possibilities for collaboration before either Mrs. Deacle or the Amateurs. On the week of Mrs. Deacle's arrival, the newspaper reported that she would be in town for several months and intended to start her own theatre; the paper suggested in no uncertain terms that Mrs. Deacle would be able to assist the Gentlemen Amateurs in increasing the profile of their performances, writing that "we hope that we shall be able next week to announce that the Amateurs have made arrangements with Mrs. Deacle."¹⁷

¹⁵ Smith, Philip. 2020. *Shakespeare in Singapore*. New York: Routledge, 16.

¹⁶ Anon. "MUSIC AND THE DRAMA." *Era*, September 1, 1844. *British Library Newspapers* (accessed October 16, 2020).

¹⁷ Anon. "Untitled." *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (Singapore), May 23, 1844.

Alas, Mrs. Deacle and the Amateurs appear to have disappointed the Free Press authors, at least at first. Mrs. Deacle produced her first performance in Singapore without the Amateurs' collaboration or the stage space at the London Hotel.

The evolution of Mrs. Deacle's relationship with the Gentlemen Amateurs can be traced in issues of the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. One of Mrs. Deacle's first advertisements announced that she would be playing five of the eight roles in the play *Twelve Precisely*, with a number of the parts to be performed by "An Amateur," suggesting that at the time of publication, Mrs. Deacle had made casting decisions with more hope than finality.¹⁸ By June, Mrs. Deacle and the Amateurs worked out an arrangement. The papers began advertising that "the Gentlemen Amateurs having kindly consented to assist her in a few Theatrical Representations, she will open her New Theatre," rather uncreatively called the Sans Souci Theatre.

Although the Amateurs assisted Mrs. Deacle with her June performance, the stage space was her own on Coleman Street.¹⁹

¹⁸ Anon. "Page 2 Advertisements Column 1." *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. (Singapore), Jun 13, 1844.

¹⁹ Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*. (Singapore: Fraser & Neave, 1902), 745.

When Mrs. Deacle arrived and built her Sans Souci Theatre down the street from where the Gentlemen Amateurs had been performing at the Theatre Royal, there were officially more English-language theatres in Singapore than bridges.²⁰ Eventually, Mr. Dutronquoy came around as well and by July, the Theatre Royal space in the London Hotel housed all of Mrs. Deacle's performances. The Gentleman Amateurs committed more fully to the productions, and by Mrs. Deacle's final presentation of *Macbeth* in August 1844, a different named Amateur filled every role.²¹

A recent theatre historian has credited Mrs. Deacle with inspiring the anti-theatrical sentiments that arose while she was in residence in the summer of 1844; however, an analysis of the newspapers of the times reveals that the kerfuffle began immediately after the Gentlemen Amateurs put up their first production in March of that year – well before Mrs. Deacle's arrival. While most European Singapore residents were delighted at the Amateurs' new entertainment, a small minority were not amused. The theatre of 1844 catalyzed an ongoing discourse that monopolized the papers and the society's consciousness for quite some time after the professional actress's departure.

²⁰ W. H. Read, *Play and politics: recollections of Malaya by an old resident*. (London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co. 1901), 6.

²¹ Anon. "THE FREE PRESS." *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. (Singapore), Aug. 22, 1844.

The same day that Mrs. Deacle arrived in Singapore, the newspaper printed a letter to the editor from ‘A Disinterested Party’ who reported that “some Persons are against our Theatrical Amusements in this dull Settlement.”²² The letter writer went on to defend the Amateurs’ productions. Apparently, the paper’s publication of this letter incensed the theatre’s detractors, who took to the streets, knocking on doors to inform their neighbors about the evils of the Gentlemen Amateurs’ theatrical pursuits.

Mrs. Deacle benefitted from the hubbub that heralded her arrival, and it is her celebrity that has incorrectly led scholars to over-emphasize her contribution to the development of an Anglophone theatre tradition in colonial Singapore. In June and July 1844, additional residents wrote to the paper in defense of theatre, offering reviews of Mrs. Deacle’s performances. Several letters to the editor pointed out that theatre attendance increased as people who generally didn’t attend the theatre ventured out to see what all the fuss was about. In many cases, these letters to the editor are the most detailed accounts of early Singapore theatre performances that we have access to today, and the study of dramaturgy is indebted to the fear-mongering committed by the pearl-clutching theatre opponents in the settlement.

²² Anon. “Page 2.” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. (Singapore), May 23, 1844.

Someone with the pen name ‘A Spectator’ wrote a significantly more detailed review of *The Dead Shot*, *Twelve Precisely*, and *Valet de Sham* than the newspaper did. The same spectator also reviewed the performance of the settlement’s own Gentlemen Amateurs who appeared in the production, remarking that their performance “shewed [sic] how much practise will do to improve, especially when there is a natural aptitude for the vocation.”²³ They went on to mention that they “trust that after [Mrs. Deacle’s] departure the zest for this elegant and intellectual amusement will not subside.”

While the excitement surrounding Mrs. Deacle’s reputation as a professional actress from London and Calcutta is evident, the fact that residents explicitly called for the Amateurs to continue in her absence speaks to the depth of desire for ongoing English-language entertainment – and also to the fact that Mrs. Deacle wasn’t the be-all and end-all of theatre in the Singapore settlement. Theatre existed before she arrived and continued after she left.

Mrs. Deacle’s contribution to Singapore theatre in the summer of 1844 was significant – her contribution should not be downplayed, simply tempered with acknowledgment of the work the Gentlemen Amateurs did as well.

²³ Anon. “Page 2.” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. (Singapore), Jun 27, 1844.

Perhaps because she was a professional actress and had the time to devote to rehearsal and production, the volume of theatre increased significantly in the four months Mrs. Deacle was present in Singapore. While the Gentlemen Amateurs produced scenes from two different plays in one night of theatre once a month, Mrs. Deacle's schedule was significantly more ambitious. Her plays went up nearly every other week, and while she did reprise some of her most popular performances, the audience was treated to new material at every show.²⁴ Mrs. Deacle was an important figure in early Anglophone Singapore theatre. She generated excitement for the art form, lent legitimacy to the vocation with her résumé of experience in London, and increased the quality and frequency of theatre productions in the Singapore settlement for the four months she was around. However, Mrs. Deacle's credentials and brief stay in the colony have overshadowed the contributions of a group of men who called Singapore home for eighty years. The Gentlemen Amateurs primed the community to appreciate Mrs. Deacle's efforts; Mrs. Deacle increased the frequency and quality of the performances the residents of the settlement got to see.

²⁴ Anon. "Page 2." *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. (Singapore), Aug. 29, 1844.

Mrs. Deacle and the Gentlemen Amateurs each played a significant role in establishing English-language theatre in colonial Singapore, and each benefitted from the success of the other.