

MATHEWS' JUVENILE DRAMA

A. How Mathews is known as the publisher of around 20 plays for the Toy Theatre or Juvenile Drama in the period 1886 to 1903. George Speaight met him in the 1930s and says quite a lot about him in his 1969 book, "The History of the English Toy Theatre". Despite this there has been very little known or written about him, his background or the work that he produced. This note seeks to go into more detail and solve a few mysteries.

He was the first identifiable "enthusiast publisher", that is someone who published due to his interest in the hobby rather than as a way of making a living. In common with his contemporary enthusiast publisher "George Skelt" he had a habit of changing his name. That is why you will have difficulty tracing "A. How Mathews" in any official records.

He was born on the 28th April 1854 at Old Ford in the north of Bow on the River Lea, which is now in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. His father William Matthews had several occupations which included coach builder, "engine smith", wine and beer retailer and publican and had come down from Barnard Castle in County Durham. The boy was christened Hannibal Mathews in 1858.

In the 1871 census he was living in his father's pub, the "Three Pigeons and Star", at 16 Hatfield Street, St. Lukes. Significantly this was less than a mile away from the Toy Theatre shops of William Webb and John Redington. This fact illuminates two statements that he made later in his playbooks:

"I am thoroughly acquainted that all that has been done in the past, having performed every obtainable play as a boy."

"..there are no other names connected with the Juvenile Drama but Skelt, Webb, Redington and Mathews"

So we can imagine young Hannibal frequenting the Webb and Redington shops both of which had Skelt sheets available at that time, buying up what he could afford and performing plays himself. Later in life he sold off a large collection of original Toy Theatre plays by Skelt, Park, Green and Hodgson. Apart from the Hodgson plays these were all on sale in Redington's shop in the 1850s and might have survived there as "old stock" when Hannibal was a boy. He was clearly focussed on the "halfpenny" period and appreciated the fact that Redington in particular had sold many other plays than just his own. He would not have rated Benjamin Pollock at that time because he did not take over until after Hannibal had left the area and then only published a limited selection of his predecessor's plays, whereas Hannibal appreciated the wider world of Skelt. Pollock was also slightly younger. The collection he sold later did not include any of Webb's plays, again Hannibal might have seen these as "Modern".

Ten years later his father was the publican at the Railway Hotel on the north-west corner of the cross roads of Churchfield Road and Goldsmith Road opposite Acton Station. This building still exists, it is now the Nora Simone Medispa. Hannibal was living there and his occupation is given as "musician". Music was another passion and was to be the basis of his future career. Later in the same year, on the 27th October, he married Alice Charlotte Laming at St.Saviours in Hoxton. His occupation was now described as "professor of music", a title he used later, and at that date he was living in Gravesend. The fact that Alice came from Hoxton could also be significant, did she have other Toy Theatre connections? She may have shared the interest or been a colourist and may have been partly why he became a publisher a few years later.

Hannibal published his first Toy Theatre play, "Prisoner of Rochelle" in 1886, as "The "Skelt" Juvenile Drama". He describes himself as H.Mathews, having dropped the second "t", and this is how his name appears on all his publications. Some sheets bear the address as "Acton" and only later does Churchfield Road appear and then never with a number. He sold his publications wholesale and by post, he never had a shop himself or received callers. Many other titles quickly followed as described below. Peter Baldwin described two Toy Theatres he produced. The smaller one, the "New Stage Front", was copied from Webb with a few minor changes such as substituting Apollo for Mars on the pediment. His larger stage was a mixture of several elements and more original in design.

The register of Ealing electors shows him living at 3 Acacia-villas off Acton Lane from 1888 until 1891, so this was the base for his initial Toy Theatre business. This is confirmed by the 1891 census where he again describes himself as "Professor of Music" with no mention of any other business activity. In the register of electors he is named as Alfred Hannibal Matthews, so this is where the "A" comes from.

However the same registers in 1895 have him as "Hannibal Alfred Mathews", living at 2 Bell Terrace, Churchfield Road. There is evidence to suggest that Bell Terrace was the terrace of three storey houses that later became Nos.107-113, Churchfield Road. This block still exists, much modernised, and 107 and 109 have merged as 109. Hannibal and Alice appear to have had just one daughter, Ruby, who was born in 1897. Later she was to be the "go-between" her father and George Speaight when Mathews was seriously ill. She died in 1988 so perhaps could have told us more although she was very young at the time of her father's publishing activity.

By 1901 the small family were occupying 109 Churchfield Road with two boarders to fill the space. So it is from this address that his later publishing activity took place. He was described as a "Music Teacher".

Originally he reprinted plays by lithography that he had redrawn or traced, although he also used a cruder method involving pieces of copper formed with raised lines and pinned to wood blocks. The quality of some copying is exceptional, the only differences with the originals are very subtle, such as lack

of stiple on faces, minor shading differences and simplified detail. Later publications show less distinct lines. This may have been for two reasons, he may have been keeping stones for long periods, as the Webbs did, or he could have been using his own prints as "masters" for later ones. He claimed to be republishing the old plays to a higher standard than the ruthlessly cut productions of the contemporary "Penny packet publishers", although he eventually resorted to doing that himself. Plays were sold plain or coloured, the colouring is good but we do not know who did this. He also sold complete stages, slides and footlights. His playbooks were perhaps all printed by local printers, the first one was printed in EC1, where he had lived as a child.

It seems that his last play was published in 1903 and that he had stopped altogether in 1906. The 1911 census shows that the family had moved across the road to No.120, which is now a shop with two storeys of accommodation above. He was back to calling himself a "Professor of Music" again. One remarkable thing is that at least three of the places he lived in, have survived, you cannot say this about any other English Toy Theatre publisher!

As mentioned earlier he sold off a large collection of original Juvenile Drama (including 90 plays, mostly complete) while at 120 Churchfield Road. He had a list printed. A pencil copy of the list has the note "in about 1919 he sold off the whole of his stock."

A.E.Wilson mentions him as "H.Mathews" in his 1932 book so it may have not been until very late in life that he became known to George Speaight as "A. How Mathews", a "bright-eyed, alert old gentleman, with a neat white beard." He passed away in 1940. The death was registered in Willesden under his name of H.Mathews.

He comes over as a pleasant if slightly eccentric family man who enjoyed his two passions of music and the Toy Theatre throughout his whole life of 85 years.



THE PLAYS

Title	Copied from	Year	Note
Prisoner of Rochelle	Skelt	1886	
Robinson Crusoe	Skelt	1886	1
Flying Dutchman	Various	1886	2
Floating Beacon	Skelt	1887	3
Little King Pippin	Skelt	1887	4
Cinderella	Pollock	1887	
Miller and his Men	Various	1888	
Maid and the Magpie	Various	1888	
Miller's Maid	Skelt	1888	5
Blue Jackets	Pollock	1890	
Brigand's Son	Webb	1891	6
Jack the Giant Killer	Various	1891	2
Tom Tug	Skelt	1893	6
Jack O'Newbury	Green	1894	1,6,7
Blackbeard the Pirate King	Green	1895	6
Captain Ross	Skelt	1895	2
Cheer Boys Cheer	Webb	1896	6,8
Robert Macaire	Green	1898	6
Three Fingered Jack	Webb	1898	6
King of the Burning Mountains	Pollock	1902	9
Red Rover	Park	1903	

Notes:

1. Large scenes were also issued for this play
2. Not completed
3. Later known as "The Norwegian Wreckers"
4. Two editions
5. Later known as "Sailor George"
6. Penny packet format
7. Derived from Green's "State Secrets".
8. Derived from Webb's "Rifle Volunteers".
9. Derived from Pollock's "Silver Palace", full and penny packet versions.