The 1899 production of *Children of the Ghetto*, by Israel Zangwill (1864–1926), then Anglo-Jewry’s preeminent writer, was a watershed event.\(^1\) It was the first time credible Jewish characters, operating within an entirely Jewish milieu and engaged in authentic Jewish dilemmas, were presented on the mainstream stage. The innovation of this enterprise is striking when foregrounded against previous and contemporaneous stage portrayals of Jewish characters. These were routinely filtered through the hackneyed schemata of the “stage Jew,” a figure whose hyperbolized otherness triggered laughter, fear or contempt. *An Old Jew*, a comedy in five acts by Sydney Grundy, opened in London in 1894, and was the last new English play with a Jewish protagonist to be produced prior to *Children of the Ghetto*. Though it is a work of minor literary value, it is the focus of this essay for two reasons. First, because it represents the “before Zangwill” period, offering a better understanding of his and his followers’ project to present Jews “as they are” on the mainstream stage; second, because *An Old Jew* is a so-called philosemitic play that supposedly presents the Jew in a favorable light. And yet, when compared with plays created a few years later by dramatists with intimate personal knowledge of Jewish life, Grundy’s text reveals the enormous chasm between the work composed by a sympathetic outsider and one written from within an ethnic group. *An Old Jew* illustrates the ambivalent nature of philosemitic works which, as noted by Alan Levenson, confute and perpetuate Jewish stereotypes.\(^2\)

The 1890s saw many changes in London’s theatrical culture. The decade began with the predominance of actors and ended with playwrights setting the agenda for the stage. Though the 1890s are

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\(^1\) For a more comprehensive discussion, see my book *From the Ghetto to the Melting Pot: Israel Zangwill’s Jewish Plays* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

remembered in theatre history for the sensational introduction of Henrik Ibsen to Britain, the rise of Bernard Shaw, the eminence of Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, and the brilliant, albeit short, career of Oscar Wilde, these playwrights were not the only names on London’s theatrical menu. West End theatres, then as now, were commercial enterprises that depended heavily on the mores of their patrons, who were mostly members of the middle-class with a preference for middle of the road repertoire, often provided by playwrights whose names would later fade from public memory. In his statistical analysis of the West End in the 1890s, J. P. Wearing confirms that while Jones and Pinero were the most popular playwrights of the decade in terms of number of productions, Sydney Grundy, followed by F. C. Burnard and G. R. Sims, did not lag much behind. French scholar Augustin Filon, in his survey of the English stage, written in the late 1890s, confirms Grundy’s position, noting:

If you were to ask a London theatre-goer to name the most popular dramatists of the present day, to designate the ripest talents which tell most clearly of the present and of the future of the English drama, I think I may affirm that the names that would come immediately to his lips, with scarcely a moment’s pause for reflection, are those of Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, and Sydney Grundy.

Despite his popularity, and although he had written or adapted more than fifty plays, Grundy has attracted practically no critical attention, and was forgotten after the Great War. In 1977, J. P. Wearing summed up his career as follows:

Sidney Grundy was a prolific, popular mediocrity who found favor with audiences comparable to that enjoyed by Jones, Pinero and Sims. . . . although he aspired to social comment, he never dared as much as Jones or Pinero.

Max Beerbohm, for twelve years drama critic of the Saturday Review, was particularly disappointed that Grundy invested so much of his dramatic skill in adaptations rather than in original plays. He wrote:

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5 Wearing 329.