

# The Piccadilly

Treatment written by  
K&M Dean  
TheDeans2

**Format Description:** Historical drama set in the heady world of the theatre. Each season covers a 12-month period in a different era of the theatre with the cast of characters changing every season. From the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to date, the seasons explore the challenges facing the world of theatre through the eyes of those who lived and breathed it.

**Logline:** *The Piccadilly Theatre is a place where, over time, art and reality blur, and long-buried secrets, hidden passions and tragic histories surface, all bound by the magical yet oppressive weight of the theatre itself.*

**Setting:** Season 1, the year is 1910. A grand but decaying theatre built in the early 1800s. It is a mix of opulent design and the crumbling of time and neglect – velvet curtains, gilded balconies but worn wooden floors, creaky ceilings and dimly lit corridors. Edwardian theatre was a **blend of opulence, light-hearted entertainment, and emerging social critique**. Our theatre sits at the crossroads between the structured formality of Victorian drama and the modernist experimentation that would follow in the interwar years.

Use of **electric lighting** became standard, allowing for more sophisticated visual effects.

Rise of the **director** as a distinct creative force, moving away from purely actor-managed productions.

The Piccadilly is falling behind.

**Premise:** The Piccadilly follows the rise and fall and rise again of a theatre over a period of many decades. Like *The Crown*, each series features historical and cultural events at a different point in time, measuring the impact on the world of the theatre. Following a diverse group of characters, over a number of series, the story arcs from our introduction to the theatre in the early 1900s to present day.

In this season, as the episodes unfold, we witness the evolution of theatre and the impact of competing entertainment forms such as musical theatre, vaudeville and the emerging film industry. James Blackwood the owner of the Piccadilly is a traditionalist who struggles to maintain the integrity of live performance, whilst his wife and co-owner, Etta Blackwood is more progressive, embraces change, often clashing with James over creative and money decisions. Their dynamic is further complicated by the presence of Mrs. C, a glamorous diva who steals the spotlight both on and off stage, creating tension and jealousy within the company.

Season 1 captures pivotal moments, including the theatre's struggle to adapt to the advent of movies and other light entertainment choices, the company's backstage dramas, and the personal relationships that intertwine with their professional lives.

With each passing decade, the following seasons dramatise the theatre and the characters within it, facing heartbreak, ambition, and the relentless march of time. The theatre goes through many changes, facing closure and change at every turn until the present day,

when a group of enthusiastic volunteers rescue and reinstate the building to its former glory.

**Tone:** Think *Downton Abbey* meets *The Crown*, where the beauty of the setting contrasts sharply with the dark and often tragic lives of the characters. Each episode reveals more layers of the past and the theater's history, blending historical elements with fictionalised twists.

### **Main Characters:**

**Mr. James Blackwood:** The Piccadilly's owner. A former actor, James Blackwood is sharp-witted, powerful and vulnerable. His own career less than successful, he found a talent for nurturing others to achieve excellence. Committed to the theatre and all things related, James sees the new wave of musical theatre and light comedies as an unwelcome intrusion but, he is at his heart a businessman who is aware of the box office and balancing artistic ambition with financial reality. James is territorial with star performers or playwrights and fears losing prestige to new directorial models or ensemble-led companies.

**Mrs. James Blackwood (known to everyone as Etta):** The Piccadilly's co-owner and source of its initial investment. In the glittering, male-dominated world of Edwardian theatre, trailblazing, Mrs. Blackwood, operates outside of her social parameters. A keen networker, she entertains potential sponsors, investors in the high-class salons of the day. Her husband resents the expense, and it is often a point of conflict between them both. Keeping her eyes wide open and her ears to the ground, she is often the sensible voice in the room.

**Bill Fairchild:** The Piccadilly's resident director. Bill is a celebrated and, due to setting the previous theatre he worked in on fire, highly controversial. He has immense vision and an ego to match. He sees himself as not only a humble theatre director but a cultural ambassador whose mission it is to bring the theatre kicking and screaming out of the, to him, dark Victorian time, into the light of the new century. The plays he directs always run over budget and have a quirk to them to modernise them in some way. This does not always work. Behind the scenes, Bill can be charming and frighteningly fierce with rash bouts of temper that can reduce many to tears. He is not above shredding a play in front of the writer and is often at odds with them as they fail, as he sees it, to understand his vision. And yet, he can bring out career defining performances from actors. Mrs. C will stand up to him and often does, but she respects where he is coming from. In his personal life, rumours of affairs and obsessions with a hint of opium abound.

**Eleanor Carter (known as Mrs. C):** The Piccadilly's leading lady. In her late 30s, Mrs. C is considered one of a kind, larger than life and on a good day comparable with the great Sarah Bernhardt. An instinctive actress with no formal training, her performances are magnetic—fierce, sensual, and intelligent—defying current expectations of female propriety. However, quick to boredom and flighty of spirit, she not only self-sabotages but also undermines performances of others on a regular basis often going off script or worse still, stopping, turning to the audience and asking them for their opinions on the play so far! She can be biting and cruel especially with people she considers beneath her intellect. Annoying as Mrs. C is, she is the theatre's main draw. Underneath the diva façade, with people she admires and trusts, she is a warm, kind and generous person whom the company love to pieces. 3 shiatsu dogs follow Mrs. C wherever she goes causing mayhem

along the way. Her private life, however, is marked by financial struggle and the burden of raising three children alone. Fellow actors are in awe and somewhat intimidated by her. Playwriters crave Mrs. C's name attached to one of their works. Critics adore her. Society whispers. Her name is synonymous with brilliance—and controversy

**Arthur Sinclair:** The Piccadilly's leading man. In his mid-40s, Arthur is the enigmatic and brooding lead actor of the company. Once a rising star, he mysteriously disappeared for several years. Now back, he has a disquieting charm but with a sense of overwhelming sadness and a secret buried deep. His acting style has not moved on during his sabbatical, and whilst his voice can be heard at the very back of the stalls, his performances are often considered wooden. Mrs. C often torments him on stage and during performances.

### **Main Supporting characters:**

**Mrs. Elsie Wingate:** The Piccadilly's chef. She is formidable and highly skilled. Once the head chef for an aristocratic family, she landed at the Piccadilly after a bit of a scandalous incident involving the unwitting poisoning of a much-honoured guest. She runs the tiny kitchen with precision and maternal care. She loves working in the Piccadilly despite less than favourable working conditions but in an era of shifting social and cultural ideas she feels her skills are becoming irrelevant and therefore is quite snippy. She is deeply superstitious and, on the quiet, sentimental. We are not sure there is a Mr. Wingate.

**Mr. Archie Pemberton:** The Piccadilly's stage manager. Archie is a former actor whose career faded to nothing 2 decades ago. However, he discovered his true calling in managing the hilly terrain behind the scenes. He is precise, detailed driven, sharp witted with boundless amounts of energy. He is the beating heart of the theatre. People go to him for advice and help "fix" their problems. Archie makes sure the actors manage their egos and gets them on stage even when it looks like they be incapable of doing that themselves. He has never married. He could work anywhere but is married to this particular theatre. He can often be found chasing the owners for monies to complete badly needed repairs.

**Marjorie Popper:** The Piccadilly's ingénue. Marjorie is a sweet and unworldly, an actor with immense talent who has not been with the theatre for very long. Despite initial worries of a rivalry developing, Mrs. C takes Marjorie under her wing. An outstanding *Juliet*, Marjorie hero worships Mrs. C and Bill and is eager to prove her worth to the company. However, Arthur is not quite so supportive seeing in her a path for his own irrelevance as he is too old to play opposite her so sadly, she becomes a pawn in the manipulation games played by those around her. Personally, she is far from what she seems and has an iron core with little time for romance as she knows any entanglement will spell the end of her career. Witnessing her mother married to a violent husband has switched her off to such matters. That is not to say she doesn't play however.

**Alistair Carstairs:** The Piccadilly's young principal. After a round of seemingly never-ending auditions (eps 1 & 2), Alistair joins the company. He is bright, passionate, idealistic and ambitious. He is young, fresh faced and very attractive with a voice that makes knees quiver and eyes that drill down into your very soul. He hero worships the great actors of the age and aspires to lift his performances to something real, raw and meaningful. However, he is not good at the politics, managing egos or dealing with critics which is why he has ended up at the Piccadilly and where he will remain. He is a man of many conflicts

– art vs. ambition and survival, he is romantic and loyal yet insecure with full blown imposter syndrome. This is also reflected in his personal life as he struggles with his identity and sexual orientation in a world that was not open about such things.

**Harriet “Harry” Graves:** The Piccadilly’s lead costume designer and Mrs. C’s dresser. Pragmatic, sharp-witted, and with a dark sense of humor, Harry isn’t fazed by much and is very hierarchical. She also is an insightful observer of human nature, constantly reading the room and making secretive deals behind the scenes.

**Henry Pointer:** The Piccadilly’s new playwright. A young man from a modest family who wanted him to be a solicitor and were dismayed when he declared his love for the theatre. Brimming with ideas, the goddess of creativity drives him hard not allowing him a moments peace. He has a brilliant command for language and is at the beginning of his career. Henry is unkempt and often covered in ink. He is nervy, anxious and requires a lot of calming. Henry is more articulate when he is writing and is awkward and self-conscious with people, preferring the company of those he has imagined. His family worry about him a great deal and are often found at the theatre ensuring Henry eats and sleeps.

### **Synopsis:**

#### **Season 1, Episode 1 (pilot) - Welcome to The Piccadilly in 1910**

We open on a busy street. A young boy is running with a bottle of port swinging from his hand dodging suffragette demonstrations, market stalls, shoppers and animals along the way.

He rounds the corner and rising up in front of him is The Piccadilly. It is audition day. Competition is high with music hall, wild west shows and the new kid on the block, silent movies all vying with theatres for bums on seats and the cream of the small pool of talent. In theatreland, things are moving seismically. A new generation of movers and shakers dominated the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s end with larger-than-life characters with larger-than-life ideas – think Henry Irving, star of his own shows.

As the boy continues his mission to deliver his precious cargo, we are treated to a tour of the theatre. Through the auditorium where actors are auditioning to backstage where all are busy getting ready for this evening’s performance to the kitchen at the very rear, where cook is doing their best to get food ready for the hungry company.

The auditions are not going well. Our theatre impresarios, Mr. and Mrs. James Blackwood and their enfant terrible director, Bill Fairchild, are in despair. Teetering on the verge on financial hardship due to a decline in audience numbers, they know that something needs to change. They must move with the times. Old plays, old ways are not good enough but, accepting that is not easy. How to tell the company – move forward or move out?

Something is in the air, the auditioning actor on stage stops, jaw dropping. Etta, James and Bill turn as Mrs. C swoops down the central isle, her dogs yapping at her heels as she moves. Chaos. She acknowledges kindly, the novice on the stage but for the others, the auditions have finished, as in relief, they turn their attention to her and the dilemma of the new play that isn’t ready for rehearsal despite opening night being 3 days away.

Taking their cue after waiting for what felt like hours in the wings, the stage crew shoo the auditioning actor off the stage and clear the way for a large dining table with cook and staff hot on their heels with warm food and the bottle of port. James insists that the company eat together on the stage before the evening's performance.

It's showtime, the audience is in, but the house is not full. The play begins with Mrs. C languidly lying on a chaise longue. Arthur, who was late to the theatre as always, enters on stage from the wings and begins. Mrs. C has a twinkle in her eye and looks out to the audience. There is a sense of anticipation as the audience knows what's going to happen next.

Arthur's performance is savaged by Mrs. C, and it is all he can do to remain on the stage. The curtain comes down, Arthur storms off as the stage crew mobilise to re set the stage for the next day. Mrs. C enjoys a banter with the crew before she too leaves. The episode ends with the last of the crew switching off all the lights before closing the door. The theatre can relax until tomorrow.

## **Episode 2 – Something has got to give**

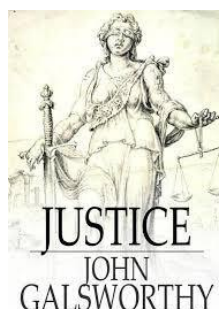
It is mid-way through the morning of Day 2 of the auditions, and things are as bad as yesterday. The playwright is still missing, the bills are coming in, there is building noise coming from the theatre next door as the competition prepares for opening night in 2 weeks' time. There are troubles backstage as one of the stage crew has injured himself and there is disquiet at not fixing things. The Cook's assistant has done a bunk. On top of that, Bill has to persuade Mrs. C to behave herself. Worries abound. All feels overwhelming.

In walks a young actor, Alistair, who blows them all away. They ask themselves, what is he doing here? Does he have a drink problem? Gambling? Hiding from an jealous husband?

## **Episode 3 – The playwright appears**

The company's playwright appears but is blind drunk and making no sense and has no play. A young man, Henry, follows him in carrying a raft of papers and covered in ink. He has a play! He persuades Bill, James and Etta that it can be done with the company in 3 days. Etta knows they will have to sway Mrs. C. Mrs. C surprises them all by being thoroughly enthusiastic. The play is new, real and fresh and makes sense to her. Arthur is reluctant so Mrs. C suggests the new recruit is given a go!

The competition is about to open next door with a new play by George Bernard Shaw. John Galsworthy's play "Justice" has premiered which highlights conditions in prison. This is with the backdrop of the welfare state getting underway with the opening of the first labour exchange.





## Episode 4 – The King is dead! Long live the King!

The change in monarch is felt by all. The theatre must close for mourning and the funeral... but that comes at a cost...

The theatre next door finally opens its doors after a full refurbishment. It is bright and new with the promise of new material and rising stars. The Piccadilly must react!



## Episode 5 – Is the writing in the tail of the comet?

Halley's comet makes its closest approach to the earth causing panic as the earth passes through its tail.

This matches the panic in The Piccadilly – staff are leaving, reluctantly but the writing is on the wall. The empresario from next door begins to make a play for Mrs. C. Mr. & Mrs. Blackwood are at their wits end. A decision needs to be made, and The Piccadilly must jump in with both feet.



## Episode 6 – Murder most foul!

The playwright comes to the rescue! Inspired by recent events around Dr Crippen, he writes a gruesome, murder mystery play.

Mrs. C, always the rule breaker, insists on playing the male part of the murderer bringing notoriety and a depth to the character that is beyond Arthur Sinclair. In a fit of pique, Arthur leaves the company. No one is sad or misses him.

The Piccadilly is full, the competition with its highbrow plays is not. The wheel of fortune has turned.

