

conviction, of earnestness and genuine feeling, is not surpassed by any actress on the English stage'.¹⁰⁷ She was so convincing at one performance that someone called out to Alan (W. Graham Browne), 'You dirty cad! Marry her!'¹⁰⁸ *Chance, the Idol* ran until late October, during which month Ashwell, who was absent through illness for some performances, had begun rehearsals for Emilia, in *Othello*.

Forbes Robertson's *Othello*, with Gertrude Elliott as Desdemona and Taber as Iago, opened on 15 December 1902 at the Lyric. *Country Life* considered that the casting of Ashwell as Emilia struck one 'as having most interesting possibilities', and it was she who received the best reviews.¹⁰⁹ 'She is earnest and sincere; her denunciation of her husband; her wrath against Othello, and bitter contempt for his blindness were expressed with real vigour and truth ... quite in the spirit of the tragedy.'¹¹⁰ Summing up the 1902 theatrical year, the *Era* declared that

a noticeable feature of the year has been the poor figure which has been cut by our old established playwrights. Mr H.A. Jones' only contributions have been *The Princess's Nose* and *Chance, the Idol*, which was only saved from immediate failure by the emotional acting of Miss Ashwell ... Forbes Robertson's revival of *Othello* was, perhaps, an error of judgement as far as he himself was concerned [he lacked the physique, vigour and voice]: but as an experiment in temperament it was interesting and Miss Ashwell's Emilia was certainly superb.¹¹¹

Ashwell was engaged to play in Tolstoy's *Resurrection* with Tree in the spring of 1903, to be followed by *Dante* with Irving at Drury Lane. It was the first time Tolstoy's work would be seen on the London stage and there was considerable interest in the Russianness of the story, the music and the visual effects. Despite the degradation portrayed, it was considered to be a very moral play. The *Anglo-Russian* featured it in great detail over three months, looking at the production's background, publishing cast pictures and reprinting highlights from press reviews.¹¹² *Resurrection* opened at His Majesty's on 17 February 1903, with Tree as Prince Dmitry and Ashwell as Katusha. '[She] showed herself to be our greatest emotional actress, for, taken as a whole, I do not see anyone else upon the stage at the present moment who could have rendered those varying moods of that wild soul with so faithful an intensity.'¹¹³ Apparently the play did not bear much resemblance to the novel, but many aspects were effective and the acting and scenic effects were clever.¹¹⁴ Again Ashwell was featured on postcards depicting scenes from the play. Katusha gave her the opportunity to demonstrate

the extensive boundaries of her art. We know her as the falsehearted butterfly of society, with padded movements and purring, lying tongue, such ... as she played in *Wheels within Wheels*. We have seen her display great power in 'strong' scenes ... in *Othello*, but never before have we seen her as an abandoned, drunken 'fille de joie'. Voice, gestures, and a swinging dissolute stride, all contributed to a clever piece of character-acting. Unfortunately, the attempt to adapt Tolstoy has resulted in a melodramatic compromise with an unsatisfactory ending, thus



1.7 Ashwell (Katusha) in her peasant's costume for Act I, *Resurrection*, His Majesty's, 1903 (Raphael Tuck, author's collection)



1.8 Ashwell (Katusha) in *Resurrection*, His Majesty's, 1903 (Raphael Tuck, author's collection)

robbing the situation in which Maslova [Katusha] finds herself of much of its original intensity.¹¹⁵

Ashwell relished her role, but did not find Tree inspiring to work with: 'He was difficult to act with for his emotion never felt sincere, and he was always liable to clown.' He may well have robbed her of some of that intensity: during the first-act love scene he would amuse himself by unfastening the hooks at the back of her peasant's dress and the only deterrent was for her to be sewn into the costume. As she observed, his failure in memorising meant he seldom really knew his part. Compared to her experiences with Irving and Wyndham, she felt Tree 'had never been through the mill and remained in many ways an amateur'.¹¹⁶