The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre

This Companion is designed for readers interested in the creation, production, and interpretation of Victorian and Edwardian theatre, both in its own time and on the contemporary stage. The volume opens with a brief overview and introduction surveying the theatre of the time followed by an essay contextualizing the theatre within the frame of Victorian and Edwardian culture as a whole. Succeeding chapters examine specific aspects of performance, production, and theatre, including the music, the actors, stagecraft, and the audiences themselves; plays and playwriting and issues of class and gender that have developed in recent scholarship are also explored. Chapters also deal with comedy, farce, and melodrama, while other essays bring forward new topics and approaches that cross the boundaries of traditional investigation, including analysis of the economics of theatre and of the theatricality of personal identity.
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NINA AUERBACH is John Welsh Centennial Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of seven books, of which the most theatrical are Ellen Terry, Player in Her Time and Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians. She is currently writing about ghosts and those who see them.

MICHAEL R. BOOTH has retired from the Department of Theatre at the University of Victoria and now lives mostly in Greece. He has been a long-time editor of Theatre Notebook, and is the author or editor of English Melodrama (1965), English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, 4 vols. (1969–76), Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850–1910 (London: Routledge, 1981), and Theatre in the Victorian Age (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

JACKY BRATTON is Professor of Theatre and Cultural History, Royal Holloway, University of London. Her edited publications include Music Hall: Performance and Style (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen (joint editor with Jim Crook and Christine Gledhill) (British Film Institute, 1994); and Four Plays by Arthur Wing Pinero (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). She is working on a revisionist historiography of the British stage.

SUSAN CARLSON is Professor of English and Associate Provost at Iowa State University. She is currently researching the relationships between suffrage theatre and the production of Shakespearean comedy in early twentieth-century London. She has published two books on women and comedy. She has recently published essays on Aphra Behn, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and Shakespearean production, as well as on suffrage theatre.

MARY JEAN CORBETT is Professor of English and Affiliate of the Women's Studies Program at Miami University. She is the author of Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women's
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Jim Davis is Associate Professor of Theatre at the University of New South Wales. He is the author of several books and many articles on nineteenth-century British theatre. His most recent book is Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840–1880 (University of Iowa Press, 2001), co-authored with Victor Emeljanow.

Tracy C. Davis is Barber Professor of the Performing Arts at Northwestern University. Her books include Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture (London, Routledge, 1991), George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), and The Economics of the British Stage, 1800–1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). She is also co-editor (with Ellen Donkin) of the collections Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Theories of Theatricality (forthcoming).

Joseph Donohue, Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is a theatre historian with special interests in the Victorian and twentieth-century theatre and the plays of Oscar Wilde. He is the author of Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970) and primary editor of a reconstructive edition of the first performance text of The Importance of Being Earnest (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995).

Sos Eltis is a Fellow and Tutor at Brasenose College, Oxford University. She is the author of Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), and of articles on Victorian theatre, and Bram Stoker's Dracula.

Victor Emeljanow is Professor of Drama at the University of Newcastle, Australia. He is a professional theatre director as well as a theatre historian. His most recent work has been on nineteenth-century theatre audiences culminating in the award-winning book Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840–1880 (co-authored with Jim Davis). He is currently researching popular theatregoing in England in the period 1880–1918.

Heidi J. Holder is Associate Professor of English at Central Michigan University. Her work on British, Irish, and Canadian theatre has appeared in such periodicals as the Journal of Modern Literature, Essays in Theatre, and
the University of Toronto Quarterly. She has recently published chapters on women dramatists in London's East End (in Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin (eds.), Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain (Cambridge University Press, 1999) and on the dramatic writings of Mary E. Braddon (in Marlene Tromp, Pamela Gilbert and Aeron Haynie (eds.), Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context: State University of New York Press, 2000). She is at work on a study of Victorian and Edwardian drama in London's East End.

RUSSELL JACKSON is Director of the Shakespeare Institute and Professor of Shakespeare Studies at the University of Birmingham. His publications include Victorian Theatre, A New Mermaid Background Book (London: A. & C. Black, 1989) and critical editions of plays by Oscar Wilde and Henry Arthur Jones.

DAVID MAYER is Emeritus Professor of Drama and Research Professor, University of Manchester. Books include Harlequin in His Element: The English Pantomime, 1806–1836 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964) and Playing Out the Empire: Ben-Hur and other Toga-Plays and Films, 1883–1908 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). He has written numerous essays on melodrama and on links between the Victorian stage and early film, and is founder-director of the Victorian and Edwardian Stage on Film Project.

CARY M. MAZER is Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and English, and Chair of Theatre Arts, at the University of Pennsylvania, where he has directed plays by Euripides, Shakespeare, Webster, Strindberg, Shaw, Barrie, Beckett, and Pinter. At People's Light & Theatre Company he has dramaturred plays by Shakespeare, Wilde, and Shaw. He writes about Shakespeare performance history and Edwardian theatre.

MICHAEL PISANI is Associate Professor of Music at Vassar College. He has served on the music staff of the Houston Grand Opera, Seattle Opera, and other professional companies. His article on Prokofiev's Love for Three Oranges for the Musical Quarterly received the 1999 Kurt Weill Prize for distinguished scholarship in music theatre. His forthcoming book, Recreating Native America: The Evolution of a Musical Stereotype, will be published by Yale University Press. He is at work on a study of nineteenth-century Theatre music.

KERRY POWELL is Professor of English at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. He is the author of Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s (1990) and Women and Victorian Theatre (1997), both published by Cambridge
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The theatre of the Victorian and Edwardian period, once thought to be comparatively insignificant, even unworthy of attention, has today become one of the most fruitful areas of inquiry into the literature and culture of the age. At the same time that the importance of theatre to Victorian and Edwardian culture is increasingly evident, the theatricality of that culture itself has begun to be recognized, calling into question time-honored understandings of the period as having been defined by such ideals as sincerity, earnestness, and devotion to productive labor in the “real” world. As we learn more about Victorian and Edwardian theatre, we enrich not only our understanding of a previously undervalued phase of theatre history and theatrical literature, but also of the complexly textured social world which engendered this drama and was in turn informed and articulated by it.

The map of this emerging, rapidly developing field of study is far from complete, but The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre provides some notable landmarks which allow an appreciation of its recent progress and current status. It incorporates the results of exciting archival investigations which have recovered lost or neglected plays that are already beginning to alter the landscape of the drama of this period, as we know it. These textual discoveries and re-readings are complemented by close analyses of dramatic genres and movements within the historical scope of this Cambridge Companion, not only surveying but revaluing the typology which defined the theatre of the period. A number of chapters give attention to theatrical production techniques, providing insight into a unique range and variety of Victorian and Edwardian stage effects – indeed, bringing some of these to our attention for the first time. Others bring to light the connections of theatre with the social world outside the playhouse, finding those linkages in the performance of gender, the operations of a market economy, and the dynamics of audience in relation to what transpired in the performing space behind the footlights. In this mixed approach to Victorian and Edwardian theatre the reader will find not only a guide to significant plays,
dramatic movements, and acting and production techniques, but also a theoretical and critical framework that encourages thinking beyond stage texts and technologies toward a larger context of meaning that incorporates but is not bounded by the theatre.

The book begins with an introduction by Nina Auerbach, whose work, along with that of other contributors to this Cambridge Companion, has given new direction to the study of theatre, literature, and culture in the period. Auerbach makes large claims for the theatre of this time, finding in its diverse genres a magnet of entertainment which enthralled all classes of people, making it a kind of universal language despite the antitheatrical feeling that it always confronted, and still does. The theatre, Auerbach writes, was the prism through which Victorians and Edwardians saw themselves and their world. It exposed the artifice of this age of “sincerity,” revealing the assumed truths of the time to be scripted performances themselves, enveloping this world, even its hallowed domestic scenes, in theatricality. Auerbach’s overview is followed by a two-part division of the remaining chapters, the first group of which is entitled “Performance and context” because of its focus on acting, production, and the theatre as such, including the dynamics of theatre in relation to the world around it. This section is framed by an analysis of the “business” of Victorian and Edwardian theatre as a profit-seeking enterprise operating within a vigorous free-market economy, and thus frustrating the dreams of a nonprofit, aesthetically rich “national theatre.” Subsequent chapters observe change as well as continuity in the styles and theories of acting in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, bring forward for the first time some important connections between specially written music and plays themselves, and trace a growing tension in the period between, on one hand, a realistic stagecraft that aimed at producing “an optical illusion through a huge hole in the wall,” and on the other, a new scenography that offered a suggestion or a symbol instead of a detailed imitation of life. Another essay challenges some long-held assumptions about the audiences who attended Victorian and Edwardian plays, and this section of the book concludes with a consideration of the life and autobiography of Ibsen actress Elizabeth Robins as a key to understanding how gender was experienced and performed on and off the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century stage, finding a continuity in the “performatif modes” of Hedda Gabler on stage and that of the “naive ingénue” in life.

In the section of this Companion entitled “Text and context,” contributors offer their analyses of the genres which dominated the Victorian and Edwardian theatre – comedy and farce, melodrama, and music-hall entertainment. Other essays chart the rise of a new and more consciously literary theatre in the 1890s, a period in which the horizons of drama were expanded to
make room for the discussion of contemporary social issues. Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, in particular during this period, “shook the drama into life.” There followed the growth of a “new drama” for a “new theatre,” originating with the Vedrenne–Barker management of the Court Theatre in the early years of the twentieth century and staging plays there and elsewhere that examined a range of social issues from class inequities to the “the woman question” and looked ahead to the formation of a National Theatre freed from the constraints of a profit-driven marketplace. Other chapters in this section deal with long-neglected, yet crucial aspects of Victorian and Edwardian drama – the role played by women playwrights in a male-dominated theatre, and the character and importance of the vital, but still little-known, working-class theatre of London’s East End.

The chapters which form this Companion will improve our understanding of an important, emerging field of study, but one that remains underdeveloped from long neglect as well as difficulties inherent in the subject matter itself. What emerges from these pages, therefore, is not a complete or fully connected narrative of Victorian and Edwardian theatre, but necessarily a fragmentary one – a scholarly adventure in progress. Old assumptions about the theatre of this period are challenged, new views and new methods of inquiry put forward, and in the process the centrality of theatre and theatricality to Victorian and Edwardian culture is well-documented. But the subject matter is elusive, as Nina Auerbach points out in her introductory essay, made up as it is of many thousands of plays, most never published, and of performances long disappeared. One notable achievement of this Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre is that it restores so much about the drama of the period that has been inaccessible to us. Another, equally important, is that the map it provides, although still a sketchy one in many respects, will point out directions for those who come after, enabling further advances in our knowledge and appreciation of the theatre of this period, and of the period itself.

Kerry Powell