

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79157-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre

Edited by Kerry Powell

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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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THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
VICTORIAN AND
EDWARDIAN THEATRE

EDITED BY
KERRY POWELL
Miami University, Oxford, Ohio



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Autobiographies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and *Allegories Of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790–1870: Politics, History, and The Family from Edgeworth to Arnold* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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PREFACE

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,

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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 “performative modes” of Hedda Gabler on stage and that of the “naïve 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

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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