Comic Acting and Portraiture in
Late-Georgian and Regency England

The popularity of the comic performers of late-Georgian and Regency England and their frequent depiction in portraits, caricatures and prints is beyond dispute, yet until now little has been written on the subject. In this unique study Jim Davis considers the representation of English low comic actors, such as Joseph Munden, John Liston, Charles Mathews and John Emery, in the visual arts of the period, the ways in which such representations became part of the visual culture of their time, and the impact of visual representation and art theory on prose descriptions of comic actors. Davis reveals how many of the actors discussed also exhibited or collected paintings and used painterly techniques to evoke the world around them. Drawing particularly on the influence of Hogarth and Wilkie, he goes on to examine portraiture as critique and what the actors themselves represented in terms of notions of national and regional identity.

Jim Davis is Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Warwick. As a researcher he specialises in British theatre during the long nineteenth century. He has published a biographical study of John Liston, an edition of the plays of H. J. Byron and an edition of the diaries of the stage manager of the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton, Frederick Wilton. With Victor Emeljanow he co-wrote a prize-winning study of nineteenth-century theatre audiences, Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840–1880 (2001), and more recently he has edited a collection of critical essays on Victorian Pantomime and a volume on Edmund Kean. He has also co-convened theatre historiography groups for the International Federation for Theatre Research and for the British Theatre and Performance Research Association, and is an editor of the journal Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film.
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JIM DAVIS
I come now to those other Men Actors, who, at this time, were equally famous in the lower Life of Comedy. But I find myself more at a loss to give you them, in their true and proper Light, than those I have already set before you. Why the Tragedian warms us into Joy, or Admiration, or sets our Eyes on flow with Pity, we can easily explain to another’s Apprehension: But it may sometimes puzzle the gravest Spectator to account for that familiar Violence of Laughter, that shall seize him, at some particular Strokes of a true Comedian. How then shall I describe what a better Judge might not be able to express? The Rules to please the Fancy cannot so easily be laid down, as those that ought to govern the Judgment. The Decency too, that must be observed in Tragedy, reduces, by the manner of speaking it, one Actor to be much more like another, than they can or need be supposed to be in Comedy: There the Laws of Action give them such free, and almost unlimited Liberties, to play and wanton with Nature, that the Voice, Look, and Gesture of a Comedian may be as various, as the Manners and Faces of the whole Mankind are different from one another. These are the Difficulties I lie under.

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Acknowledgements

I started work on this book in Sydney, Australia, and completed it in Warwickshire, UK. I am very grateful to the Universities of New South Wales and Warwick for research leaves that enabled me to research and to finish writing this study, not to mention the Australia Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) for small research grants. Library fellowships at both Harvard and Princeton Universities enabled further research into primary materials. Staff at the Theatre Collection (Victoria and Albert Museum), the Garrick Club Library, the Houghton Library (Harvard), the Folger Shakespeare Library and Princeton University Library have been particularly helpful. Many individuals have contributed to this study, whether as research assistants, commissioning conference papers and articles, finding prints, commenting on drafts or sections of the manuscript, or offering advice, inspiration and encouragement. I owe a particular debt to Peter Thomson and Patricia Smyth for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this book. I am particularly grateful to Patricia Smyth for additional assistance in preparing illustrations for the book. I would also particularly like to thank Emily Allen, John Astington, Barbara Cavanagh, Chris Baugh, Tracy Davis, Kate Dorney, Rosie Dyas, Victor Emeljanow, Annette Fern, Viv Gardner, John Golder, Jane Goodall, Catherine Haille, Peg Katritsky, Baz Kershaw, David Mayer, Bronwyn Mason, Kate Newey, Jean Orr, Marcus Risdell, Laurence Senelick, Brian Singleton, Simon Sladen, Lisa Trahair, Shearer West, Georgina Zeigler, Ted Ziter and the anonymous readers of this monograph for CUP. I am indebted to the Historiography Working Groups of both the International Federation for Theatre Research and the British Theatre and Performance Research Association for more general stimulus, and to my colleagues in Theatre and Performance Studies at Warwick for providing a calm and collegial environment in which to function. I could not have researched and written this book without the hospitality of many friends who provided accommodation at various times in England and Australia, particularly Madeleine Blackwell, Bill and Laurette Bray, John McCallum, Pat Roach and Cheryl Coyne, and Queenie Saoul. I would also like to thank my wonderful daughters Helen and Catherine Davis for their support and friendship over the years and for always being...
Acknowledgements

such good company. I am also grateful to Vicki Cooper and her staff at Cambridge University Press for their support and advice. Earlier versions of some sections of this book have appeared in *European Romantic Review*, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, *Theatre Research International* and *Theatre Survey*. 