

Introduction

Introducing a volume of the diaries of a minor dramatist, the Victorian critic Clement Scott speaks of them as a bridge ‘over the blank period of unwritten history between Macready and Henry Irving’.¹ It is now generally agreed that the years from 1840 to 1870, roughly the same span, saw the emergence of the West End;² but the period remains almost as unmapped as it was when Scott threw his first rope of reminiscences across the chasm. In 2000 Tracy C. Davis provided a massive and challenging incitement to new work on the whole century, in her *Economics of the British Stage 1800–1914*;³ but there are still very few works exploring the foundation of the West End. This book, taking something of its title and its focus from Maggie Gale’s *West End Women: Women and the London Stage 1918–1962*,⁴ is therefore setting out upon a new and untold history. Perhaps Scott’s image of a bridge, offering to link two high places, suggests a reason for the continued neglect of the early and mid-Victorian theatre: it carries the implication that what lies between is a gulf, dark and low and not worth visiting. A few pathways through the undergrowth have been traced, mostly using Shakespeare as a guiding light;⁵ and they suggest that this was indeed a space of savagery and darkness. It is the ambition of this book to counter that perception. My intention is not to offer another way of negotiating, getting over, the mid-Victorian theatre, but to make an open-eyed and appreciative foray into its centre; to attempt to suggest a different way of seeing, that does

¹ Clement Scott and Cecil Howard, eds., *The Life and Reminiscences of E. L. Blanchard*, 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson, 1891), vol. 1, p. xiv.

² See for example James Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience* (University of Iowa Press, 2001), p. 167.

³ Cambridge University Press, 2000. ⁴ London: Routledge, 1996.

⁵ See for example Richard W. Schoch, *Shakespeare’s Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) and *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

not picture the formation of the West End as an unfortunate pitfall in the development of theatrical art.

THE NEW WEST END

The first question that presents itself is why such a ‘blank period’ in theatre history should be supposed to have occurred during the most eventful and vigorous years of Victoria’s reign: the received understanding that theatre-going was an unimportant and unfashionable pursuit during these decades is not an answer but a restatement of the question. During these years London was rebuilt as the global metropolis, the unchallenged centre of the western world; and this meant huge physical and psychological changes. According to its most recent historian, ‘[t]he 1860s were the most destructive and the most creative decade in the City’s history in the 200 years since the Great Fire’, when runaway new building and the urgent necessity for new highways, transport, drainage and lighting to serve it made old London an unceasing chaos, a maze of hoardings, actual bridges – the viaducts of the new railways – deep excavations, broken-off streets, raw demolition and chaotic redevelopment.⁶ In the midst of this there were, it would appear, many people eager to be amused and to have their understanding of the world around them shaped by the interpretations of performance: every picture we have of London’s ubiquitous hoardings in these years shows them plastered with brilliant and busy posters advertising plays, shows, exhibitions and performances of all kinds (see cover illustration). Already in 1800 this was the largest city in the world; by 1851 it had become a dense mass of more than 2.3 million people, with tens of thousands more within frequent visiting range by train. By 1841 a third of the residents had not been born in the city; and the large majority of them were young.⁷ 136,000 houses in 1801 had become 306,000 by 1851. Here was the biggest, most exciting audience in the world.

On the other hand, growth was not a simple matter of addition. The redevelopment undercut not only the old patterns of social assumption and interaction between Londoners, but their very dwelling places, and many communities which were the potential audiences for London theatre were displaced and destroyed, while others were created further from the centre. In the City of London the number of inhabited houses fell by 30 per cent in twenty years, from 14,580 in 1851 to 9,415 in 1871. The middle-class

⁶ Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 47.

⁷ Accounts of the Total Population, 1841, *British Parliamentary Papers*, 1841 ii (Sess. 2, 52), p. 277.

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workers in the banks and offices of the commercial district chose to move to the suburbs and become commuters on the new trains: and the new train stations meant that, in their turn, the poorer citizens were turned out. Over 56,000 inner-city poor were abruptly made homeless between 1857 and 1874. Since no replacement housing was provided, they crammed into every surviving nook and cranny behind and around the grand new stations and the fine broad roads that were deliberately driven through the worst of the slums; their alienation presented an urgent problem requiring social engineering in an increasingly dangerous city. It was as well that by 1842 all the main thoroughfares were lit by gas – but the dark lanes and back courts were thereby turned even more completely into no-go areas for the well-dressed and vulnerable. The violent underclass were no more of a threat to city life, however, than the chaotic traffic jams in which people and horses were regularly crushed to death, and certainly nothing like as dangerous as the newfangled water closets of the better off, which by 1855 discharged most of the waste of 2.5 million Londoners untreated into the Thames on their doorsteps, and spread successive waves of cholera that thinned the city's population, rich and poor alike. Deaths had reached 43,000 by 1854, when the causes were finally understood and action taken – again in the form of massively disruptive building works, this time to create the Thames Embankments, which still house sewers to intercept and carry away the waste, the work partly financed by having the Embankments also house the tunnel of the first underground railway in the world.⁸

During the second half of the period of this book, from the tipping point of 1851 when the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park inaugurated W. L. Burn's 'age of equipoise',⁹ the imperial, industrial wealth that made it possible to undertake these grand designs flowed into leisure and consumption as conspicuously as it did into metropolitan growth. Business responded to demand driven by a new middle-class self-confidence, ever-increasing disposable income and social ambition; the modern West End was developed as the centre of that conspicuous consumption and urgent self-formation.

This development did not only apply to the public lives of men. It is an important part of the project of this book, the reassessment of West End

⁸ White, *London*, pp. 47, 49–50.

⁹ A characterisation of the period that the historian originated well before it became the title of his 1964 book (London: Allen & Unwin), which is interestingly endorsed by the revisionist essays in *An Age of Equipoise? Reassessing Mid-Victorian Britain*, ed. Martin Hewitt (London: Ashgate, 2000).

entertainment, to reinstate women as part of the London public and the professions. The role of women in the making of this new metropolis has already begun to be read anew in the twenty-first century, beginning with Erika Rappaport's significantly titled *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End*.¹⁰ The gendering of these developments as feminine and therefore soft and commodified may indeed have something to do with way in which West End theatre, a hugely important part of London's Victorian social history, is still discussed in a largely hostile, dismissive tone. Davis and Emeljanow provocatively offer the analysis that 'the history of the West End in our period . . . shows a deliberate attempt on the part of managers and journalists . . . to construct a "Crystal Palace", which would lure an increasingly assertive middle class to a theatrical theme park to flatter its sensitivity and cultural perspicacity or to satisfy its craving for luxurious spectacle'.¹¹ To put this less pejoratively, one might say that public spaces for display and shopping, entertainment and instruction, leisure and pleasure were part of the building and development of the new London; and the performance culture there played out is important for our understanding of Victorian times and our own. Jane Rendell in *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Gender, Space and Architecture in Regency London* has shown how the early part of the century set up a matrix of building and buying, looking and owning, on which the Victorian city was built, and suggests that 'the "interdisciplinary" state of knowledge allows new kinds of spaces and alternative modes of interpretation to emerge'¹² through which we might come to understand our culture better. A new and more nuanced understanding of the part played by women in this process is of the essence.

The domestication of leisure in the suburbs, the much discussed swing to the private patriarchy of the fireside, which fed the development of the periodical press and the novel, was not all there was by way of community activity and identity formation in the mid nineteenth century. The Victorians did go out; and many thousands of them went, every night of the week, to the spanking new West End entertainments. Imperious new movements in the arts gathering pace after 1880 have condemned this as simply commercial and commodified activity. The influential critical perspectives of William Archer and Bernard Shaw have enforced a teleological, Modernist view that before the arrival of Ibsen's plays London theatre was in urgent need of reformation and reclamation from vulgar and self-indulgent social rituals. A different view of the building of the

¹⁰ Princeton University Press, 2000.

¹¹ Davis and Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience*, p. 173.

¹² London: Athlone, 2002, p. 2.

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West End, both literally and in its symbolic dimensions, would read theatre – and also professional and social singing, dancing, music-making, reading and lecturing – differently, alongside the new understandings of public pursuits like shopping, dining out and strolling. This field is, of course, far too large to be remapped in its entirety in one volume; what follows will aim simply to set aside the stubborn rejection of the period's theatre as lacking in interest and excellence, and suggest ways into it as a richer and more flexible field of significance both social/material and symbolic.

PART I: MAPPING

This book is in two parts, each informed by one of the historiographic methods I canvassed in *New Readings in Theatre History*. The first section attempts a denser, more particularised characterisation of the West End entertainment world by several kinds of mapping. Chapter 1 begins by walking in imagination the West End streets that made up the rough parallelogram between the river on the south, Oxford Street to the north, Temple Bar to the east and St James's to the west, and attempts to give a sense of the rich complexity of that unfolding terrain, in its spatial, cultural and temporal dimensions. It culminates in an evocation of the essence of the place, its ideal existence as a portal on to a world of pleasure – an imaginary but insistently desired world that remains discursive. The journey invokes a materialist understanding of the pleasure ground both more detailed and broader than the usual focus on a few theatres and notable moments that led to the next important era. The demise of the patent houses in the 1840s, Charles Kean's management at the Princess's and his competition with Samuel Phelps at Sadler's Wells in the 1850s, the Bancrofts' management at the Prince of Wales's and their sponsorship of Tom Robertson's plays in the 1860s, the rise of Irving's Lyceum in the 1870s are the piers on which previous histories have built their bridge; this section moves about under their shadow, and looks for other marks upon the quite different landscape that lies beneath, seeking there the fairy-lights and half-hidden ways in to other theatres, new entertainments, a different performance.

Chapter 2 reaches for a discursive map to this newly illuminated terrain, turning to the popular press of the day. The explosion of journalism and print culture in general is a conspicuous feature of mid-Victorian Britain, and one often invoked to explain the enduring critical focus upon writing rather than performance in the period. It has been usual to accept

the condemnation of the theatre of the day which is found in the prolific commentaries of contemporary writers, the millions of words pumped out by the new steam presses and sold at popular prices to an increasingly literate population. But the very proliferation and endless repetition of these journalistic jeremiads might suggest to us that they were not succeeding in their aim of suppressing or changing the theatre to suit themselves; and amidst the deluge of print there is much that can be read to reveal the shape of the hopes and anxieties that performance provoked. I take a single issue of the trade newspaper *The Era* (that for 6 April 1856) and extrapolate, from its layout, tone and especially its advertisements, a taxonomic, classed view of the entertainment world to which it is a guide, finding there a fuller and more balanced context for the work of the men and women of the theatre.

Having surveyed the West End on the ground and in the press, Chapter 3 makes a final step from a material to a conceptual mapping of the terrain to ask how the creators of Victorian theatre perceived their own world; how they conceived of their work and the social identity it gave them. One of the most intriguing areas for a new history that is revealed by interdisciplinary understanding of the development of the West End is an exploration of an imaginary land that existed within it – the land of ‘Bohemia’. Victorian Bohemianism was a notable feature of the mid-century, and it is particularly interesting in a discussion of the gendering of social space; twenty-first-century scholars in gender studies have begun to explore it, taking off from suggestive remarks in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet* about a ‘semiporous, liminal space’ where ‘the young, male bourgeois literary subject was required to navigate his way through his “homosexual panic”’.¹³ Focusing on the hitherto occluded presence of women in this world of artistic work, I take up arguments concerning masculinity and the middle classes: the links between Bohemia and the development of the theatrical West End, its complex cross-gendering of public and private, domestic and creative spaces are a vital part of a new understanding of performance in this society. Writing for the stage is considered here as a product of the Bohemian subculture, and its conflicts over gender are seen to cut both ways. I suggest that the anxieties of these writers circulate round the feminisation of the jobbing translator, the hack journalist and the dramatic writer, in their separation from the valorised poets and novelists

¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 193.

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of the time, and that this anxiety has contributed to the pretended absence of women from that space.

PART II: MAKING

The dimensions of space and gender are further explored in the second part of the book, which turns to the theatre itself. I will employ genealogical and feminist methods to suggest new understandings of this despised culture, focussing on the parts played by women, not only on stage but also in management and creative entrepreneurship. Chapter 4 focusses first on the period from the first Parliamentary Select Committee on the Theatres in 1832 to the passing of the Theatres Act in 1843,¹⁴ and consider the ways in which the theatres' period of doubt and turmoil played into the concurrent, larger disturbance in British culture. What Marjorie Garber has called 'category panic' is, she argues, endemic in the modern world, and reaches crisis pitch at periods of particular stress, when cultural and social dissonances result in the blurring of definitions and boundaries.¹⁵ The deliberate transgression and ritual reassertion of gender divisions is a conspicuous result of such moments of high pressure, and the chapter explores the way in which, in the 1830s and 1840s, the London theatres obsessively represented and played out that testing of the line.

Chapters 5 and 6 move to include the post-1843 period, during which the new theatrical world, surveyed by a second select committee in 1866, took shape. Here the emphasis is upon the prominence, and in some cases the predominance, of women in the establishment of West End theatre. Despite continued reiteration even in the twenty-first century of the received wisdom that 'it was *only* as actresses that Victorian women could realistically hope to succeed in the theatre',¹⁶ Katherine Newey has already shown us how rich a field of work the nineteenth-century theatre was for women writers,¹⁷ and Tracy C. Davis gives us solid evidence that 'in nineteenth-century Britain, theatre is the only branch of industry or commerce where women, in significant numbers, were up-front business executives' and 'the emergence of hundreds of women in

¹⁴ Properly 1843 6/7 Victoria c. 68, Theatres Regulation Act.

¹⁵ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 16 et seq.

¹⁶ Kerry Powell, 'Gendering Victorian Theatre', in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, vol. 2, 1660–1895*, ed. Joseph Donohue (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 352–68, 361 (emphasis original).

¹⁷ *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

the administration of Victorian theatre created a whole new challenge to the practices of “gentlemanly capitalism”.¹⁸

Davis has very helpfully provided a detailed list of female contributors to management on the British stage up to 1914, and observes from her findings that the ‘toughest market to break into was the West End of London’ before the Victorian period; but adds that nevertheless we might see ‘Eliza Vestris, Mrs Honey, Harriet Waylett and Madame Celeste, triumphant in the minors, as pathbreakers’ while in the succeeding decades, as ‘the industry grew, more and more names emerge’ and ‘Marie Wilton, famous for taking over the Prince of Wales’s in 1865, was in good company as a London manageress in the 1860s’.¹⁹ She lists Anne Dumarge, Louisa and Ruth Herbert, Alice Marriot and Harriet Pelham as managers and lessees at this point within the West End, and Anne Vagg just beyond at Collins’s Music Hall in Islington. To these many more names of female impresarios may be added from Davis’s list, beginning with Fanny Kelly, who built her own theatre, the Royalty, and managed it until 1849, where after her a series of other women took charge, including Harriet Pelham, Martha Oliver and Emily Fowler, before the long tenures of Henrietta Hodson between 1870 and 1887 and Kate Santley 1878–1902. Louisa Nisbett managed at the Queens (which later became the Prince of Wales’s under Marie Wilton) in 1834 and the Adelphi in 1835; Elizabeth Yates managed the Adelphi after her husband’s death in 1843; Mary Ann Keeley shared the management with her husband at the Lyceum 1844–7. The Olympic, Vestris’s theatre, had several more women managers. Louisa and Mary Ann Swanborough took turns as lessees and managers in their family business at the Strand during the 1860s, and women of the Gatti clan held the lease at various dates of their music hall ‘Under the Arches’ in Villiers Street, as well as at their Lambeth Palace of Varieties. At the St James’s a succession of women tenants and managers began with Jenny Vertpré managing the French players in 1835, to be followed by Laura Seymour in 1854, Fanny Wyndham, there in 1859–60, Leonora Wigan 1860–2, Ruth Herbert 1864–8, Mlle De la Ferte in 1868, and Mrs John Wood (by birth a Vining) between 1869 and 1874.

In Chapter 5 I focus on these directors, lessees and managers, including several important women who had authority in the theatres where they

¹⁸ Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage 1800–1914* (Cambridge University Press 2000), pp. 273, 10.

¹⁹ Tracy C. Davis, ‘Female Managers, Lessees and Proprietors of the British Stage (to 1914)’, *Nineteenth-Century Theatre* 28:2 (winter 2000), 115–44, 115–16.

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worked with their partners or husbands, and who were widely acknowledged to be the actual moving force of the concern.²⁰ They operated not only as star performers but also in the role we would call director or artistic director: notably this was the case of Ellen Kean, neé Tree, whose work was vital to Charles Kean's venture at the Princess's; Celine Celeste, whose managerial abilities as well as her extraordinary stage gifts made her the equal and ally of Ben Webster, while between them they leased and managed at various points the Adelphi, the Olympic, the Lyceum and the Haymarket; and Priscilla Horton, aka Mrs German Reed, who invented the Gallery of Illustration in Regent's Street and whose cutting-edge importance is proposed in Chapter 2. Chapter 6 will conclude the argument for the importance of these women by offering a description and assessment of the theatrical work they actually did, the performances they staged and the importance of these to the Londoners for whom they were performed, and in the shaping of the West End as it is today.

The two parliamentary select committees I have mentioned frame the period of the formation of the West End. Much had happened between the two enquiries, in the development of London and indeed of Victorian Britain, but the preoccupations of the committee men remained remarkably constant. Since their reading of the history of London theatre has remained the basis of subsequent accounts, I will conclude this introduction with a consideration of what their questioning of witnesses suggests to have been their assumptions and intentions about the theatre of their times. This is a very different story from the one about the development of the West End that this book will attempt to tell.

THE SELECT COMMITTEES AND THE RECEIVED
 ACCOUNT, 1832–66

In 1831–2, which was of course also the time of the first parliamentary Reform Acts, the Select Committee on the Drama, chaired by Edward Bulwer Lytton, was chiefly concerned to introduce dramatic copyright for authors, and secondarily to reform theatrical licensing, abolishing the exclusive patent to perform Shakespeare and other 'legitimate' drama enjoyed by Covent Garden, Drury Lane and the Haymarket. The committee members asked their professional witnesses about the problems of the ancient patent houses, not only their old-established privileges and their hopelessly involved financial affairs but also their struggle to present

²⁰ Davis, *Economics*, p. 274.

straight plays in auditoria too large for them to be properly seen and heard. They clearly, from the tenor of their questioning, had a vision of smaller theatres where soft voices and unexaggerated facial expressions could make their points, and in which all sorts and conditions of men and women might become cultivated. They were hoping to encourage the widespread performance of the national poet and also the emergence of a new Shakespeare, to shape and to lead a new British way of life. Their focus on what James Glavin has called the ‘monumental chimera of a national drama’²¹ manifests a literary, rather than a theatrical, conception of the role of the stage, and one further disabled by its misunderstanding of theatre as being a tool of education, of social manipulation. The only immediate outcome of their recommendations was an abortive act which failed to give dramatists the copyright protection which the chairman of the committee (himself an aspirant dramatist) had chiefly aimed at.²² It is by no means clear why it took the government until 1843 to bring in the legislation that freed the trade in theatricals;²³ but the consequence for the patent houses in the interim was a kind of planning blight, their owners and successive managements struggling desperately as they awaited the abolition of their so-called privileges, their crowd-pleasing expedients endlessly lamented by the frustrated dramatists who wrote for the contemporary press. Subsequent histories have normally accepted their account, and focussed almost exclusively, in considering this period, on the brief and unsuccessful managements of William Charles Macready at Covent Garden 1837–9 and Drury Lane 1841–3, writing them up as noble but doomed efforts to revive Shakespeare and encourage legitimate new writing for the stage.

But the vociferous partisanship of Macready’s writer friends should not be allowed to eclipse the work of at least two other patent house managers of the time. One of these was Eliza Vestris, the importance of whose management of Covent Garden 1839–42 has been recognised by recent histories of Shakespearean production, and she figures here in Chapter 5; the other was Alfred Bunn, who in 1833 held the leases of both Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Bunn has been written of almost entirely as the enemy of ‘the national drama’, and of Macready its champion. His was a commercially spectacular career, culminating in this decade: he relinquished

²¹ John Glavin, *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 116.

²² 1833 3 William IV c. 15, Dramatic Copyright Act.

²³ But see Tracy C. Davis’s analysis in terms of the free trade debates, *Economics*, pp. 35–41.