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INTRODUCTION

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NINA AUERBACH

Before the curtain

For many, the Victorian theatre is the scruffy orphan of high culture, somewhat redeemed by the cultivation of its Edwardian successors. Today's high-minded aficionados take their antitheatrical tone from the stuffiest Victorians: the stage was and is crude, embarrassing, primitive, compared to its sister arts, prose, poetry, and painting.[1] In any case, the medium is by definition ephemeral, and so impossible to study. Its scripts, when they exist at all, are not moored by weighty volumes as literature is, or heavy canvases like paintings; like most screenplays today, Victorian plays are sketches for productions and performances now vanished in the mists that engulfed the world before film preserved it.

Collaborative, messy, and lost, the theatre is generally, and wrongly, dismissed as sub-canonical, at least until the 1890s, when the self-conscious literacy of Wilde and Shaw elevated it to the verbal sophistication that would become Edwardian drama. But the theatre's elusive art can be retrieved and, in books like this, it is. Once we begin to piece this hybrid medium back together, we restore the prism through which *all* Victorian artists and audiences – and these were most Victorians – saw their world.

I like hybrid media because as far as theatre history goes, I am myself a hybrid, a literary scholar who learned nothing about the Victorian theatre except that like everything else, it pertained in some vague way to Dickens. When I began to write about the celebrated Victorian actress Ellen Terry, I realized that even for my fellow Victorianists, she was in another world than her literary contemporaries. This most famous of artists was abandoned to a field called "Theatre History," whose denizens read archives, not what I called texts, and had a clinging mistrust of the literature that was my livelihood. But literary critics were still more suspicious of the theatre. Most of my colleagues persisted in assuming that I was writing about Dickens's secret mistress Ellen *Ternan*, a sullen ingénue whose only sustained role was that of great man's lover.[2] Most natives of English departments ignored everything about the theatre that Dickens did not control. Like Dickens's own

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blusteringly English Podsnap, they did not want to know about things they did not know. But in nineteenth-century England, literature and the theatre were collaborative storytellers; they were the dominant media through which audiences understood the world. Had they continued to collaborate, both would be stronger today.

Admittedly, we cannot see or hear Victorian productions as readily as we can read Dickens or look at Turner, but with the help of the essays in this *Companion*, they come back to life in our mind's eye, and with them, the makers and recipients of a culture steeped in theatre. Michael Pisani's evocative "Music for the theatre" lets us hear with our inner ears the sorts of melodies that underlay Victorian productions and molded its actors, who, like opera singers, attuned their voices to musical accompaniment; Russell Jackson's "Victorian and Edwardian stagecraft" encourages us to see sophisticated and fluid visual effects as exquisite as painting and as overpowering, in their day, as today's thoroughly inhuman cinematic computer graphics; while Tracy C. Davis reminds us of who paid for all this, or, more important, of who refused to pay: since the theatre was a creature of pure capitalism, state subsidy was inconceivable. The theatre may have been raffish compared to arts we now define as canonical, but it drew expertly on those arts. Moreover, like an exemplary Victorian hero but unlike many actual Victorians, it was both sumptuous and self-supporting.

All the essays in this book insist on the centrality of the theatre in nineteenth-century culture; until the end of the century, its broad popularity gave its conventions the aura of universality. Many essayists make large claims that are absolutely true. Cary M. Mazer states baldly: "in the nineteenth century, theatre was – despite the prevailing antitheatricalism of official high culture – perhaps the most widespread arena of popular culture." David Mayer reminds us that the violent moral absolutes of theatrical melodrama were not just a sop to groundlings, for whom we may read the working class; in a society racked by seemingly meaningless and malevolent changes, changes melodrama's fascinating villains came to personify, absurd contrasts reflected common perceptions, for "the nineteenth century was the first era of mass theatre-going, with theatre attendance active in all parts of the British Isles." In the best and broadest sense, theatrical experience was common; until it became respectable, it was not limited to any coterie.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is its determination to disentangle theatre history from the class snobbery and exclusions – our own as well as the Victorians' – that initially limited the field. A few decades ago, the official story of the Victorian theatre, which several essays label "triumphalist," was that of progressive rise.[3] In the first half of the nineteenth century, the story goes, audiences were predominantly lower class, thus by definition drunk and

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raucous; in the 1860s, the Bancrofts and other canny managers appealed to a middle-class family audience who, by the Edwardian decade, evolved grandly into the cultivated – for which we may read wealthy and fashionable – classes. As the audiences "rose," so, like a Victorian hero, did the theatre, evolving out of association with vagabondage and prostitution to genteel, even titled, respectability.

Such a theatre, if there ever was such a theatre, is as fractured as the mutually antagonistic classes it served. To many observers, it was segregated by geography as well as time. A trip from London's West End to its East End was often described as an excursion into savagery. In 1877, *Household Words* presented a taxonomy of London audiences according to their class: there were "the purely society or fashionable audience; the fast fashionable audience; the domestic audience; the respectable audience; the mixed audience; the working-class audience," which itself fractured into "the transpontine, the extreme East-end, the flash, the decorous, the criminal, the honest, the drunken and the sober."[4] Presumably, the rising respectable Edwardian theatre saved the institution, if not England itself, from these working-class intrusions, couth or uncouth.

This paradigm of a rising theatre is itself Victorian in its snobbish complacency, and it is, like most snobbish paradigms, wrong – though I have obtusely used it in my own work. The *Cambridge Companion* shows that like the theatre itself, Victorian audiences were more capacious and diverse than divisive commentators, then or now, have wanted to see. In "Victorian and Edwardian audiences," Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow insist that London's "multifaceted, variegated audiences have been generically and artificially constructed and often simplified by their contemporaries" – and by ourselves as well. In the same spirit, Heidi J. Holder's account of London's East-End theatre, generally defined as a ghetto of raffish roughs, argues for the capaciousness of the East End: while it gave something of a voice to women, criminals, blacks, and Jews, much of its repertoire also overlapped with that of the more refined West End. Jacky Bratton's account of the Victorian music hall similarly refuses to ghettoize its subject, stressing the congruence of this witty, impertinent, seemingly self-contained world with the so-called legitimate stage. Davis and Emeljanow reveal that even the so-called lower classes attended plays in the West End, though managers did their best to expel them by raising prices and gentrifying the house, replacing the pit with more expensive stalls.

These fascinating chapters reconstruct not a theatre fractured into class-segregated communities, shunned by each other, but a fluid mixture of genres that drew virtually all classes. The theatre may not quite do the work of the culture that Matthew Arnold fruitlessly tried to bring to his aesthetically

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brutish countrymen, a universal balm that consolidated warring and mutually ignorant social classes, but it came closer than any art, even the lovable but long Victorian novel, to becoming a universal language – as movies would claim to be before the coming of sound – providing a common audience with common visions. Outsiders constructed the divisions that were partially transcended in the theatre.

The theatre was not democratic (is anything?), but it did come as close as any art could to creating an experience that felt both topical and universal. For this reason, I am sorry that good as they are, almost half of the essays in this volume focus on the urbane theatre of the *fin de siècle* and its Edwardian descendants. It was in the 1890s that the theatre, like the novel, grew ashamed of mere popularity and aspired to high art. Now relying on smart talk in smaller theatres, late-Victorian and Edwardian plays were written for publication as well as performance, with elaborate (and, in Shaw's case, interminable) stage directions and commentary. As the characters' IQ rose, so did their social position. The idiom of the new theatre was reformist – its prophets were Ibsen, William Archer, and Shaw – but the more progressive it claimed to be, the more elitist it became. In short, theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century made itself up as the refined institution later historians claim it actually was.

The new Shavian theatre was never commercially self-sustaining, but because it published itself incessantly, it is what we have; scholars need not go to archives or forage for out-of-print anthologies to find plays and manifestos. But as the theatre aspired to literature, and literature itself became more rarefied, a unity was lost. I hope it does not seem obtusely nostalgic to suggest that the theatre that mattered in the nineteenth century was the theatre we no longer quite have.

Perhaps because the theatre had such a powerful imaginative hold, many of the most eminent Victorians shunned its compelling artificiality, its direct displays of emotion and fear, its unending music, its implicit deceit, its continual shape-changing. Charles Dickens has made himself known as Mr. Theatre, as well as Mr. Social Criticism and Mr. Jollity, but in fact he could not be farther from authentic theatricality. When he writes about the theatre, he does so with a moralistic fastidiousness that becomes, at times, revulsion. Several of the essays in this *Companion* take Dickens to task, rightly, for his condescending descriptions of East-End playhouses, as if this former child of the streets feels compelled to distance himself from a melee of workers cavorting around. But even those virtuoso self-displays, his novels, find it hard to treat the theatre without insulting it.

Jacky Bratton's essay on the music hall cleverly brings in a snippet of *Bleak House*. An officious coroner comes to the foul heart of London's slums to

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interrogate its crushed inhabitants about a pauper's death. A local song-and-dance man in a public house tries to lighten this gloomy visitation:

> In the zenith of the evening, Little Swills says, Gentlemen, if you'll permit me, I'll attempt a short description of a scene of real life that came off here to-day. Is much applauded and encouraged; goes out of the room as Swills; comes back as the Coroner (not the least in the world like him); describes the Inquest, with recreative intervals of piano-forte accompaniment to the refrain – With his (the Coroner's) tippy tol li doll, tippy tol lo doll, tippy tol li doll, Dee![5]

Not the least in the world like him – with this taunt, throughout his novels, Dickens banishes actors, claiming sole reality for himself and his visions. Never mind that his own subsequent description of the slums – "Come night, come darkness, for you cannot come too soon, or stay too long, by such a place as this!" (*Bleak House*, chap. 11) – sounds like Little Swills parodying East-End melodrama. For Dickens, who constituted a theatre in his person, the actual theatre was a meretricious snare.

Dickens's sourness toward the theatre stretches from the beginning of his career to the end. After the good-hearted protagonist of his third novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*, realizes that he can do nothing to earn a living, he becomes a popular actor without half trying. Vincent Crummles, the fraudulent company manager, asks suggestively, "You don't happen to be anything of an artist, do you?" "That is not one of my accomplishments," Nicholas answers, thereby assuring his theatrical future: to be an actor is to be an artist in no sense. With polite horror, he shares the bill with Crummles's daughter the infant phenomenon, a putative child star who is really a monster without an age:

> the infant phenomenon, though of short stature, had a comparatively aged countenance, and had moreover been precisely the same age – not perhaps to the full extent of the memory of the oldest inhabitant, but certainly for five good years. But she had been kept up late every night, and put upon an unlimited allowance of gin-and-water from infancy, to prevent her growing tall, and perhaps this system of training had produced in the infant phenomenon the additional phenomenon.[6]

A caricature of eerily versatile child actors like Master Betty and Jean Davenport, who were authentic stars in the early nineteenth century, the infant phenomenon is an embodied lie who turns performance into lies.

Great Expectations, written when Dickens was an established literary star, equates all expectations with theatre, and thus with deceit and self-deceit. Pip, an ambitious laborer, is given a mysterious gift that will make him a gentleman – which means, in practice, that he wears fancy clothes and idles

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about. Like the actors in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Pip is made a sham person, deferred to for being, and doing, nothing. Around the middle of the story, Mr. Wopsle, a repellent clergyman, repeats Pip's degrading transformation by becoming an actor. With no credentials but overweening vanity, he plays Hamlet. Wopsle's Hamlet is one of Dickens's renowned comic set pieces; it is also one of the most excoriating antitheatrical passages in the English novel.

The point is not that Wopsle is a terrible actor in an amateur production; he is damned, doomed, and mocked for being an actor at all. His embarrassing performance is an icon of artifice, from his appearance, on which Pip muses, "I could have wished that his curls and forehead had been more probable," to his elocution, which was "very unlike any way in which any man in any natural circumstances of life or death ever expressed himself about anything."[7] Somewhere, no doubt, there is a natural Hamlet with probable curls and real speech whom Pip, and Dickens, would approve, but this Hamlet would never see a stage. Like Pip himself, Wopsle's Hamlet is a creature of costume – his tyrannical dresser critiques his performance only because "when he see the ghost in the queen's apartment he might have made more of his stockings" – and thus a sham. Like poor Little Swills who does his impotent best to irradiate *Bleak House*, Wopsle's Hamlet is "not the least in the world like him."

For Dickens, the only authentic theatre was himself. His novels are performances of Dickens; he acted in his own plays; in the end, he shortened his life touring in blazing readings from his own novels. Like many non-actors, he loved to have everybody watching him enthralled as he pulled his world out of his head. His hostility to the actual theatre, his compulsion to expose its meretriciousness, was more than professional rivalry; it was a symptom of a typically Victorian, and perhaps particularly masculine, fear. In those innocent days before talk shows and television, the mark of a great man was sincerity. Thomas Carlyle's blueprint for would-be heroes boomed through the minds of all ambitious men: "I should say *sincerity*, a deep, great, genuine sincerity, is the first characteristic of all men in any way heroic."[8] A hero was unremittingly himself. If audiences turned from man to performer, from word to show, the commonwealth would lose itself in chaos.

For Dickens and other Victorian heroes, the theatre was suspect unless it was a testament to his own solitary sincerity. But stars, memorable though they were, were not the heart of the Victorian theatre; it was not so much Hamlet as home that was consecrated on the stage. From the domestic comedies and farces Michael Booth's essay describes to Tom Robertson's prestigious cup-and-saucer plays of the 1860s – staged by the Bancrofts in a dollhouse theatre that was a winning facsimile of a middle-class house – to Ibsen's, Shaw's, Pinero's, and Henry Arthur Jones's Edwardian problem

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plays, the theatre may have been run by men, but it dwelt on women's ostensible sphere, family and its simulations.[9] If the theatre was perilous to great men on heroic missions, it was still worse company for the good women who were supposed to wait for them at home.

Victorian novels, with their subtle elisions and divisions, have always drawn feminists to search out hidden protests against the tyrannical contradictions that governed women's lives. Though literary feminists endlessly dissect Dorothea Brooke's marriages or the "low, slow ha-ha" of the madwoman in the attic, they perpetually neglect the theatre. I have never understood this neglect, for in the theatre, even at its most pious, home is an arbitrary series of plays. Victorian novels about women's lives, and these are most of the novels we still read, have frozen into predictable ritual: we know what Dorothea will feel when. But women-centered plays are open to almost infinite suggestion.

The essays in this anthology illuminate women's role in the nineteenth-century theatre – both as troubling presence and speaking absence – from many vantage points. Joseph Donohue's stirring "Actors and acting" affirms the continuity of the theatrical grand style from the late seventeenth century to the present: despite the rhetorical changes in theatrical fashion, Donohue draws a firm line from Kemble's Shakespearean performances to Gielgud's, and after him to those of Ralph Fiennes. In Donohue's account, British actors forge a tradition as distinct and immutable as the great tradition that dignifies the British novel.

I love this vision of a tradition; I too believe that distinctive actors like Gielgud contain glimpses of distinctive actors like Kean. But Donohue's tradition has trouble containing women, for the actresses he describes all seem more eccentric than the men. Are actresses part of the same grand tradition as actors, or do they compose a tradition of their own? I find it harder to locate a tradition that would link Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, Peggy Ashcroft, and Judi Dench, and so, I suspect do many theatre historians. Donohue himself concludes cryptically: "All the same, the vitality and presence we find in actors and acting today, in this post-Gielgud era – Ralph Fiennes's Richard II and Coriolanus come happily to mind – have such clear affinities with performances of such roles by Kemble, Kean, Macready, Fechter, Tree, Martin-Harvey, their actress counterparts, and their illustrious or unsung predecessors, that the connections seem, finally, too close to challenge."

Who are "their actress counterparts" and what roles would they play? Not, probably, Richard II or Coriolanus or their female foils: to play Richard's queen or even Volumnia in the grand manner would unbalance these actor-centered plays. I suspect that I am not the only believer in Donohue's thesis who finds herself drawn by his essay to the anomaly of theatrical women.

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Other essays address theatrical women more directly, but they emerge as scarcely less anomalous than Donohue's "actress counterparts." Sos Eltis finds one thread of tradition in the recurrent figure of the fallen woman, but proclaims that this figure disappeared after Noël Coward's unsuccessful use of a fallen woman in 1924. Mary Jean Corbett writes suggestively about the sly self-creation of actress autobiographies, as exemplified by the Edwardian feminist Elizabeth Robins. Susan Carlson and Kerry Powell continue to spotlight Robins in their exhilarating reconstruction of Edwardian women's theatre as the suffrage movement galvanized it. But all these essays highlight fragments of theatrical history, making me wonder what happened before and after. Are theatrical women today infused by the glamour of the fallen woman, the self-awareness of Elizabeth Robins, the communal power of suffrage theatre? Or do men transcend time, while women are lost in it?

Two of the strongest essays in the book emphasize the comprehensive degree to which women's issues, if not always women themselves, dominate the Victorian and Edwardian theatre. Michael R. Booth's "Comedy and farce" points to the fixation on marriage, family, and unruly women that fuel these apparently escapist genres. Booth reminds us that while, true to form, comedies end conservatively and in couples, the spur of much Victorian comedy involves trouble in the home.

In contrast to Booth's suavely descriptive account of plays that are predominantly mid-Victorian, Peter Raby's "Theatre of the 1890s" is a plangent evocation of domestic problem plays that implicitly denounce a dying class and a sick society. For Raby, male dramatists like Pinero, Shaw, Jones, and Wilde scrutinize marriage hopelessly and diagnostically, as a microcosm of terminal social decay. The urgency of *fin-de-siècle* plays may be tempered by conservative endings, but their lacerations are no longer comic.

If we knew how earlier Victorian comedy erupts into *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian extremities of social despair, we might discern a tradition of theatrical domesticity, one focused on theatrical women, whose roots precede the nineteenth century and whose aftershocks are with us today. The most durable achievement of these essays should be to stimulate new ones, and books as well, giving sequence and substance to omissions, while restoring works this anthology necessarily omits.

What, for instance, happened to *East Lynne*? Many essays dwell on Pinero's sophisticated domestic melodrama, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893), but all are silent about the earlier, phenomenally popular domestic melodrama *East Lynne*. Perhaps *East Lynne* still embarrasses us. It is such a sentimental cliché of a weeper – through the 1920s, a failing repertory

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