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The Victorian Clown

The Victorian Clown is a microhistory of mid-Victorian comedy, spun out of the life and work of two professional clowns. Their previously unpublished manuscripts – James Frowde’s account of his young life with the famous Hengler’s Circus in the 1850s and Thomas Lawrence’s 1871 gagbook – offer unique, unmediated access to the grass roots of popular entertainment. Through them this book explores the role of the circus clown at the height of equestrian entertainment in Britain, when the comic managed audience attention for the riders and acrobats, parodying their skills in his own tumbling and contortionism, and also offered a running commentary on the times through his own ‘wheezes’ – stand-up comedy sets. Plays in the ring connect the circus to the stage, and since both these men were also comic singers, their careers give a sharp insight into popular music just as it was being transformed by the new institution of music hall.

JACKY BRATTON is Professor of Theatre and Cultural History in the Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London. She is the author of a number of books and many articles on nineteenth-century culture. Her latest monograph is *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge, 2003), and, with Julie Hankey, she is Joint Series Editor of the Shakespeare in Production series published by Cambridge University Press. She is also a frequent contributor to BBC radio documentaries.

ANN FEATHERSTONE is a Lecturer in the Department of Drama at the University of Manchester and Research Assistant in the Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London. Her interests encompass popular entertainment and culture, and she has published on subjects such as pub entertainments, the diary of a Victorian theatregoer in Nottingham, and the portable theatres in *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* and *Early Popular Visual Culture*.

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Dedicated to the memory of Paul Newman, who was sadly
killed in a road accident before he could see this book,
inspired by the work of his ancestor Tom Lawrence.



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Preface



The project on which we are engaged, under the auspices of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, is to map ‘an alternative history of the Victorian theatre’. An alternative vision depends not only on new methods and new approaches, but also on new materials for study. The perennial problem that faces commentators, theorists and historians working with texts that are outside the canon is how to share those materials fully and fairly with their readers. Voluminous records survive from the artistic life of the nineteenth century, but only a small proportion of the material that might be utilised in creating our working understanding of that past has been published, even less kept in print. In challenging that selection, and the wisdom based upon it, we have somehow to juggle new suggestions and perceptions against the imperative need to show readers the texts on which we have based our fresh ideas. This volume is primarily intended to share with future readers and analysts some of the materials we are using in our attempt to frame a new approach to the performance culture of the mid-Victorian period. The major part of this book consists of two lengthy manuscripts by two men who worked as clowns; they have never been printed before, and were not written for publication, so they have not so far passed through the process of assimilation to the conventional narrative of Victorian performance history. We have tried to provide enough editorial explication, and prefatory discussion, to suggest their significance as a microhistory of Victorian comic performance; but our efforts are tentative and by no means exhaustive, and we hope that some readers will find their own ways, whether as students and scholars or performers and entertainers, to explore the Victorian clown much further than we have done so far.



Acknowledgements and note on authorship



As is wholly appropriate for a microhistory of an entertainment form in which collaboration is vital, this book is the creation of many hands. Its point of origin is a text by Thomas Lawrence, clown and proprietor of a portable theatre, the manuscript of which was most generously donated to Royal Holloway, University of London by Lawrence's descendant Paul Newman. This unique Victorian clown's gagbook is transcribed here by Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone, as are James Frowde's circus recollections. John Turner had previously lodged a photocopy and an initial transcription of this second manuscript at the Theatre Museum in London, and he kindly put us in touch with David Stabb, Frowde's descendant, who lent us the original notebooks and also the sketches of Frowde that we reproduce. We are very grateful to both of these descendants for permission to reproduce their invaluable materials here. John Turner has written a full account of the Henglers and their circuses, and published two volumes of circus biographies, and we have drawn extensively on his published and unpublished expertise. The introductory materials and many annotations are our joint creation. We have evolved a mode of writing, checking, editing and rewriting that eventually blends the work of our two hands together; and we take joint responsibility for the opinions and decisions it embodies, as well as for all our errors and shortcomings.

Many local librarians and archivists have lent their unstinting assistance: we would like to thank Roger Beacham, Central Library, Cheltenham; the Staff of the Local Studies Library, Central Library, Birmingham; Peter Blake and Paul Jordan, Brighton History Centre,



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Even more than most writers, we must thank our families and friends, who have exercised great forbearance with our immersion in sometimes rather dubious Victorian jokes; moreover, we have had careful and insightful readers in Jane Traies, Gilli Bush-Bailey and Dennis Featherstone. Vicki Cooper of Cambridge University Press has been extremely generous with editorial help and advice. Finally, we would like gratefully to acknowledge the very substantial financial support of the AHRC, without which this project could not have been carried out.



Editorial practice



James Frowde began to write his memoirs on 21 June 1894, using a foolscap account-book (13 × 8 inches) with 45 leaves (of which 39 are used for the memoirs) that already contained some lists and figures connected with his local concerns and societies ('no. 8 battery 1st Gloucester Artillery Volunteer Corps', among other things) in the back and front. He continued in four other notebooks, the next two similar to each other, both black, measuring 8 × 6½ inches and with 80 leaves; the fourth is covered in red marbled paper and measures 9 × 7 inches with 60 leaves; the fifth is again black, 9 × 7 inches with 60 leaves (of which the final 23 are unused). He wrote in indelible pencil, a faint purple, and in some patches went over his work in black or red ink. He tended to write on the verso, left-hand pages and then sometimes to double back and fill in the rectos, either with additions or with the continuation of the narrative. These practices make it extremely difficult to disentangle a story which is in any case not particularly consecutive. He numbered the pages straight through all the volumes, but the numbers are as often as not confusing rather than helpful, and we have omitted them, sorting the story into chronological order as far as possible and noting our deductions about its dating.

Our selection from the manuscript is intended to include everything that bears in any way upon Frowde's experience as a performer: accounts of his travels, his appearances, his relations with his family (his mother was a Hengler) and fellow-workers, and any incidental comment about theatre or circus life. We have amended the punctuation where this was essential, since there is often none in the original, but have otherwise left the text as Frowde punctuated it

Editorial practice

as far as possible, however strange it may seem to modern eyes. We have silently corrected the (relatively very few) spelling errors he made, except where there seems some significance in the way he chose to write a word, which we have retained and noted. Large parts of the manuscript, notably his embarrassed accounts of his early courtships and some fluent but unremarkable passages of sermonising, have been left out; omissions are marked with a simple ellipsis, thus ‘...’. There are a few places where we have been unable to decipher a word, which we have marked with ‘[?]’. To structure the narrative, and to carry the reader through omitted sections of any length, we have used summarising paragraphs differentiated by type-face; but we are conscious that an ideal procedure for this kind of transcription is elusive. We apologise in advance for any irritation our intrusions may cause, and, conversely, for any points where we do not seem to have offered enough explication.

Frowde’s scribble was, presumably, intended for later transcription, hence his hurried and complicated procedure, with many corrections and additions. Thomas Lawrence, on the other hand, wrote carefully, fluently and in a clear hand, in a rational and deliberate order; he was making a tool intended for rapid use in dim light before he returned to the ring. The first gagbook, not transcribed here, is full to bursting and has lost its cover; when he began on the second, he copied out materials he was still using, apparently updating them in the process, and crossing them through methodically as he rearranged them in the new book. This later book, which we have transcribed in its entirety, is $8 \times 6\frac{1}{2}$ inches, contains 68 leaves, and is not full. He titles and numbers his ‘wheezes’, starting each on a new page, and he groups short fragments together under headings. Therefore his work presents very little difficulty on the page – except for the enormous effort of translating the bald script into a performance. Lawrence was less formally literate than Frowde, so his spelling is practical rather than orthodox; we have updated it for ease of reading and to avoid a factitiously quaint effect. Where it seems to us that the way he writes makes a point about pronunciation, or suggests how he thought about a word, we have added a note of the original spelling.