

Victorian Theatricalities: Introduction

Michael Dobson

Most of my academic work to date has been devoted to early modern drama, particularly in Enlightenment and modern performance, but editing this issue of **19** about Victorian theatre and theatricality has felt like coming home all the same. I grew up in a Victorian seaside resort, Bournemouth, where the nineteenth-century past was the only past we had. Equally, the theatrical past was about the only theatre we had. Apart from the annual pantomime at the Pavilion Theatre (feeble enough for one year's effort to have starred Linsey de Paul), the occasional visiting musical (at a very early age I saw *Oliver!* at the same venue, an experience to which I attribute the visceral aversion to musicals from which I have suffered ever since), and the archaic farces and last desperate revivals of *The Desert Song* which used to come to the Pier in the summer, the town seemed wilfully determined to earn the description offered by Sir Anthony Quayle when his touring *Tempest* played to half-empty houses in the 1980s: 'Bournemouth', he intoned, 'is the graveyard of the English theatre.'

If it was a graveyard, though – and from what I remember of the touring production of *Ladies in Retirement* to which my father once took me out of sheer surprise that Evelyn Laye and Dulcie Gray were both still alive, the description wasn't far off – it boasted one very luxurious memorial. In a prime position on the cliff top, surveying the bay and the pier, a vigorous, philistine and acquisitive Victorian hotelier and Mayor of Bournemouth called Sir Merton Russell-Cotes (1835–1921) had in 1898 built East Cliff Hall, as a present for his wife Annie. It remains a superb monument to the nineteenth century in general and the nineteenth-century theatre in particular.

A peculiar but attractive compound of Scots baronial castle, Italian villa, French château and Bournemouth seaside bungalow, complete with lavish Art Nouveau interiors and a fountain in the entrance lobby, this building had always been treated as a museum: in conscious emulation of the Wallace Collection in London, Sir Merton and Annie amply stuffed it with nineteenth-century British paintings, miscellaneous sculptures, and souvenirs of their extensive overseas holidays, and in 1908 they formally donated it to the Borough to serve as Bournemouth's principal repository of high culture.¹ Today the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum remains the late Victorian treasure house *par excellence*, and I can imagine few more vivid shortcuts into the culture and mindset of the late nineteenth-century *haute bourgeoisie* than an afternoon spent marvelling at the tons of

accumulated trophies and bibelots cluttering its rooms or the acres of tastefully-exposed nipples adorning its walls. The gallery is now expertly curated, and was lovingly refurbished with the help of lottery money in the 1990s, but when I was young it was a faded and Gothic place, simply the grandest of all the many Victorian houses in the town where someone had died and nobody had known what to do with all their obsolete possessions. If it hadn't been for the portraits of a florid and proprietorial Russell-Cotes hung in key positions, and the sheer force of body and will commemorated by the suits of Samurai armour and African masks filling the upstairs bedrooms, East Cliff Hall might have been Miss Havisham's holiday house.



Fig. 1 Exterior of the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth.

What the Russell-Cotes Museum always made clear, even at its gloomiest, was the key place of drama in the Victorian imagination. The house was always designed in and of itself as a dramatic location, the gold mosaics and fountain of its hall giving the Russell-Cotes' guests the illusion that they had stepped into one of the voluptuous Alma-Tadema-style classical scenes on its walls, and indeed when I was a teenager Ken Russell brought a film crew to Bournemouth in order to shoot the interiors of his characteristically over-the-

Michael Dobson, Victorian Theatricalities: Introduction

19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

top movie about Rudolph Valentino there. (It always struck me that it would make the perfect set for Orsino's palace in a film adaptation of *Twelfth Night*.) East Cliff Hall was also intended as a magnet for the theatrical celebrities whose portraits alternated down the hallways with genre paintings of languid nymphs and groups of domestic animals.

Russell-Cotes' much-name-dropped guests at his Royal Bath Hotel next door included Oscar Wilde, who was impressed by the works of art which would later be moved to the house ('You have built and fitted up with the greatest beauty and elegance, a palace,' Russell-Cotes remembered him saying, 'and fitted it with gems of art, for the use and benefit of the public at hotel prices'), but unfortunately Wilde had been disgraced by the time East Cliff Hall was built.² The prime famous guest Russell-Cotes craved was someone altogether less controversial, namely Henry Irving, given the first ever theatrical



Fig. 2 James Archer, *Henry Irving as Charles I*, oil on canvas, 1873 (BORG 00160 Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum).

knighthood in the very year of Wilde's downfall. Irving had stayed at the hotel during

Michael Dobson, *Victorian Theatricalities: Introduction*

provincial tours, and after a barrage of manipulative fan-letters from Russell-Cotes he eventually came to stay, briefly, at East Cliff Hall. During his stay he was even prevailed

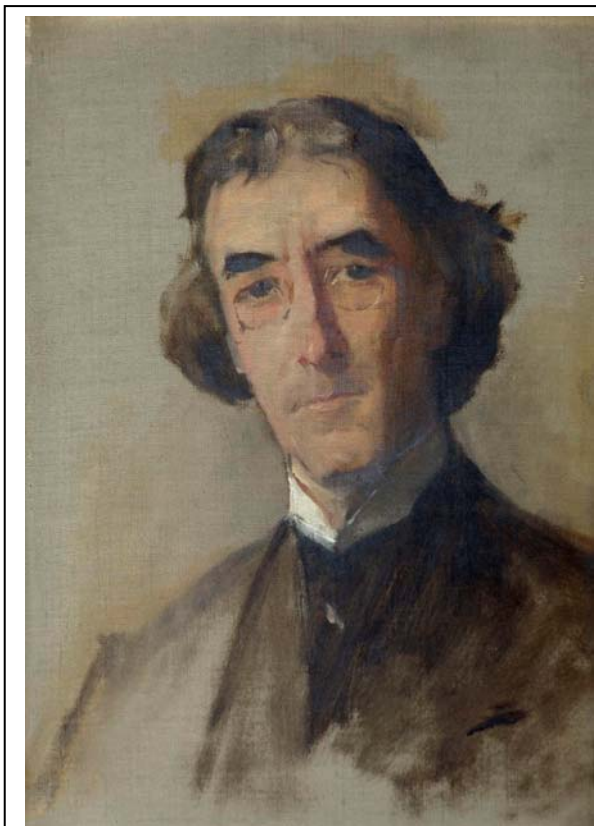


Fig. 3 William Ewart Lockhart, *Sir Henry Irving, Study for his Jubilee Picture*, oil on canvas, 1887 (BORGH 01330 Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum).

upon to switch on a fountain named in his honour at the Royal Bath, using a special inscribed key which Russell-Cotes treasured ever afterwards. After Irving's death in 1905, Sir Merton and Annie bought many of his personal effects at auction, including James Archer's fine full-length portrait of him as Charles I (1873) and William Lockhart's study for the face of Irving (1887) included in the congregation represented in his huge canvas of Victoria's jubilee service at Westminster. Adding these to their existing collection of Irving memorabilia and other theatrical paintings and souvenirs, they converted the bedroom in which Irving had stayed into a permanent shrine to his memory, key and all.

The Henry Irving Room – which thanks to the wonders of modern technology computer-owners reluctant to visit Bournemouth can now tour via the internet at <http://russell-cotes.bournemouth.gov.uk/house/tours/360pages/irving360.asp> – would make an ideal introduction to most of the contents of this volume, not only Brian Willis's intriguing article on the voices of Irving and other Victorian actors. (Thanks to another technological wonder, this reassessment of how the late Victorians spoke Shakespeare includes early sound recordings made by Irving and some of his contemporaries.) The solemnity with which Russell-Cotes had the details of Irving's major roles painted all over the walls and ceiling, for example, constitutes prime evidence of the respectability which the Victorians eventually managed to confer on the drama. This is something which Irving's predecessor as premier Shakespearean actor-manager, the mortally hiss-sensitive William Charles Macready (1793–1873), hungered for but never quite achieved, as Nigel

Michael Dobson, *Victorian Theatricalities: Introduction*

Cliff's excellent *The Shakespeare Riots* reminds us. That respectability was in part conferred, as on other enterprises, by an endless succession of pompous after-dinner speeches (like those given at Macready's retirement supper in 1851 and printed at length in Tallis's edition of Shakespeare later that year), and we are delighted to be able to include in this issue of **19**



Fig. 4 Conservator working on Irving Room mural decoration (P1010093 Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum).

a fine selection on the subject from Charles Hindley's *The Book of Ready-Made Speeches* (1867).

We are pleased to be able to include, too, Frank Bellew's instructions on how two people can entertain a whole house-party with a skit on the comedy of courtship, from his *The Art of Amusing* (1866). Bellew was a close friend of his countryman Mark Twain and also of Charles Dickens, both of them keen practitioners of domestic amateur drama, and his 'patent play' serves as a reminder of how theatre was for many Victorians not confined to the playhouses but was part of the culture of home. (Not for nothing did Nina Auerbach entitle an influential book *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Harvard University Press, 1990).) The interpenetration of nineteenth-century social life and the dramatic – the extent to which the authentic and the performed can be all-but inseparable – is explored here in Beth Palmer's important article on Florence Marryat, a figure hitherto overlooked in the revaluation of Victorian women writers.

Eminent Shakespearean he may have been, but Irving, as the ceiling of the Irving Room reminds us, was also a master of melodrama, whose most often-performed role was that of the guilty Mathias in Leopold Lewis's *The Bells* (1871). This play is listed on the Irving Room's ceiling by a different name, *The Polish Jew*, a literal translation of its French origin as Erkmann-Chatrian's *Le Juif polonais* (1869). The extent to which nineteenth-century English drama was indebted to the French stage has recently been

Michael Dobson, Victorian Theatricalities: Introduction

made wonderfully visible by the ‘Buried Treasures’ project, described here by Caroline Radcliffe and Kate Mattacks, by which digital technology is at last making more of the corpus of Victorian drama available to critical scrutiny.

The extent to which the role of Mathias dominated Irving’s working life is perhaps a sign of how precarious his respectability felt, despite the knighthood. Night after night, it obliged Irving to impersonate a man who has achieved the respect of his entire community, but who cannot escape the disreputable origins of his prosperity, which he is compelled to re-enact before a nightmare audience of judges. At the climax of the play, the burgomaster Mathias dreams that he is restaging the long-past robbery and murder of the Polish Jew who gave the play its original title. This proto-Freudian enactment of the repressed returning (and the triumph of the superego – Mathias hangs himself at the end of his performance) occasioned melodramatic acting of the highest order, and although Irving never himself made a sound recording of this harrowing scene we are fortunate to possess a fine record of one of his most faithful imitators, Bransby Williams, giving a note-for-note reconstruction of his performance within a decade of Irving’s death (click here to listen to the recording: duration 4:09).

For my own part, an early exposure to the miscellaneous contents of the Irving Room – the sporran-like handbag carried by Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth, the skull used by Irving in *Hamlet*, the daguerreotypes of great Victorian actors in extreme roles and extreme costumes – probably did much to shape my own interest in the stage; it certainly made me keener-eyed in my searchings through Bournemouth’s many junk and second-hand book shops for old copies of *Punch*, old theatrical prints and other ephemera, some of the results of which are reproduced in this volume. (It also helped inspire me to write about melodrama in my first-year exams at university, something in which, I now gather from Juliet John, I may even have been ahead of my time.) The problem of how to deduce a cogent and undistorted history of the nineteenth-century theatre from all that surviving stuff, as assembled into fan-driven collections like that of Sir Merton and Annie – of how nineteenth-century historiography can transcend the limits of the arbitrary and celebrity-obsessed archives which the Victorian theatre has left us – is tackled in our forum, in which a number of specialists in the subject respond to Richard Schoch’s lament over the extent to which, in his view, much critical writing on the Victorian stage merely reproduces the priorities built into the archives on which it draws.

Michael Dobson, Victorian Theatricalities: Introduction

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The critical state of play on not just the historiography but the whole subject of melodrama in particular – including its psychology, its aesthetics and indeed its ethics – is described in Juliet John’s article, contributed here in memory of our much-missed colleague in melodrama studies and distinguished contributor to **19**, Sally Ledger. As Juliet points out, Sally was a warm defender of the rights of the people to emotional intensity, both inside the theatre and beyond it, and the grief experienced across the scholarly world and beyond on Sally’s sudden death is a fitting tribute to that critical priority. We hope that she would have enjoyed the materials we have gathered into this issue of **19**.

¹ See Giles Overfield. ‘A Home of Luxury and a Temple of Art’, in *A Victorian Salon: Paintings from the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum* (Bournemouth: Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum in association with Lund Humphries, 1999), pp. 14–23.

² Merton Russell-Cotes, *Home and Abroad* (Bournemouth: privately printed, 1921), p. 36.

The images in this article appear courtesy of the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth
<<http://www.russell-cotes.bournemouth.gov.uk>>