

Book Reviews

Tracy C. Davis. *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*. London: Routledge, 1991. pp. xvi, 200. \$21.50 pb.

Tracy C. Davis's new book on Victorian actresses is a valuable corrective to such earlier studies as *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (1978), by Michael Baker. Baker does mention that by the 1880s most theatrical professionals were female, but he still tends to assume that the typical actor was male: it is startling to turn from Davis's book back to Baker's and encounter his unreflective references to the actor as a professional man. He also tends to focus on leading actors; the rise in his title is largely that from William Macready to Sir Henry Irving. Davis, by contrast, focusses on the majority of women concentrated at the bottom of the profession and in its humbler specialties — in the pantomime, burlesque, and music-hall rather than in the legitimate drama (where two-thirds of the roles were male).

Davis describes herself as a socialist feminist (xii); these are brave words in the current climate of scorn for anyone and anything that can be labelled "politically correct," but they indicate what is best about her book. As a socialist, she grounds her discussion of Victorian actresses in a detailed analysis of the material conditions of their work: of their wages (meagre), their working conditions (brutal), and their prospects of rising (minimal). She backs up her analysis with an impressive use of statistics, drawing them mostly from Victorian censuses, but going behind the official publications to examine the manuscript reports of the enumerators. Even the figures drawn from these manuscripts are limited in important ways; Davis points out the limitations but does not use them as an excuse to avoid the labour of reaching the most complete and reliable conclusions possible.

Davis is not an economic determinist, but she does speculate intriguingly on possible parallels between economic and theatrical developments. Industrial innovation is greatest in times of labour surplus; perhaps the labour surplus created by the influx of women into the profession encouraged the technical innovations of the Vic-

torian theatre. The entry of such a large number of women into the labour force naturally threatened the economic status quo: perhaps this economic threat lay beneath the widespread perception of the actress as a sexual threat.

As a feminist, Davis is aware of the different social positions from which Victorian men and women approached theatrical issues and consequently of the different perspectives they brought to those issues. (This awareness accounts for her use of the term "actress.") As the need for some form of professional welfare became clear, the "male middle-class clique of managers . . . practised piecemeal philanthropy, while women recognized the root causes of hardship and addressed them directly" (xiv). Such a judgement looks radical, but it is amply substantiated by the contrast Davis draws between the manager-run Actors' Benevolent Fund — which provided small emergency loans but rejected proposals to establish either a boarding school and orphanage for actors' children or a co-operative agency — and the Theatrical Ladies Guild, founded by Kittie Carson, which by 1896 "assisted 57 maternity cases; clothed 35 men, 78 women, and 115 children (25 of the adults secured engagements thanks to the revitalization of wardrobe); sent 4 women to convalescent homes; and gave away 20 coal tickets, 54 bread tickets, 96 dinners, and 198 Christmas dinners" (62). Carson also worked for years, though unsuccessfully, to establish a theatrical orphanage.

Davis devotes the second half of her book to an analysis of the actress as an erotic spectacle. She explodes the Victorian myth that prostitution was endemic among actresses, but points out that striking parallels existed between the two professions: "acting and whoring were the occupations of self-sufficient women who plied their trades in public places" (100). Moreover, these were often the same public places, since theatres were located in unsavoury neighbourhoods and prostitutes frequented them in order to solicit clients. Davis takes into account both this erotic milieu and a concept she calls pornographic literacy (133): a costume or a performance might seem perfectly innocent to the women, children, and censors in the audience, but pornographically literate men would know how to interpret it to their own titillation. No matter how independently minded an actress might be, the image she projected was beyond her control. (I'd love to read what Davis might have to say about Madonna.)

The book is well illustrated with fifteen contemporary paintings, engravings, photographs, and diagrams. Not all of them are discussed in the text, but some of them speak for themselves. The painting on the cover (identified only as "probably from a late Victorian magazine") is particularly telling: it shows a woman standing in the wings at a music-hall, waiting for her turn to go on, after a quartet of per-

forming dogs. The artist seems to have been thinking of Dr. Johnson's remark about women preachers.

Unfortunately, the book is turgidly written; moreover, the introduction and four of the five chapters are riddled with errors in grammar ("between each line" [xii]), diction ("manageresses' existence is laudatory," for "laudable" [51]), and spelling ("trooper" for "trouper" [74]) — over 60 in 132 pages. (Curiously, the fourth chapter, though not exactly sprightly, is almost error-free. Perhaps Routledge's copy editor works only on Thursdays.) Such important material deserves to be presented more carefully.

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Martin Banham, ed. *The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988. pp. 1104. \$54.50.

The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre, like *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (1983), offers survey articles of up to sixteen pages on the theatrical traditions of most of the nations of the world, including Greenland, Ecuador, and Zambia; biographies, usually brief, on playwrights and actors as well as producers, directors, and designers; brief entries on theatre companies and theatres; and mid-length articles (one to five pages) on topics as diverse as circus, pornographic theatre, radio plays, and ritual. It focusses on the stage more than on dramatic literature. Sprinkled among the references to local playwrights in the surveys are names like Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Brecht, but equally prominent are the names of local actors, producers, and theatre companies as well as foreign actors who gave an impetus to the development of some countries' theatre. When appropriate the surveys stress also non-literary performances, such as dances or puppet-shows. The entries on playwrights include writers whose works were successful on stage in their day but are inconsequential from the point of view of literary merit or modern repertoire, and even the entries on writers whose works are part of the present-day canon emphasize the reception of their works in production and mention their theatrical activities rather than their non-dramatic literary works. There are no separate entries on plays. Both *The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* and *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* give ample coverage to popular entertainment, such as vaudeville, the music halls, and cabaret. *The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* has entries also on reviewers and theatrical journalists; *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* has more definitions of and brief articles on terms relating to stagecraft and theatre technology.