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The music hall

The music hall is a specially Victorian institution. It came into existence as the queen was crowned, flowered with her reign, and entered the twentieth century ready to decline. Its heyday was roughly from 1890 to 1910. The first purpose-built halls for this kind of entertainment began to be erected in numbers in the early 1840s, with forerunners such as the Star at Bolton which opened in 1832. Signs of the end were the 1907 performers' strike and the 1912 Royal Command performance. During this period huge success attended the transformation of a multitude of small-scale entertainments presided over by pub proprietors and semi-professional chairmen into seriously capitalized big business that operated according to increasingly strictly enforced and eventually overdetermining rules. At first the growth of the halls provided a leisure service to growing urban populations, and enabled talented individuals to develop star careers and fortunes. Cultural change and aspiration, the broadening of the audience to include more segments of late-Victorian society, and concomitant moves to increase discipline and market control shifted power into the hands of business managers and investors. They spent venture capital on very large and sumptuously appointed auditoria laid out as theatres rather than "halls," transforming the audience/performer relationship; and they protected their investments, via the censorship of material and the contractual disciplining of performers to strict time limits on stage, and bound them to work more or less on demand for the contracting syndicate, while forbidding appearances elsewhere. The transformation resulted not only in the shifting character of the large halls themselves, as they developed into "variety theatres," but also the suppression of small independent halls; it eventually deracinated an institution which then failed to meet the challenge of further developments in the leisure industries.

The usual interpretations of this phenomenon range from the Whiggish popularism of "from pot-house to palace," celebrating the "good old days" of sing-songs and class solidarity, through wry recognition of the halls as

a "culture of consolation" that kept the Victorian working man happy in his subservience, and beyond that to their wholesale condemnation as the seedbed of the jingoism, racism, and misogyny of yob culture.¹ My intention here is to replace the halls in the context of the dynamics of British performance during a crucial period in the formation of modern theatre and of attitudes toward its history. In this frame, the music hall has unique features – certain architectural and institutional innovations and formal, esthetic developments – but it is also to be understood in terms of larger cultural and institutional politics.

The music hall was the primary, but by no means the only, Victorian home of professional entertainment: singing and dancing, especially comic and sentimental songs sung by costumed performers "in character," overlapped with opera and operetta in upper-class venues; freaks and novelties, feats of strength and agility and technical mastery, whose exhibitors and practitioners also appeared in circuses, fairs and pleasure-gardens; and verbal and physical clowning, which it shared with farce and pantomime in popular theatres. After the 1843 Theatre Licensing Act any performance containing narrative, whether expressed in dialogue, song or dance, was supposed to be the preserve of the theatres, and throughout the century charges were brought against individual halls for encroachments on this right in the form of *ballets d'action*, spectacular and melodramatic scenes or comic sketches. These were essentially proprietorial turf wars: performers continued to sell their services to whoever wanted them, and audiences chose where to see them in terms of the price, the company, and the other amenities on offer at various venues. In London, where the potential audiences and profits were greatest but the licensing situation most complex, the struggle for audience share conducted through the prosecution of rivals transferred itself seamlessly from the major/minor battles of the previous half-century to attempts to forbid drama in the halls. Elsewhere the opponents of the growth of the halls might similarly be theatrical vested interests, as was the case for example in Sheffield, or rival publicans, as they were in Bolton. After the large halls became established institutions, in the 1860s, they were also assailed by successive waves of moral reform, whose target was drink or sexual immorality. As Dagmar Kift has shown, these largely ineffectual ideological attempts to suppress or discipline entertainment did not always differ as much as they claimed from the commercially driven rivalry of other public caterers: often personal and financial interests attempted to appropriate the developing powers of local government, ostensibly in the name of morality.² Nevertheless the cultural politics of pleasure and leisure was a multi-layered and important discourse, then as now, touching upon many significant beliefs and practices; a concentration of financial,

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many kinds of social and performative interactions took place. The chair-man, who might well be the proprietor in person, conducted proceedings from a table set across the hall below the platform; his welcome included guests who sat with him, rambled in and out, made up parties at other tables, leant on the bar, or stood craning to see from the back of the gallery. Many patrons liked to feel they were personal guests: the local tradesmen or their sons who had business dealings with the hall expected free entrance, even a "face pass" – recognition by the doorkeeper, a coveted mark of distinction.⁵

The audience is unique. Everybody seems to know everybody. The gentlemen shake hands heartily, all round, the ladies embrace and kiss each other, and on all sides may be heard affectionate enquiries after the little ones at home, or other friends and acquaintances . . . the audience . . . appear to constitute quite a happy family.⁶

The elevated but not necessarily very large space of the stage itself was only differentially lit by the addition of a few footlights, although it could be made a focus by decorative effects – there was a rising, competitive tide of splendor in the statements made by the décor of the hall, and the stage was naturally dressed up. So, however, were the room, and the patrons: mirrors added glitter and excitement to performance both on stage and off. There were sparkling stages, like the mirrored apse behind the platform at Wilton's in Wellclose Square, London; but also much light and mirroring in the body of the hall. In Manchester the old Folly was mirrored throughout when it was renamed the Tivoli in 1897; as early as 1872 the Middlesex in London was thus lined to give the young men and women dressed up for a night out "abundant opportunities for self-admiration."⁷ The stage space itself was not always exclusively appropriated to the professional entertainers, and could be used to elevate local heroes who received benefits when they were struck by calamities, or when, on happier holidays, they took part in competitions, and went forward to say their piece or receive their winnings. But the pressure was in the direction of professionalization, and the bar-room or street performers of previous decades made the transition to full professional status in the new halls, and removed themselves from the community to mix with incoming theatricals in the sub-stage dressing room before making their appearance. On stage, of course, the link to the audience had to be remade. The first moment relied on the chairman in his introduction, which was calculated in the interests of the house; on the good will of the bandsmen, which probably depended on the performer's ability to tip; and on the visual impact of the entry, in immaculate or outrageous clothing.⁸ Thereafter the audience-participation chorus song, the exchange of banter, and ultimately the ability to sing or dance or stand on your head

The music hall

so well as to win attention from the competing claims of food and drink, noise, friends and interruptions were the professional tools of the trade – and these came out of the theatrical kit.

Local variations in successful entertainment were quite distinctive: in the north of England the plebeian but complex skill of clogdancing, for example, at a highly polished, competitive level which supported large wagers, was a staple music-hall turn that never found a place in the south, where the audience had no clogs of their own. The sucking-in of street performance styles meant the transfer to the stage of songs from tradition, whether oral or broadside, and some visiting commentators remarked on what seemed to them the incongruous juxtapositions of scantily clad women doing step-dances and singing protracted, ancient, tragic ballads in a rustic style; but others at the time and more recently have seen the music-hall song style as rapidly extinguishing an ancient tradition of folk song.⁹ But such appropriations and exchanges were nothing new in the web of performance; ideological discriminations seek to divide up the creative processes, but professional performers will use anything that works. The ballads and morris steps joined "nigger minstrel" images from America and song styles, skills and "novelties" from centuries of stage practice, part of the endless continuum which developed into a distinctive music-hall style under the creative pressure of new conditions and audiences. A very similar voraciousness, and disregard for purity of origin or authenticity of traditions high or low, attends the bricolage culture of the new media today.

From the 1860s the distinctive performance space and style of the music halls was thus established as one point within a network of professional entertainments. In provincial cities and the various districts of London the older, smaller free and easies, the singing saloons and the dance halls licensed for music, still threw alongside and fed into the larger, more highly developed and professionalized halls. The single public auditorium in smaller provincial centres could still be used for classical concerts as well as popular ones; traveling music-hall entertainers could find a booking, or bring their own concert party to town hall or music room. And dramatically licensed popular theatres, in London as well as beyond, continued to use singers, dancers and novelty acts as part of their mixed bill of entertainment, within and alongside the drama, as a matter of course. In Sheffield, Thomas Youdan fought attempts to suppress full-scale drama within his Surrey Music Hall, and eventually continued the same mix under a full theatre license. The Britannia at Hoxton was forced to apply to the Lord Chamberlain in the 1840s, but continued to stage a mixed bill throughout its life. Sadler's Wells, one of London's oldest entertainment houses, which had been appropriated by Samuel Phelps for Shakespeare and drama after the 1843 Act, was rescued

This intimacy was fostered by participatory rituals, in themselves an exercise of power relations across the footlights. The gallery "boys" were supposedly kept in check by the chairman's authority, but had a right to their fun – so a dancer, especially a woman, could be forced to respond to cries of "over!" by turning cartwheels, and even star performers like George Chirgwin might find themselves saddled with the demand always to repeat a song the gallery had fixed upon. House customs developed, like that at the suburban, lower-class South London Palace, where whenever the chairman, Bob or "Baron" Courtney, sang his only song, a patriotic number called "Britannia's Voice of Thunder," they chanted "Good Old Bob! Bob! Bob!" incessantly throughout.¹⁴ Audience scripts existed in the West-End halls too: the Pavilion favorite G. H. Macdermott in the 1870s had a song whose chorus ended "I'll stand glasses round; how much can you drink?" to which the gleefully mendacious audience response was "Not much!"¹⁵

Performance in the halls

In such a situation of known and expected performance and participation, a distinctive style was fostered. Commentators on the politics of the halls have focused on the song lyrics, using printed texts as evidence; but while comic singing was perhaps the backbone of music-hall entertainment, it was not its sole resource, and the songs should be considered in their setting of clowning, spectacle and parodic cross-readings. The sheet music, often fronted with wonderfully evocative colored engravings of the singer in costume, was an expensive artifact – a single song could cost four shillings, sixteen times the cost of admission to a cheap hall – and one aimed at a different group, the drawing-room singer. The songs deemed suitable, and no doubt often cleaned up, for this market, do not form a representative cross-section of what was actually sung in the halls. To redress the analytical imbalance, what follows describes the major ingredients of the typical music-hall bill during the 1870s, 80s and 90s under three headings: drama, comic song, and "speciality" acts, which I assume, for convenience, to include dance and clowning as well as all sorts of physical feats. It must be understood that a single bill interleaved all these, and often a single turn used more than one such skill.

Drama in the music halls

The enactment of narratives was always entangled with demarcation disputes between the halls and other, often less successful, theatrical enterprises. Many plays were nevertheless seen on the music-hall stage, and their

from decline by the music-hall showman George Belmont in 1893.¹⁰ Some small, unfashionable halls continued with the mixed bill unmolested until they were effectively destroyed by the syndicate barring clauses (see p. 164 above). In the West End of London, on the other hand, the much larger and more differentiated audience pool made for a long spectrum of venues, but even so many of them booked performers who on other occasions appeared in the halls, before other audiences. The minstrel shows at the St. James's Hall, Piccadilly, on whose programs music-hall black-face stars like E. W. Mackney appeared as guests, prided themselves on an audience that included many moral people who would not enter a music hall,¹¹ while Drury Lane enabled middle-class families to take their children to see comic stars of the halls such as Dan Leno, booked annually from 1888 to 1903 to play the dame in the pantomime.

The Gaiety, the upper-class burlesque house founded on cross-dressed musical entertainment, catering for the unregenerate male audience who rejected or escaped from the grip of educational Shakespeare, often sought to recruit its stars from those discovered by the music halls. And there were big West-End music halls, charging high prices and in some cases giving an individual style of program – the Alhambra in Leicester Square is the most obvious instance, where a variety bill was always coupled with one or more in-house music-and-dance spectacles – which were show business at its most commercialized. They nevertheless had their own sectional, even "local" audience, occupying the auditorium in their own way, and finding a mixture of entertainments there. These famously included excessive drinking and prostitution, but their apologists, like the racing-paper journalist J. B. Booth, claimed that the notorious Empire promenade was chiefly a gentleman's club, a place where "men went not so much for the entertainment as for companionship . . . of other men. . . . When one said good-bye to a friend on his way to India, China or Singapore . . . his last words were: 'So long, old man, see you in London again. Sure to run across you in the Empire.'¹² Booth claims that the West-End halls, during what seemed to him the great days, the 1880s and 90s, were as much a community resource as were those in the working-class districts, for the

last idea with which one turned into a hall – whether it was the Pavilion, or the Empire, the Tivoli, or the Alhambra – somewhere about nine, was the idea of sitting penned in one's stall amongst total strangers. Each hall had its habitués . . . and there were subtle distinctions. The black-coated, white-shirted, silk-hatted crowd of young "bloods" who filled the promenades of the great Leicester Square houses in the "intervals" differed vastly from those found in the Strand or Piccadilly Circus; but in each crowd there was an intimacy, the intimacy born of coteries which frequently met and whose aim is to enjoy life.¹³

surviving songs, and reviewers' descriptions – often the only available evidence, since they were not required to supply copies for licensing to the Lord Chamberlain's office until 1912¹⁶ – suggest a dramatic style both traditional and innovative. Arguably, these little plays had something not found in the protected legitimate theatre: a vigor that stemmed from synergy with the rest of the entertainment spectrum. The dramas carry antique formal elements forward into the halls – there is a discernible continuum from the *lazzi* of the ancient improvised farce into the comic ballet or song-sketch – but they are also in some sense at the political cutting edge, where current attitudes are revealed and even challenged by their parodic music-hall incarnation.

The basic form was the two or three-handed domestic farce, which could be conducted entirely in song and dance, and which explored the old comedy of relations between the sexes and between classes, that is masters and servants.¹⁷

The music-hall representation of sexual relationships was material rather than romantic, and concerned itself with marriage, mastery and money rather than just wooing and winning. Male/female duos danced or sang or merely burlesqued the battle of the sexes, moving rapidly on from lovebirds to warring husband and wife to suffragette and policeman; and whatever the ostensible coupling, it was tipped into farce and often violence by its physical extremity: "Les Leons, duettists and comiques . . . introduced the gigantic gentleman in petticoats and the petite lady in the garb of a masher . . . the sight of the very small male making love to the very large female excited much laughter"¹⁸ Real boxers sometimes did exhibition matches as turns, but the dramatized battle was a longer-lasting attraction: a choreographed knock-down fight, framed as fiction, became a beloved music-hall act in its own right. The apache dance, a lurid enactment of sexuality, jealousy and violence, was danced, straight or in knockabout burlesque, by many duos, the man representing a knife-wielding petty criminal and the woman his unfaithful partner, both supposedly the dregs of the slums of Paris. The famous fight scene from the melodrama *Humanity* required an elaborate set of a collapsing staircase on which a betrayed husband and his wife's lover, in evening dress, fought themselves to a standstill and the set to shreds.¹⁹

Drama was accorded no special treatment in the halls; its narrative excitement and perhaps its realism could be relished, but audiences did not expect carefully preserved illusion, especially at the expense of other pleasures. Boucicault's racing drama *The Flying Scud* was condensed for the halls with a girl, Nellie Wilson, playing a stableboy; the *Era* reviewer suggests that the audience took her oddly nautical costume in their stride, but were disappointed when she declined to halt the action and perform her speciality top-boot dance. Similarly star turns would act, but saw no reason

to compromise their personal image for the sake of the role: Jennie Hill, playing against an impressive revolving scene of Irish landscape in a potted version of *The Shaughbraun*, chose to wear a smart "red hunting coat, velvet cap, knee breeches and riding boots" to impersonate Conn.²⁰ Such motley performances, which class-hostile critics derided as crude incongruity and failure of realism in music-hall plays, actually demanded a sophisticated response, what Peter Davison calls the "multiconscious apprehension" of popular theatre, to their rapidly alternating perspectives, demanding that the audience switch between emotional involvement, technical appreciation, and knowing disengagement.²¹ The result is most obvious in music-hall versions of patriotic melodrama:

in the third scene – Rorke's Drift . . . he is seen potting Kaffirs by the half-dozen, and he is very nearly assailed by one of them, but is saved by his mortally wounded comrade Tom Green, who is fortunately able to exert sufficient strength to fire his rifle. The savages calm down while Private Travers breaks the monotony of the desert campaign by a song in praise of the British flag . . . Mr G. H. Macdermott [as Travers] . . . is really very funny.

The villain in this piece is "a rich scoundrel in possession of the lands" of his "honest ne'er-do-well" half-brother Travers, and of course he happens to be an officer in the same campaign. At the end, against a "splendid revolving set," "The howls of the gods as he stands cursing over the prostrate form of Mr. Macdermott set the seal on Mr. Day's success" in this role.²² When the sketch-deviser tells an imperialist story for performers with established personae unlike Macdermott's patriotic heroism, an extraordinary critique of jingoist self-justifications may suddenly emerge. Athol Mayhew devised *In Darkie's Africa* for the brothers Mac, "Irish comedians and knockabouts," with the assistance of the Avolo boys as monkeys doing their gymnastic act on a grove of huge bamboo.

Brother Mike Mac is the intrepid explorer, who enters upon his duties in Equatorial Africa with all his impedimenta in a child's mail-cart. Brother Joe is the noble "brown" savage, grown fat and scant of breath, with a black wig and a face soiled apparently with the unburnished livery of soot. The latter disguises himself as an alligator, and then, appearing as the untutored savage, indulges in a parley with the explorer, who, rifle in hand, is apparently prepared to shoot at anything. The comic business really commences when the two brothers affect to recognize each other, and start some of their well-known knockabout business. (The Era, April 1893)

This clowning is richly suggestive of the music-hall intervention in imperialist discourse: it burlesques triumphalist versions of the invasion of Africa, the heroic tales of explorers pitted against alligators and savages, and also

the contradictory nineteenth-century visions of black races as noble and as savage. It is founded upon the parodic expedient of *reductio ad absurdum* – the child's cart, the little comedian as noble explorer, the fat one as a (Hamletesque) savage in a minstrel wig and exaggerated cheap make-up – but also upon the play of ideas around the known brotherhood of the performers; and it resolves into their “well-known” act, satisfying the demand for the expected entertainment (as Nellie Wilson in the example above failed to do) as well as the novelty of the sketch and its new, pointed jokes.

In the period from the South African War to the First World War commentators have stressed the mindless jingoism of music-hall displays of patriotism; Laurence Senelick suggests that the Toryism of the big business and brewing interests that controlled the halls economically imposed a view of imperial politics that alienated the lower-class patrons, and that this contributed to the decline of the halls. Others have asserted that jingoistic songs shared a bill with surviving parodies that express exactly the opposite sentiments, apparently to the approval of the self-same audiences that applauded the patriotic claptraps.²³ This may perhaps be explicable in terms of a distinction that should be made between material presented in West-End halls patronized by “society” men and that acceptable to audiences elsewhere; but in any case such contradictions are often part of communal response. One of the discursive functions of entertainment is to hold the common opinion together by containing contradictions without forcing them into conflict. The Irish brothers Mac in their dramatic sketch were able to send up the empire – as long as they did their knockabout clowning too. No such formally generated complexity of meaning was available to the legitimate stage.

Music-hall songs

Thus, gradually the Sol's Arms melts into the shadowy night, and then flares out of it strong in gas. The harmonic meeting hour arriving, the gentleman of professional celebrity takes the chair; is faced (red-faced) by Little Swills; their friends rally round them, and support first-rate talent. . . . The landlord . . . finding Little Swills so popular, commends him highly to the Jurymen and the public; observing that, for a song in character, he don't know his equal, and that that man's character-wardrobe would fill a cart. . . . In the zenith of the evening, Little Swills says, Gentlemen, if you'll permit me, I'll attempt a short description of the scene of real life that came off here today. Is much applauded and encouraged; goes out of the room as Swills; comes 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!²⁴

Thus Dickens in chapter 11 of *Bleak House*, 1852–53, capturing the moment of transition, as it occurred in hundreds of public houses, from a group of friends singing to the appearance within the (virtual and material) ritual space of the community – the advertised harmonic meeting, the public room also used for such business as coroner's inquests – of the professional singer, with a “character-wardrobe would fill a cart.”²⁵ The step-change pinpointed by the Metropolitan Buildings Inspectors, the erection of accommodation for a larger audience with a place for the celebrity to don his character dress, followed inevitably upon this professionalizing, theatricalizing shift. To get a closer view of the unique artistic creation of the halls, it may therefore be more fruitful, instead of entering into the more usual ideological debates about its relation to a putative “folk” music, to look at the comic character song's theatrical origins.

Dickens, despite working his own comic/grotesque transformations on the inquest in the paragraphs leading up to this description, suggests that the music-hall representation of “the scene of real life” is ludicrously unrealistic, with a crude attempt at impersonation, in a stereotypical costume presumably drawn from stock – a judge's robe? – and a topical song provided with a traditional participatory refrain. Stage entertainers had been offering such impersonation time out of mind, and the art had been very popular throughout the century. Its best known exponent was Charles Mathews the elder, a friend of Dickens's. At a time when it was death to the highest ambitions of a performer to appear outside the “legitimate,” Mathews strained against the limiting roles for which he could be cast in five-act comedy. In 1817 the dramatist Colman wrote for him a short play called *The Actor of All Works* in which he enacted six different parts in quick succession, a feat which developed into the “protean” music-hall quick-change act. Mathews then side-stepped into solo shows, doing impressions of famous judges, politicians and other public figures, and of his legitimate colleagues, past and present, and developing new characters in song and patter from observation of everyday life on the streets. He had a discriminating eye for the absurdities of the developing range of middle-class self-presentation, and his variations upon the ordinary Englishman as well as Scotch fishwives, Irish coaches and Frenchmen with fractured English and, most famously, his pioneering impersonation of a poor African-American, were great fashionable hits. Sixty years on, the work of middle-class self-definition was continued by the music-hall singers. Successors to Mathews's contrasting types were presented by humbler performers like Fred Wilson, whose 1877 act offered a song and a dance in each of four characters: “a deserted Irish wife,” “a Chinaman,” “a German” and “an aged Negro,” as well as stars like Alfred

Vance whose provincial solo show transferred into London music hall. In 1880 his usual finish of style, elegance of dress and "power of illustrating character" were deployed first on "two old girls that were anything but beautiful," then on "a swell of the toothpick and crutch order," then "a jolly old joker" and finally "a Margate bathing woman."²⁶

Mathews's status worries did not afflict the performers brought up in the minor theatres before 1843. Those performers who had the talent to stretch and play with the theatrical frame exploited their stage personae and developed songs and character impersonations freely. The Adelphi stars John Reeve and James Wilkinson, for example, accumulated favorite characters from successive plays so that they could invoke them, at their own whim or that of the audience, in any evening's entertainment thereafter. Reeve reached stardom via his frame-breaking, ad-libbing stage persona in 1823 in a topical adaptation called *The Quadrupeds* that allowed him to parody Kean, poke fun at horse dramas and sing comic songs. Wilkinson had an array of topical songs in the role of Logic in the hit dramatisation of Pierce Egan's *Tom and Jerry*; or, *Life in London* in 1821, including a hymn to various London haunts, to the air "Carnival of Venice," which is very obviously an ancestor of the music-hall topical song:

Tis fashions lounge, Tis beauties bower
Tis art's selected depot;
Tis fancy's mart, industry's bower,
Tis London's raree show.
The Opera cannot with it vie
Despite its colonnade,
Then let's to Piccadilly hie,
to Burlington Arcade.

(W. T. Moncrieff, *Tom and Jerry*; or,
Life in London, 2nd edn (London:
Thomas Richardson, n.d. [1828],
p. 20))

In this play even the minor player Chapman had a cameo role of the kind that was to transfer to the halls. As Jack the gaslight man he had a song in character, beginning "I'm saucy Jack the gaslight man, I put the prigs to rout." Such performances simply spilled from the confines of the theatres into the growing network of song rooms and harmonic meetings, and fueled the growth of the characteristic music-hall turn.

Typically a turn would include two or three "characters." In February 1880 the humble first turn Marie Beecher was singing as Rose the parlourmaid and as a Jolly Jack Tar; in the summer of 1895 the three sisters

Oliver presented "the girls of the new brigade" as New Women in "rational" costume, changed to appear as chorus girls from the Gaiety, and finished as "coons," i.e., blacked up, with "a smart dance."²⁷ The origin of such material, drawn by stage writers and composers from all kinds of roots, is less important than its formal suitability as a vehicle for a kaleidoscopic, participatory, intensely personalized picture of contemporary life, which had a powerful role in the structure of feeling of the Victorian period. The character song is more supple than the narrative ballad: it comments on current events of greater and lesser importance – the latest hairstyle, the ticket of leave, the Boer war, the lady cricketer – or on eternal themes of love and power, in a known but malleable structure. Its heart is the chorus, in the early decades set up for participation by the audience, and therefore often in an easier key or time signature than the verses. These tend to be self-contained, and while each of them may tell a little story, none of them has necessarily to be included. So a song not going well can be cut off short; a hit chorus can be exploited afresh by the addition of new and topical verses. The ubiquitous, infuriating popular chorus manifested itself as early as T. D. Rice's "Jim Crow," whose refrain was sung and danced in the London theatres and streets in 1836, and by the time Kipling arrived in London in the 1880s could inspire his story in which the House of Commons sing "The village that voted the *Earth* was flat" until they drop exhausted, because they cannot stop.²⁸

Recent cultural studies approaches to the content of these music-hall songs have focused upon a conspicuous concern with class impersonation, the real or fake "swell" whose life story and style presented the dreams, the swagger and the uncertainty of the Victorian clerk or shopman for his own delectation, whether to imitate or deride. The sometimes complex performance dynamic generated by such parodic and at the same time attractive visions as Leybourne's Champagne Charlie and Vesta Tilley's "Piccadilly Johnnie with the little glass eye" has begun to be explored.²⁹ Character song is also rich in self-conscious presentations of people by local or national type, as if community identities, especially those within the British Isles, needed endlessly to be re-presented, defined and approved or laughed away: transforming regional dialects and song styles by the hegemonic music-hall model, the stage Irishman, the Scot, the northerner, the Welsh girl, and, in many variations and guises, the cockney, became roles rehearsed on stage and accepted or modified by the audience, in a laboratory of style, sentiment and self-confidence. The mixed metropolitan audience, thus interpellated, saw itself reflected and perhaps coerced into conformity to what we might take to be an early version of the consumerist illusion of individuality through choice.

The speciality acts

If the character song was about "us," the self-definition of the audience, the music-hall bill always also contained representations of the other; and just as the self-presentation might sometimes be critical, and set down some too self-satisfied members of the audience, so the spin given to difference and otherness was by no means always derogatory: the amazing and the peculiar were sought after and admired. The fairground sideshow and the circus act became music-hall turns, and ancient subjects of wonder – so-called "freaks" such as dwarfs and Siamese twins – appeared there alongside monkey parachutists, reptile conquerors, globe runners, shadowgraphists, roller skaters, electric frogs, feet equilibrists or white kangaroos.

It could be said that the "coon" acts were the particular music-hall development of the exploitation of otherness. They were certainly among the most regularly appearing staple acts, to be found on almost every bill at halls great and small throughout the period. Modern scholarship has begun to explore the complex meanings attaching to these racial impersonations; the most comprehensive work has been in placing the minstrel show in the crucible of American identity-formation.³⁰ In Britain the meanings were inevitably different, as the situation on the streets and in the imaginary of Britain differed from that of America. The freedom of the mask, in which identity was figuratively subsumed and literally disguised, and the constraints of Victorian Britishness were set aside, allowed many tyro entertainers their first steps on the halls, and also built up an extravagant repertoire of jokes, sentiments and suggestions tacitly available to both audience and performer that, it has been suggested, offered a valuable free space for the play of the unspeakable.³¹ The act described above, in which two Irish knockabout clowns burlesqued African exploration, perhaps suggests some of the extraordinary mix of implications of blackface. Jokes about the imperialist discourse, that nevertheless confirm white superiority, mingled with slapstick clowning and an admired physical skill honed by the brothers act and well known to the audience.

Physical skills carried to a high level of polish were some of the most important elements of music hall, as they were of the circus; and, as had been the case for centuries, a large international pool of artistes was available to offer such non-verbal acts. The halls took in the ancient arts of acrobatics and gymnastics, from contortionists to living statues, trapeze artists to weightlifters; and they housed dance and music-making of all kinds, whether the operatic prima donna, the salterino player or the organophoniconium. If the music hall drew in the showman and his novelties (including the seeds of change in the form of the cinematograph), it also provided audiences

for deep-rooted traditional families of entertainers, whose skills were honed and hoarded down many generations of exhibitors. The Lupino family, for example, supplied a "screaming comic ballet" to London halls in the 1880s, but their ancestors had been theatre pantomimists and acrobats in the previous century and their descendants were dancers and film-makers in the next. The music-hall transformation was usually in the direction of speed, "smartness," an added professionalism and a sharpening up, especially as the organization and investment developed, and a standardized product for the market was required. The world-famous clown Grock and his partner, already at the height of circus fame, auditioned for a fat contract with a German music-hall syndicate in 1911, only to be told "You're too broad . . . Tone it down and suit your stuff to variety." To save their careers they developed a whole new act in a hurry, "altogether on a smaller scale, much more sharply defined" with no ad libs, "everything cut and dried," involving an aria from *Traviata*, a fiddle that chirruped, a *jodel* and dance.³²

Conclusion

Grock gives this anecdote an upbeat outcome: his engagement at a huge salary to perform exclusively for the powerful syndicate. George Belmont, the inventor of two-houses-a-night, was equally sanguine when he told a reporter profiling him in 1894 that

the bar will play an ever-lessening part in the future of the music hall. For his own part he is absolutely opposed to the man who drops in for a drink or a chat with the proprietor or a manager. Such a person generally wants to come in "on the nod" and his custom is more trouble than it is worth. The tendency of the public is to visit a music hall in search of a variety entertainment, and for no other object.³³

But however rewarding the evolving variety system was to the most successful performers and proprietors, the new contractual and performance relationships marked the death of the Victorian music hall. Small independent owners were squeezed out; minor performers were progressively bound into contracts that trapped them in low-paid subordination; even the stars were forced to adjust their performances to a code that rendered them up, prompt and innocuous. The chairman and his convivial guests gave way to a printed program of numbered and timed turns. The aspiration of the large syndicates and expensive new London halls was to serve a wider audience. J. B. Booth describes Sir Alfred Butt, the successor to the "father of the halls" Charles Morton at the Palace Theatre, bringing there Pavlova and the Russian ballet, and potted dramas starring Beerbohm Tree or George

Alexander, to mix with the performing seals. Booth claimed the Palace had artistic, social and musical *cachet*; he regarded it as a wonder worthy of remark that Sir Harry Lauder, about to depart on an Australian tour, persuaded "the smartest and most fastidious audience in London" at the Palace to join in a chorus of "Auld Lang Syne."³⁴ The hall was the site of the first Royal Command Variety performance, in 1912. Booth alludes vaguely to the jealousy and heartache that was generated; he does not specify what caused it, but two stories have passed into legend – the undoubted fact that Marie Lloyd was deemed too unreliable and vulgar to appear, and the rumor that when Vesta Tilley appeared in her usual immaculate male costume, the ladies of the royal party were instructed by the queen to avert their eyes. The real life of the music hall was over.

Its memory, of course, has lived on, one of the highly charged myths of British theatre history. As the institution came to its apogee, and its inevitable onrushing decline caught the attention of *fin-de-siècle* writers and artists such as Kipling, F. Anstey, Max Beerbohm, Arthur Symons, Arnold Bennett, and Walter Sickert, it entered into the British imaginary as a lost golden age of simple good cheer and sentiment. As such it can still be invoked by a litany of names: Our Marie, Little Tich, the George Robey – or by the remembered lilt of a few of the songs and their catchphrase choruses – "It's a great big shame, but if she belonged to me . . ." or "A little of what you fancy does you good!" The halls have come to be a glittering, warm, tinkling projection of "the world we have lost," and as such are an outstanding instance of the discourse of the popular: a site of national nostalgia probably more powerful, certainly more widely cherished and mourned, than folk song, on the one hand, or the rest of the theatre of the nineteenth century, on the other. A fuller understanding of their material life depends on the re-situating of this mythical topos within the wider context of performance and cultural history.

NOTES

1. For a survey of music-hall scholarship past and present, see Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 17–35.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 77–134.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–68, 136.
4. See John Earl, "The Metropolitan Buildings Office and the First Music Halls," *Nineteenth Century Theatre* 28, 1 (Summer 2000), 5–25.
5. Peter Bailey, "Business and Good Fellowship in the London Music Hall," revised version in Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 80–100.
6. *The Era*, 18 February 1877, review of Deacon's in Islington, which was further praised for the low price of its drinks.

7. G. J. Mellor, *The Northern Music Hall* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Frank Graham, 1970), p. 25; Bailey, "Business," p. 116, quoting *The Era*, 6 June 1872.
8. Only marginally on the material – almost anything would serve, if it was put across well. Kipling's story about writing a music-hall song captures the crucial moment admirably, though he, in the persona of an anxious songwriter, attributes it to the success of the number itself: "Then came the chorus and the borrowed refrain. It took – it went home with a crisp click" as the guardsmen in the gallery joined in and sang. ("My Great and Only," January 1890, see *The Sussex Edition of the Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Rudyard Kipling*, 35 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1937–39), xxix: 259–67.)
9. For the oral ballad and scantly clad singers, see Philaster, "Low Singing Rooms" – ms held at Manchester Public Library; Thomas Hardy lamented the extinction of folk singing in Dorset by the coming of music-hall songs via the railway, in the 1840s; see Florence Emily Hardy, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy 1840–1891* (London: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 25–26; Dave Harker angrily echoes that regret in "Joe Wilson: 'Comic Dialectal Singer' or Class Traitor?," in J. S. Bratton (ed.), *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. 111–30. Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, pp. 53–54 and *passim*, makes the opposite assumption, that "folk songs" were simply sung in the halls alongside more modern song forms.
10. Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, pp. 89–96; Dennis Arundell, *The Story of Sadler's Wells 1683–1877* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1965), p. 173.
11. "Strait-laced people who even barred the ordinary theatre patronised St. James's Hall", Frederick Reynolds, *Minstrel Memories* (London, 1928), p. 104.
12. J. B. Booth, *Old Pink 'n' Days* (London: Richards Press, 1924), pp. 317–18.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 335–36.
14. J. B. Booth, *Pink Parade* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd., 1933), p. 133.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
16. David Cheshire, *Music Hall in Britain* (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1974), p. 94; Cheshire also quotes Henry Arthur Jones complaining in a letter to the press in 1910 that "150,000 illegal performances of stage-plays" (p. 92), took place annually in music halls. John Russell Stephens in *The Censorship of English Drama 1824–1901* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 188, n. 2, notes that the music hall was outside the Lord Chamberlain's remit as censor, and that both the 1866 and 1892 parliamentary reports recommended that this state of affairs should be ended. There are many short sketches in the Lord Chamberlain's collection from after 1912, but their linkage to performance in the halls is not established; see Lois Rutherford, "'Harmless Nonsense': The Comic Sketch and The Development of Music Hall Entertainment," in Bratton (ed.), *Music Hall*, p. 134.
17. The first major London confrontation between theatres and halls was in 1860–61 when Benjamin Webster took Charles Morton, the so-called "father of the halls" who had built first the Canterbury Theatre in Lambeth and then the Oxford, in the West End, to court for staging a "pantomimic duologue" in which two performers played ten characters in a tale of young love that ultimately developed into Clown, Pantaloon, Harlequin and Columbine. See Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, p. 141.
18. *The Era*, review of Alhambra, 21 June 1890, p. 15.

19. Fred Farren and Beatrice Collyer created a sensation at the London Empire with the apache dance, subsequently imitated and burlesqued by innumerable adagio dancers; see W. Macqueen-Pope, *Ivor* (London: Hutchinson, 1954), p. 100. *Humanity* was the speciality of John Lawson, who bought the provincial rights just for the fight scene, out of a Standard Theatre play of 1882 ostensibly about Grace Darling: see A. E. Wilson, *East End Entertainment* (London: Arthur Barker, 1954), p. 132.

20. Boucault, out of date in the theatre, was a favorite source of music-hall melodrama in the 1890s. *The Era*, 7 June 1890, p. 15; the sketch was called *Wild Rose* and was that night seen at the Temple, Hammersmith; *Conn* was premiered at the South London Palace and reported in *The Era*, 12 April 1890, p. 15.

21. See Peter Davison, *Contemporary Drama and the Popular Dramatic Tradition in England* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 13.

22. *The Era*, 12 April, review of *Our Lads in Red*, devised by Fred Bowyer of the Canterbury Theatre.

23. Laurence Senelick, "Politics as Entertainment: Victorian Music-Hall Songs," *Victorian Studies* 19 (1975-76), 180; Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, p. 42.

24. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Everyman edition, 1907), p. 142.

25. See *Tavern Singing in Early Victorian London: the Diaries of Charles Rice*, ed. Laurence Senelick (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1997) for the experiences of a semi-professional singer on this cusp.

26. Fred Wilson, *The Era*, 4 February 1877, review of Collins's Theatre; Alfred Vance, *The Era*, 18 January 1880, review of the Cambridge Theatre.

27. *The Era*, 8 February 1880, review of the Bedford Theatre; 29 June 1895, review of Collins's Theatre.

28. See Anthony Bennett, "Music in the Halls," in Bratton (ed.), *Music Hall*, pp. 1-22, for an analysis of the chorus and its uses, especially pp. 11-12.

29. See especially Peter Bailey, "Champagne Charlie and the Music-Hall Swell Song," revised version in *Popular Culture*, pp. 101-27.

30. See for example Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

31. See Michael Pickering, "White Skin, Black Masks: 'Nigger' Minstrelsy in Victorian Britain," in Bratton (ed.), *Music Hall*, pp. 70-91.

32. Grock, *Life's a Lark*, trans. Madge Pemberton, ed. Eduard Behrens (London: Heinemann, 1931), pp. 45-46.

33. *The Era*, 13 October 1894.

34. Booth, *Pink Parade*, pp. 160, 177-78.

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PETER RABY

Theatre of the 1890s: breaking down the barriers

Anyone skimming the columns of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the 1890s might assume that English drama was flourishing, and that theatrical topics were on everyone's lips. New plays and productions are given long reviews; actors' managers' plans for future offerings and seasons are trailed in some detail; and a European dimension is assured by the frequent references to Ibsen and the close attention paid to the visits of the Comédie-Française, or of Eleonora Duse. On 17 February 1893, for example, there is an article by Henry James on *The Master Builder*, with Elizabeth Robins as Hilda Wangel, followed four days later by an edition of the *Gazette* that includes both an interview with George Moore on his forthcoming *The Strike at Arlingtonford*, and another review – a hostile one – of *The Master Builder*. At the end of February, Wilde's *Salomé*, published in French, is savaged, but the reviewer at least discusses it in a theatrical context. In March comes a revival of *A Doll's House*, in April, the premiere of Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*, in May the enthusiastic reception of Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, in June reviews of performances of Rosmersholm at the Opéra Comique, of Duse as Nora Helmer, and of the publication of Shaw's *Widowers' Houses*.¹ These are all names or works that retain their resonance a century or more later. Theatre, and theatrical form, was alive.

At the same time, there was a sustained idea prevalent in the magazines and newspapers that all was not well with English dramatic art, if one defined that as the drama performed or published in London. One symptom to cause anxiety, perhaps, was the fact that only one of the people named above, Pinero, was English. The cutting edge of new dramatic writing came from Ireland, the model for a modern, serious theatre from France, in the shape of André Antoine's Théâtre Libre, and the bedrock of modern repertory from Norway. Sandwiched between the columns about Wilde, Ibsen and Shaw come articles on "The Decay of the Stage" or speculations as to why the London theatres are half-empty (defective heating). The year before, the *Pall Mall Gazette* had encouraged a series of statements from novelists