Introduction: Staging the Victorians – ‘Angry Ghosts’?

Bankable Victorians

A glance at the listings for West End theatre or regional theatre season brochures across the UK will confirm the ongoing significance to the theatre industry of drama based on the Victorians. In 2010–11, for instance, there were adaptations and re-imaginings of Dickens’s novels (such as Deborah McAndrew’s *David Copperfield* at the Bolton Octagon, and Tanika Gupta’s re-imagining of *Great Expectations* on tour), alongside the familiar onslaught of seasonal productions of *A Christmas Carol.*¹ There were revivals of twentieth-century adaptations of late Victorian adventure stories, like *Dracula* and *The Invisible Man.*² Sherlock Holmes was enjoying a series of stage revivals, which could well be connected to the recent Guy Ritchie film and modernized BBC series,³ and the television success of *Lark Rise to Candleford*, based on Flora Thompson’s books, led to a touring revival of Keith Dewhurst’s 1978 play of the same name. Revivals of Victorian plays like Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (Comedy Theatre, 2010), Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband* (Vaudeville Theatre, 2010–11) and Boucicault’s *London Assurance* (National Theatre, 2010) continued to be popular. Edward Fox was touring his one-man show about Anthony Trollope, *Trollope in Barsetshire* (Riverside Studios, 2010), Out of Joint produced a new play about Dickens at Hampstead Theatre and Shared Experience staged a revival of its biographical play *Brontë* at the Oxford Playhouse.⁴

How did productions like this – from inventive physical and ensemble approaches to Victorian classics to the fascination with Victorian writers’ lives – become a fixture in British theatre? Film and, in particular, television certainly play a part in consolidating and perpetuating contemporary notions of the Victorian, but this book will argue that it was
the social and political upheavals of the later twentieth century, particularly from 1968 to 1990, that generated new theatrical forms with which to interrogate and reassess the Victorian past. Most of these forms are still with us, I will argue, even though our national relationship with the Victorians has undergone a series of radical transformations.

Hence, the overarching argument of this study is that the way in which we represent the past on stage tells us much about how we regard ourselves in the present. Often unwittingly, plays about the Victorians reflect modern concerns about the place of Britain, and the individual, in a post-imperial world of globalized capitalism. Theatre is a sensitive litmus-test for these anxieties because it is a shared, social, space-and-time bound experience in an increasingly individuated, material and private culture. Over the years, these concerns have changed, and from the standpoint of 40 years’ distance, we can see profound theatrical differences in the way in which Britain has related to its ‘glory years’ of the nineteenth century. This book seeks to place British theatre about the Victorians in its broader cultural context, and in doing so will refer to trends in television, films, music, architecture, visual art and fashion over the last four decades. Although these are disciplines with their own vocabularies and perspectives for both audiences and critics, I have drawn on these fields here in order to pursue an argument centred on theatre studies, where fashions in other media and art forms feed into, and are in turn fed by, the theatre.

**Why the Victorians?**

One objection to this book’s focus on heritage and nostalgia is that its ideas could be applied to the theatrical treatment of any period in British history. In this section, I want to propose some reasons for the Victorian period’s long-standing and continuing importance to British theatre, to historical playwriting and to contemporary British culture in general.

First, the kinds of plays with historical settings performed on the British stage would have been quite different over the last 40 years had it not been for two plays, in particular, which draw on the Victorian period and our feelings towards it. Edward Bond’s *Early Morning*, as Chapter 1 explores, was a provocation to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, a way of demonstrating that its antiquated function was irrelevant and insulting to British society in the 1960s; and the play chose to portray Queen Victoria, Florence Nightingale, Gladstone, Disraeli and others in a surreal and unflattering light in order to make this point. This had