

**“This garish parish called the music hall”:  
Rupert Holmes’s *Drood* as Dickensian Adaptation**

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**Abstract:** Rupert Holmes’s musical adaptation of Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, first staged in 1985, remains one of the most inventive stage adaptations of any Dickens novel. This adaptation is not a traditional integrated musical, however. Rather, the play is written as an excursion into a Victorian music hall, where a lively group of actors and actresses are staging a musical revue based on Dickens’s last novel. Holmes’s *Drood* is thus a concept musical, a distinctive genre in musical theatre which became prominent in America in the 1970s and which represents one of the most innovative and modern takes on the musical format. For Holmes, the central concept of replicating a music hall is more imperative than the narrative thread of the Drood murder mystery. However, by laying such emphasis on British music-hall culture, Holmes, like Lionel Bart before him, is able to reinforce the traditional Britishness and popular appeal of Dickens.

**Keywords:** adaptation, concept musical, Dickens, *Edwin Drood*, Rupert Holmes, musical theatre, *Oliver!*, Stephen Sondheim.

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Perhaps the most fascinating element of the theatrical and cinematic afterlives of Charles Dickens’s novels is the diversity of approaches taken to the adaptation of the author’s works. Clearly, Boz has meant many different things to many different writers, directors, and producers over the course of the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries – artists have responded to Dickens in a wide variety of ways and through a wide variety of mediums. One such medium is the genre of the stage and film musical, and the fact that Dickens’s novels have proved to be such popular literary sources for musical adaptation over the past fifty years (in spite of the numerous difficulties involved in transforming a novel into a musical) is a testament to this enduring fascination with the author, and likewise, with Victorian society. In spite of the darkness and social outrage that defined many of his literary endeavours, Dickens’s ability to dwell upon “the romantic side of familiar things” (Gill *Bleak* 1996: 6) has largely defined our popular perception of the novelist and the era in which he wrote. As such, it is not surprising that Boz has been such a notable source for musical adaptation – much as in Dickens’s fiction, musicals convey the notion of

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increased sensitivity to the romantic possibilities lurking beneath the surface of our everyday experiences.

Lionel Bart’s masterpiece *Oliver!* (1960) is obviously the most successful of these musical adaptations, and its debut in the West End in 1960 not only marked the birth of the modern British musical, but simultaneously, the birth of the modern Dickensian musical. Though songwriters had been exploring the musicality of Boz’s stories and characters since the Victorian era, Bart was the first composer to successfully incorporate Dickens into the genre of the book musical. The fact that the composer was able to preserve a perceptible, albeit stereotypical ‘Britishness’ of his source, even while operating in the predominantly American genre of the integrated musical, is arguably his greatest achievement in writing *Oliver!* The joint effect of the Cockney idiom used by various characters while singing, combined with the music-hall tenor of many of the songs that Bart wrote for the show, is to accentuate the Britishness of the story; this effect is inestimably important to the success of the musical as a Dickensian adaptation.<sup>1</sup>

*Oliver!*’s popularity initiated a Dickensian fad in the realm of musical theatre, as other composers attempted to explore the musical potential of Dickens by adapting his texts to fit various musical formats. The structure of these musical adaptations has varied widely (as has the level of success attained by the writers), and the transatlantic balancing act between British literary source and American musical has created several interesting variations on Dickens.<sup>2</sup> Rupert Holmes’s 1985 musical *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, now known by its abridged title, *Drood*, is arguably the most inventive of these subsequent adaptations, and it remains *Oliver!*’s most noteworthy successor. Though the structures of these two musicals are widely divergent, both adaptations succeed in maintaining the British tenor of Dickens’s texts while simultaneously adapting him to the tenets of the American musical. In both cases, this success is attained through the use of a musical score based on the conventions of the British music hall, including Cockney lyricism and a ‘knowing’ relationship between the performers and the audience that shatters traditional theatrical illusions.

What is particularly fascinating in the case of *Drood*, however, is that unlike Bart, Holmes did not set out to conscientiously create a Dickensian musical in the strictest sense of the term. In this version of Dickens’s final novel, a fictional group of music-hall performers, the Music

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Hall Royale, acts out scenes from their own recent musical adaptation of Boz's incomplete mystery story. For Holmes, this show-within-a-show framework was central to his artistic vision of the adaptation: "My goal has always been one with the Music Hall Royale's: to amuse, divert, and entertain" (Holmes 1986: v). Implicitly, then, Holmes rejects any 'high' cultural ambition of keeping literary heritage alive or even the lesser aim of historical 'edutainment' evident in much neo-Victorian fiction. Ultimately, this diversionary goal is far more important to the writer's vision than the narrative thread of the *Drood* murder mystery, as Holmes notes that his play "was never intended to be a serious Dickensian adaptation" (Holmes 1986: v). Rather, it was primarily conceived as a "springboard for a series of theatrical moments and events, using a literary curiosity as a trampoline" (Holmes 1986: v) for present-day imaginings,<sup>3</sup> clearly emphasising the 'neo-' rather than the 'Victorian' aspect of the project.

Holmes's focus on the music-hall elements of his creative vision, along with his subordination of the Dickensian source to that vision, raises several questions about whether or not *Drood* should actually be considered a Dickensian musical. Where does Dickens fit in an adaptation of a Dickensian novel that is not meant to be taken seriously as an adaptation? It is easy to label Holmes's highly experimental play as an 'unfaithful' adaptation of the source, but assessing *Drood* (or any other Dickensian musical) on the basis of its fidelity to the text is a frustrating and largely unproductive endeavor. Prominent adaptation theorists have spent several decades trying to promote less constrictive analyses of adaptations, noting that the best way to view these works is as 'readings' of their literary sources as opposed to 'live-action versions' of the same. Linda Hutcheon notes that "for a long time, 'fidelity criticism,' as it came to be known, was the critical orthodoxy in adaptation studies [...]. Today that dominance has been challenged" (Hutcheon 2006: 6-7). Robert Stam likewise challenges readers to move "beyond fidelity" (Stam 2005: 3), contrasting the stringent criticisms put forth by fidelity criticism – "'infidelity,' 'betrayal,' 'deformation,' 'violation,' 'vulgarization,' 'bastardization,' and 'desecration'" – with the more flexible and thought-provoking terms promoted by the aforementioned "adaptations as interpretations" viewpoint: "translation, actualization, reading, critique, dialogization" (Stam 2005: 3, 4).

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In the case of Holmes’s *Drood*, the composer’s unabashed divergences from the literary text stand in sharp contrast to his meticulous fidelity to the re-creation of Victorian music-hall culture onstage. Nevertheless, it is this same commitment to the music-hall vision which ultimately allows for the Dickensian element to emerge so successfully. The use of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as the source for Holmes’s music-hall experiment is ultimately appropriate from both a historical and literary point of view: the Victorian music hall is the perfect setting for an adaptation of a novel written by a nineteenth-century British author whose artistic approach was founded on the principle of engaging his audience. Furthermore, Holmes’s experimental approach to the material allows him to reconcile the historical British elements of his project with the tenets of the historical trends in the experimentalist American musical theatre of the 1970s and 80s in an innovative way, creating the sort of “dialogization” described by Stam.

*Drood* was a product of its time period. Most musical theatre scholars designate the 1970s as the birth period of the so-called ‘concept musical’, with Stephen Sondheim’s *Company* (1970) often described as one of the first examples of this type of show. Joanne Gordon stresses the correlation between Sondheim’s innovative approach to musical theatre and the advent of this genre:

Concept, the word coined to describe the form of the Sondheim musical, suggests that all elements of the musical, thematic and presentational, are integrated to suggest a central idea or image [...]. Prior to Sondheim, the musical was built around the plot [...]. The book structure for Sondheim, on the other hand, means the idea. Music, lyric, dance, dialogue, design, and direction fuse to support a focal thought. A central concept controls and shapes an entire production, for every aspect of the production is blended and subordinated to a single vision [...]. Form and content cannot really be separated, for one dictates and is dependent on the other. It is for this reason that each of Sondheim’s works is unique. The pattern in all of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals is basically the same, but Sondheim develops a new lyric, musical, and theatrical language for each work. Sondheim’s music and lyrics grow out of the dramatic idea

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inherent in the show's concept and themselves *become* part of the drama that previous theater songs would only reflect. (Gordon 1990: 7-8, original emphasis)

While Gordon emphasises the importance of total integration to the structure of the concept musical, other musical theatre scholars stress the influence of the disjointed format of the musical revue on the presentation of songs in a concept musical. Stephen Citron describes the concept musical as "an offshoot of the topical revue, often done with more seriousness of purpose. It need not have a plot or it may have a slight thread of one" (Citron 1991: 39). Allen Cohen and Steven Rosenhaus also highlight the revue style use of songs in a concept musical, as speech and song do not always alternate smoothly in this type of show: "Instead, the differences and the seams between speech and song are emphasized, to deliberately create a disjunctive effect. In a concept musical, the songs stand outside the spoken scenes" (Cohen and Rosenhaus 2006: 10). This innovative merging of the revue show with the basic theory of a wholly integrated musical is a vital component of *Drood*. Although the revue format is used in the staging of Holmes's songs, so as to accentuate the music-hall concept behind the adaptation, this format itself is seamlessly integrated into the musical's fundamental design. It would make little sense to utilise a traditional book score in a musical about Victorian music-hall culture, because the revue format was much more akin to the actual performance style of music-hall shows, with quickly alternating and diverse acts.

This structuring of the musical reinforces the precedence of the music-hall concept over the Dickensian narrative, for the songs are rarely utilised to tell the story. Whereas a book musical like *Oliver!* features songs which serve narrative purposes, thus reinforcing the plot points of the original story (or at least, the composer's vision of that story), a concept musical features songs which underscore the thematic slant of the piece.<sup>4</sup> In the case of *Drood*, the songs serve mainly to sustain the historical illusion instead of sustaining the Dickensian narrative, as Holmes explores the various types of music-hall songs, jokes, and communal activities that made these venues so popular throughout the nineteenth century.

In order to evaluate the function of music-hall culture in *Drood*, a better understanding of the musical repertoire of the Victorian music halls is necessary. The halls evolved from such ordinary practices as singing in local

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taverns and, initially, a music hall was little more than a saloon in which the patrons sang together.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis in music-hall culture gradually shifted from drinking to entertainment, as Dagmar Kift explains: “The music hall can thus be characterized as an institution which was born ‘from below’ (i.e. from the pubs) and was rapidly subjected to a thoroughgoing process of commercialization” (Kift 1996: 2). Consequently, the music hall quickly became the chief form of entertainment (as well as an important social outlet) for members of the working class, and many of the songs that defined music-hall culture had a distinctive working-class appeal.

Comic songs became the central feature in the musical repertoire of the nineteenth-century music hall, and most comedic songs undercut several fundamental elements of Victorian culture, especially middle-class morality. Whereas members of the middle class idealised the Victorian home, the retiring female, and the cosy domestic sphere, music-hall songs tended to mock these idealisations. Furthermore, the bawdy songs sung in the halls reinforced the fact that music-hall culture took a far more open view of sexuality; according to Kift, “sex – in stark contrast to Victorian middle-class notions – was not taboo but a source of celebration and enjoyment” (Kift 1996: 37). It is no surprise that music halls were frequently labelled as immoral by middle-class reformers, but the comic songs that derided the prudish elements of a middle-class lifestyle oftentimes offered members of the working class the chance to revel in the freedoms afforded by their particular station.

Many of the comedic songs sung on the music hall stage were placed in a specific context through the use of a particular stage persona. Anthony Bennett asserts that

from the outset it was the comic singers who epitomized music hall, and essential to their acts was the projection of an assumed character, or range of characters. Every singer, aspiring or established, therefore needed a body of songs recognizably their own. (Bennett 1986: 8)

Thus, specific comedic melodies were associated with specific characters. The most common personalities found on the music hall stage were often satirical caricatures of certain middle- and upper-class figures in Victorian society. The “swell” or “dandy” was a popular role for male performers to

take on, while popular female figures included the “shy maiden”, a satire of the Victorian angel in the house, and the “naughty girl”, a world-wise character whose innocent style of dressing belied her knowledge of sexual matters (Kift 1996: 46-47).<sup>6</sup>

Although music-hall songs are best remembered as comical and coarse, they likewise had their sentimental side. Christopher Pulling notes that these “songs from the heart” were taken very seriously by working-class patrons (Pulling 1952: 123). Frequently, audiences were moved to tears by these tragic ballads commemorating lost loves: “The performer’s success might be gauged by the number of handkerchiefs produced” (Pulling 1952: 123).

The score to *Drood* contains several comical and sentimental songs which epitomise the conventions of the Victorian music hall and make virtually no contribution to the story of Edwin Drood’s disappearance nor any other element of Dickens’s narrative. Instead, these songs are sung as interludes or revue-style performances, which again serve to underscore the music-hall concept. From the very beginning of the show, Holmes prioritises the music-hall component over the Dickensian narrative, as the opening number, ‘There You Are’, features the actors and actresses in their roles as music-hall performers as opposed to Dickensian characters; furthermore, the song has nothing to do with Dickens’s plotline, instead introducing the comical and bawdy carnivalesque world of the Victorian music hall. During this opening number, each of the leading performers teasingly makes advances towards a member of the audience, setting up the same sexual innuendos that their Victorian predecessors would have utilised to garner laughs from the working-class crowd:

**PRYSOCK**

I am standing with a gent  
Who seems singularly bent  
On attaching both his hands to both my knees! [...]

**NUTTING**

I’m considering the lap  
Of a most engaging chap  
And I’ll let him do exactly as I please! [...]

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**PAGET**

I've a lady down in front who's handed me her  
Latch key—  
Surely she must know that spells her doom! [...]

**PEREGRINE**

And this man has grand designs to show me  
In my dressing room [...]  
(Holmes 1986: 4)

Various other comedic songs such as ‘Both Sides of the Coin’ and ‘Off to the Races’, are likewise presented mainly in their capacity as music-hall entertainment numbers, without referencing Dickens’s plot. Instead, they are comic numbers written in the form of the patter song and the repertory number respectively (genres which would have been familiar to music-hall patrons in the Victorian period).<sup>7</sup> Sentimental ballads, such as ‘Moonfall’ and ‘Never the Luck’, are likewise sung independently of the Drood story, as the performers portraying Rosa Bud and Bazzard basically step out of their roles and sing personal ballads, purely intended to entertain the audience.

Although numerous songs are eventually sung in conjunction with the plot of the Drood disappearance, all of these numbers retain the tone and style of a traditional music-hall ballad, and the emphasis is rarely placed on the Dickensian story. ‘Don’t Quit While You’re Ahead’, though sung by Puffer, Datchery, and other characters in the context of the characters’ attempts to solve the murder mystery, contains virtually no direct references to the plot and includes the elements of traditional music hall ballad with the onomatopoeia-esque lyrics: “Ta-Ray-Ta-Rah!/Boom!/Bang it, Bash it, Hooray-Ha-rah!/Boom!/Clang it, Clash it, Oo-Lah-Dee-Dah!/Don’t quit while you’re ahead” (Holmes 1986: 85). Similarly, Puffer’s first song, ‘The Wages of Sin’, serves to introduce both Puffer and the opium den setting, but it maintains a definite music hall quality, as the lyrics put forth bawdy jokes befitting of music-hall culture. Even more tellingly, Puffer gets the audience members to sing along during the final chorus and chastises them if they do not sing loud enough. No matter what the context of a specific song within the Dickensian adaptation, the performers always break character following their songs and acknowledge the audience in some way.



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Clearly, the actors are all aware that they are participating in a musical revue, and they draw attention to their performances in the same way that actual music-hall performers would have done in the Victorian age.<sup>8</sup>

The musical score and basic structure of *Drood* clearly accentuate the centrality of the music-hall concept and its dominance over the Dickensian element of the project. Indeed, given that the lead character in the play – the Chairman, Mr. William Cartright – functions almost entirely in his music-hall role as master of ceremonies as opposed to his Dickensian role (the relatively minor part of Mayor Sapsea), it is obvious that the adaptation of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is a relatively small component of a much larger experiment in musical theatre. The Dickensian narrative gradually becomes a more central element of the project as the play nears its conclusion, and one of the show's most memorable features – the audience's voting on the ending – is built squarely around the Dickensian roots of the story (and its infamous status as an unfinished murder mystery). Even in this instance, however, Holmes's central preoccupation is to preserve the music-hall illusion rather than to put the Dickensian adaptation at the forefront.

Just as a music-hall performance was dependent on a lively and accepting audience, Holmes's musical is equally dependent on a cooperative crowd, for the success of the overall concept is contingent on the audience members feeling free to participate as if they were actually watching a music-hall performance. Without an imaginative and involved set of spectators, the central concept is infinitely weakened. As in the Victorian music hall, Holmes places a great deal of power in the audience's hands, and never more so than when he allows the crowd to choose from numerous possible outcomes regarding the ending for the show. Several of the questions that Holmes places in the hands of his audience are rooted in the Dickensian source, as readers and critics have long debated such issues as the motive behind the murder of Edwin Drood, the identity of Dick Datchery, and the question of Edwin's true fate.<sup>9</sup>

Despite taking numerous creative liberties with his hypothetical solutions, Holmes displays a keen insight into the critical arguments regarding these unsolved mysteries. The Chairman claims that “most literary experts agree that our enquiring Detective, Mr. Dick Datchery, is actually someone we have already met” (Holmes 1986: 87), and indeed, many readers and scholars have put forth theories that the mysterious

Datchery, introduced in the final few chapters that Dickens wrote, was actually another character in disguise. In Holmes’s adaptation, the audience is given the option of selecting a Datchery from a group of characters: Helena, Neville, Bazzard, Rosa, and Crisparkle. Following the revelation of the ‘detective’s’ identity, the individual chosen by the audience sings ‘Out on a Limerick’, a brief little air revealing his or her motives for donning the disguise (see Chart 1).

**Chart 1: Possible Candidates for Datchery**

<b><u>Bazzard</u></b>	<b><u>Crisparkle</u></b>	<b><u>Helena</u></b>	<b><u>Neville</u></b>	<b><u>Rosa</u></b>
Disguised himself out of his love of theatricality.	Disguised himself to secretly assist the twins.	Disguised herself to save Neville and put an end to Jasper’s treachery.	Disguised himself to clear his name.	Disguised herself to save Neville and get revenge on Jasper.

The revelation of Datchery precedes the most important question, which Holmes leaves in the audience’s hands: who killed Edwin Drood? Ironically, this is probably the question, the answer to which almost all of the leading scholars writing on the novel have agreed on. From the very beginning of the novel, Jasper seems so obvious a suspect that it is difficult to contemplate anyone else having committed the crime. As in various other Victorian mysteries, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s sensation novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), the titular mystery is actually of secondary importance to various questions regarding the potential madness of the lead character.<sup>10</sup> While the revelation of Jasper as the murderer probably would not have surprised many, the disclosure of his reasons for killing his nephew would undoubtedly have fascinated Dickens’s readers (as the various theories put forth regarding this matter continue to fascinate readers today).<sup>11</sup>

This fact obviously creates several difficulties for Holmes, however, for by staying true to the basic arc of Dickens’s plot, he too makes it fairly obvious that Jasper killed Edwin. This technique would seem to impede his determination to have the audience choose the ending to the play – for where is the fun in all the spectators selecting Jasper as the killer? The

Chairman himself points out that the solution to the mystery seems a bit obvious:

Could this be all there is to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*? That John Jasper, the obvious villain of the piece, did indeed kill his nephew in a hopeless attempt to win the love of the fair Miss Rosa Bud. Ladies and gentlemen: where then the mystery? (Holmes 1986: 93)

In an attempt to preserve the fun of the music-hall concept, Holmes eliminates Jasper as a suspect by having Durdles reveal that Jasper could not have been the one to commit the murder. Though this decision completely contradicts Dickens's novel, Holmes is again more focused on preserving his conceptual vision by allowing his 'music-hall' audience to vote on a surprise ending. To circumvent the problems created by this contradiction, the playwright incorporates a rather blatant yet effective plot device, so as to justify the idea that another character might have killed Edwin, albeit accidentally. In the climactic scene where Edwin leaves his uncle's house on Christmas Eve, Jasper gives Edwin his coat to wear. Thus, nearly all of the characters who are presented as possible suspects are given justifiable motives based on a desire to kill Jasper (see Chart 2).

**Chart 2: Possible Murderers**

<b><u>Bazzard</u></b> Did it to frame Neville and earn fame for himself as the man who solved the case.	<b><u>Crisparkle</u></b> Thought he was killing Jasper. Did it because he viewed Jasper's madness as Satanic.	<b><u>Helena</u></b> Thought she was killing Jasper. Did it to protect her brother and Rosa.
<b><u>Puffer</u></b> Thought she was killing Jasper. Did it to try and protect Rosa from Jasper.	<b><u>Rosa</u></b> Thought she was killing Jasper after having been driven to madness by his advances.	<b><u>Neville</u></b> Truly hated Edwin and thus got rid of him so as to have Rosa for himself.

Humorously, the play does not conclude with the revelation of the murderer, but rather, with the potential for a romance between two of the remaining characters. As the chairman puts it, “Surely we are also entitled to a happy ending? We all have need in our lives for Love... Romance...or, at this hour of the night, any reasonable facsimile thereof” (Holmes 1986: 127). The audience is allowed to select one of the remaining female characters and pair her up with any of the remaining male characters. (Understandably, the murderer is omitted from this vote.) Most of the pairings are purposefully outrageous and, from a scholarly perspective, only one of the possible permutations could be traced back to critical arguments over the text’s intended ending: John Forster suggested that Dickens intended for Crisparkle and Helena to marry (see Schlicke 1999: 403). The other pairings are played mostly for laughs and reinforce the bawdy humour and openness regarding sex in music-hall culture (see Chart 3).

**Chart 3: Possible Romantic Pairings for the Finale**

	<b>Rosa</b>	<b>Helena</b>	<b>Puffer</b>
<b><u>Bazzard</u></b>	Rosa is interested in the play that Bazzard is writing and thinks that he might serve as her new music tutor.	Like Bazzard, Helena is interested in the theatrical scene and eager to leave Cloisterham.	Puffer has led a wicked enough life to make a score of bawdy dramas, and she decides to become Bazzard’s co-author.
<b><u>Crisparkle</u></b>	Rosa is fond of him because of his fatherly nature, which she admits to finding very attractive as well.	Crisparkle’s kindness and goodness have made a strong impression on Helena and she loves him for it.	Puffer asks for Crisparkle’s help in repenting her sinful and wayward lifestyle, and he is eager to help – perhaps a bit too eager!
<b><u>Deputy</u></b>	Since older men have proven so unsatisfactory, Rosa feels she would rather be with the young Deputy.	Helena asks Deputy to teach her about English culture, and he in turn will learn about Oriental culture.	Puffer thinks tutoring the virginal and naïve Deputy would be a good way to make use of her checkered past and sexual expertise.

	<b><u>Rosa</u></b>	<b><u>Helena</u></b>	<b><u>Puffer</u></b>
<b><u>Durdles</u></b>	After all this madness and mayhem, Rosa is interested in slumming as a means of coping.	Helena thinks she could have a good effect on Durdles and help elevate him from the lower class.	Puffer jokes that she is the only woman in England who won't make Durdles feel morally inferior.
<b><u>Jasper</u></b>	Rosa is attracted to the good Jasper so long as he is capable of suppressing the evil one. Jasper vows to get his split personalities in order.	Helena finds Jasper fascinating. Jasper is delighted to be with someone who shares his flair for Eastern tastes.	Puffer knows Jasper would only want her for the opium with which she can provide him, but Jasper doesn't see the problem in this arrangement.
<b><u>Neville</u></b>	Rosa has felt romantic love for Neville for some time, and Neville loves her back and realises that Edwin never loved her as much as Neville will.	The actors playing the twins are understandably horrified, and the two of them sarcastically deride the audience for its perverse sense of humor.	Puffer thinks she would be a good match for the hot-blooded Neville and vows to teach him tricks he can't even learn in the Orient.
<b><u>Sapsea</u></b>	Rosa is not interested in being anyone's object of desire but would rather settle for a rich husband.	Helena is interested in marrying Sapsea so as to have her own money, her own life – and her own bedroom.	Puffer knows that Sapsea used to visit a brothel and blackmails him into taking her as a wife.

Though the build-up toward the resolution of Edwin Drood's disappearance places significant emphasis on the source, Holmes's outlandish theoretical solutions to the various mysteries of the Dickens text, along with his comical last-minute romantic pairings, reinforce his assertion that the musical was never meant to be taken seriously as a Dickensian adaptation. The music-hall concept retains its dominance over the textual element of the project through the authority of the audience in the shaping of the story's conclusion and the comicality of these potential outcomes.

The way in which Dickens's plot is presented throughout the adaptation indicates that its primary purpose is to support Holmes's creative

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vision rather than to dictate the structure and pace of the musical, and one could argue that the composer could have selected virtually any Victorian mystery story to suit this purpose. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was conducive to his music-hall vision, because its open-ended conclusion automatically allowed for a significant amount of audience participation, but the composer might easily have chosen a different nineteenth-century mystery and revised the ending so as to allow for the audience to select a finale. It is not difficult to imagine *The Moonstone* (1868) or *Lady Audley's Secret* receiving similar treatments, especially given that Holmes would not have allowed the completed narratives or conclusions of these novels to impact his music-hall vision in any palpable way. Nevertheless, if the concept musical genre is founded upon the principle of total integration, should not the Dickensian element exert a more pronounced effect on the shape of the show?

In spite of Holmes's ostentatious infidelity and ostensible dismissal of the source, the Dickensian component of the project is actually integrated fully into the musical, though this integration is detectable in the thematic and cultural threads of the adaptation as opposed to the narrative. Ultimately, it is the novelist's distinctive Britishness and his philosophy of connecting directly with his readership which link him fully to the music-hall concept as executed by Holmes.

While the concept musical is an American innovation, pioneered by the likes of Sondheim, Kander, and Ebb, the central idea utilised by Holmes as a framework for the adaptation is inherently British; the Victorian music-hall setting allows for a greater emphasis on historical British culture than perhaps any other frame which the composer might have utilised. Consequently, the Dickensian source fits smoothly into the overall design of the show, due in no small part to the popular perception of Dickens as perhaps the most overtly British author of all time.<sup>12</sup> Malcolm Andrews notes that:

In his own day Dickens was recognized as a master of the knowledge of English life: “he is so thoroughly English, and is now part and parcel of that mighty aggregate of national fame which we feel bound to defend on all points against attack.” This review appeared in 1850, soon after *David Copperfield* had come to an end, when Dickens was on the

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crest of his career. Even a century and a quarter later, it is hard to think of any other English writer whose imaginative world remains so fully assimilated into the national identity. (Andrews 1979: xvi)

The very fact that the phrase ‘Dickensian London’ exists seems to exemplify the connection between the author and English culture. While the Dickens narrative is a supplementary element of the Holmes adaptation as opposed to the very foundation of the piece, the overt Britishness of Dickens allows for the narrative to complement Holmes’s music-hall concept in a way that no other source could.<sup>13</sup> Since every single element of the musical is connected back to the music-hall concept, a Victorian cultural institution defines the entire project – it is not surprising that a Dickensian source should prove so effective in this context given that Dickens, through his legacy as a canonical Victorian novelist and his afterlife on stage and film, continues to epitomise the popular perception of nineteenth-century Britishness.

The use of a Dickensian source can likewise be linked to Holmes’s conceptual approach in terms of the author’s own historical approach to the medium of the novel. Throughout the adaptation, Holmes’s music-hall performers assert that their central desire is to divert and amuse, which is true to the historical roots of these characters, given that the success of a music-hall act was dependent on the ability of the performers to successfully entertain the audience.<sup>14</sup> Holmes’s concept of the necessity of entertainment, especially for the lower class patrons who would have been attending music-hall productions, is immediately evocative of the driving principle behind the Dickens canon, which was established and perpetuated on the basis of his works’ cross-class, as well as cross-generational and cross-denominational appeal. Indeed, this appeal was so transcendent that it crossed the lines between different artistic genres, as hack playwrights stole scenes and characters from Dickens’s novels in order to create marketable working-class melodramas. Whether or not Holmes was aware of these links is inconsequential; the more important matter is that the author whose story he selected to underscore his historical vision of the music hall was a man who firmly believed in the goals that the composer expounds in his libretto: “to amuse, divert, and entertain” (Holmes 1986: v). This connection is further accentuated by the fact that Holmes’s musical is written as if it were

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being performed in front of a working-class audience. Dickens was a strong believer in the necessity of entertainment for England’s working classes, and in many instances, served as a staunch defender of their right to be entertained. Paul Schlicke has written extensively on this subject, and his text entitled *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* provides a wealth of information on Dickens’s widespread incorporation of popular entertainment forms into his novels. The author describes Dickens as a champion for all the various popular amusements that repeatedly came under attack during the Victorian age, for Dickens did all he could to defend popular entertainment from the conservative Evangelical forces that sought to pass stricter Sabbatarian restrictions, which would undoubtedly have limited the working class’ ability to enjoy such diversions. The Dickens canon can serve as an invaluable historical guide to the popular entertainment forms of the Victorian period, as travelling theatre companies, itinerant players, Punch and Judy shows, circuses, tavern songs, and country fairs are all featured in the various novels.<sup>15</sup>

Popular entertainment was not only essential to the themes, plots, and structures of Dickens’s novels, but simultaneously to the author’s artistic philosophy: “His repeated advice to fellow-novelists was to take seriously the need to entertain readers” (Schlicke 1988: 4). This philosophy is especially apparent in Dickens’s early novels, as the intervallic structure of *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* allows for the author to jump from one entertaining episode to another. Even the later novels retain elements of Dickens’s entertaining approach to fiction, however, as when his desire to dwell on the “romantic side of familiar things” (Dickens 1996: 6) in *Bleak House* allows him retain the primary role of entertainer, whilst conveying a dark and truthful story to his readership. In the first volume of *Household Words*, the author explains his desire to entertain readers by illuminating the imaginative elements of everyday life:

No mere utilitarian spirit, no iron binding of the mind to grim realities, will give a harsh tone to our Household Words. In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast; which, according to its nurture, burns with an inspiring flame, or sinks into a sullen glare, but which (or woe betide that day!) can never be extinguished.



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To show to all, that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellant on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out: – to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination; to bring the greater and the lesser in degree, together, upon that wide field, and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding – is one main object of our Household Words. (Dickens 1850: 1)

Dickens's reference to the "hardest workers at the whirling wheel of toil" reinforces his sympathy towards the working classes and their need for entertainment as a means of relieving the burdens of their laborious existences. In many of his novels, most notably *Hard Times* (1854), Dickens labels imagination and entertainment as necessities rather than simple diversions, particularly for those at the bottom of the social ladder. The desire to entertain is central to Dickens's understanding of his own vocation; it is likewise central to the philosophy behind the music hall. Whereas many in the Victorian era might have dismissed the diversionary amusements of the people as trivial, Dickens perceived popular entertainment as an ethical necessity—a noteworthy consideration given the upcoming Dickens bicentennial. As educators across the world consider the difficulties of 'marketing' the two-hundred year old Dickens to a generation that is content to read Facebook walls and Twitter tweets, it is essential to promote the enduringly entertaining qualities of his writings as a means of bridging the generational gap. Passing on Dickens's novels, characters, and stories (Boz's own contribution to the 'popular entertainment' of his day) is a moral responsibility for those who seek to uphold the great books tradition (thus echoing Dickens's own belief in the ethical essentials of entertainment). Turning to entertaining adaptations, neo-Victorian sources, and musical experiments such as Holmes's *Drood* can facilitate this transmission.

Interestingly, Holmes's presentation of a show in which the audience is allowed to shape the narrative is strangely evocative of Dickens's desire to connect with and please his own audience. Though he did not go so far as to allow his readers to 'vote' on what endings they preferred, Dickens, perhaps more so than any other author of his day, sought to reach out to the

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public and forge a strong connection with them through his art. For Dickens, a bad novel was one which did not properly engage the reader. Thus, he constantly evaluated the reputation of his novels amongst readers, so as to better attune his future projects to popular tastes:

The immense popularity of Dickens’s novels, which always delighted him, was one standard by which he judged their success [...]. Yet this standard of judging by popularity cannot be explained simply in terms of finance or personal vanity. It is a case rather of a sincere and intimate bond with the reader. (Sucksmith 1970: 22)

The dependence of Dickens’s novels, music-hall performances, and Holmes’s concept on audience participation and interaction is a key link between the original version of the novel and Holmes’s adaptation. Furthermore, this link illustrates the relevance of Dickens to the vision of the show, despite the fact that the music-hall concept supersedes the Drood story.

In spite of the inherent differences between a stage performance and a novel, the connection between reader and author in the case of Dickens is highly evocative of the relationship between patron and performer in the Victorian music hall, particularly in regards to the power dynamics of these relationships. Peter Bailey describes the bond between music-hall patron and performer through a concept which he refers to as “knowingness”; since music-hall performers frequently jumped in and out of character when addressing their audience, there was no “fourth wall” between the actors and the spectators, which consequently allowed the audience to “know” the performers (and the basic elements of a performance) in a way that was impossible in the “legitimate” theatre. As Bailey writes, this technique “secured a distinctive relationship with the audience by initiating them in the mysteries of the performer’s craft and giving them a consequent sense of select inclusion” (Bailey 1998: 132). This inclusiveness is another defining feature of Dickens’s prose style, and just as Holmes’s characters repeatedly break the fourth wall, Dickens likewise did all he could to tear down the barriers between himself and his public. If the purpose of a music-hall performance, or a Broadway musical, is to entertain and elicit an affective response from an audience, Dickens’s writing style is similarly rhetorical. In

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a way, the relationship that Dickens desired with his reading public is analogous to the relationship that a stage performer has with his or her audience. Yet whereas an actor is immediately rewarded with feedback and appreciation through applause and crowd reaction, a novelist is incapable of attaining such instantaneous praise. Nevertheless, Boz repeatedly granted his readers unrestricted access to the fictional worlds he created, whether it was through the overt presence of his narrators (who are never content to *show* the story, but rather, must always *tell* it through a grandiose ‘performance’), the theatricality inherent in his plots and characters, or ultimately, through his reading tours, which finally gave him the ability to receive the instantaneous feedback of a performer. Just as an actor or singer shifted techniques based on audience responsiveness, Dickens himself felt as if his narrative art was moulded and remoulded by his readers. In a speech given during a banquet held in his honour, Dickens explained the centrality of the reading public to his authorial vision:

Let me assure you that whatever you accepted with pleasure, either by word of pen or by word of mouth, from me, you have greatly improved in the acceptance. [*Cheers.*] As the gold is said to be doubly and trebly refined which has seven times passed the furnace, so a fancy may be said to become more and more refined each time it passes through the human heart. [*Loud applause.*] You have, and you know you have, brought to the consideration of me that quality in yourselves without which I should have beaten the air. Your earnestness has stimulated mine, your laughter has made me laugh, and your tears have overflowed my eyes. All that I claim for myself, in establishing the relationship which exists between us, is constant fidelity to hard work (Dickens 1988: 387-388).

The personal connection between author and reader, like the personal connection between music-hall performer and audience member, underscores another conceptual element that makes a Dickens novel seem such a suitable source for Holmes’s musical.

It is somewhat striking that the Dickensian element of the project should work as well as it does given the contrasts between the concrete text, as written by Dickens, and the more amorphous musical written by Holmes

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– though *Drood* has a libretto, score, and lyrics, its music-hall frame means that the adaptation exists primarily in performance. The gleefully chaotic tenor of the script, along with the aforementioned tendency of the performers to break the fourth wall, gives the piece an improvisational quality that dictates the tone of the entire musical. Nevertheless, while Dickens’s novels clearly exist in a tangible, textual tradition, they are likewise part of an improvisational and performative tradition. Dickens’s own improvisational approach to the serial novel in the early stages of his career evokes the idea of ostentatious performance from his stepping into the roles of harried editor in *The Pickwick Papers* or sardonic social critic in *Oliver Twist*; the interpolated tales included in the early novels are likewise akin to the random acts or musical numbers peppered throughout many Victorian melodramas or music-hall shows. Similarly, the tendency to read Boz aloud, along with Dickens’s own desire to directly engage the public through dramatic readings of his novels, accentuates that the Dickens canon, like Holmes’s *Drood*, exists partially in performance.

In conclusion, while the concrete text, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, does not exert a particularly strong influence on the tone and style of Holmes’s musical, the more abstract elements which have defined the popular perception of Dickens contribute heavily to the overall success of the concept musical. Throughout the show, the characters celebrate the popular appeal of Dickens and treat his memory with a tenderness and respect that clearly conveys their appreciation of the man and his works. Toward the beginning of the play, the Chairman describes Dickens’s untimely death as “the one ungenerous deed of his noble career”, and when the play reaches the end of Dickens’s actual narrative, he sadly states that “it was at this point in our story that Mr. Charles Dickens laid down his pen forever” (Holmes 1986: 6, 87). These testimonies to Dickens reinforce the fact that, even though his story is of secondary importance to Holmes’s concept, the author’s worldview and approach to his craft directly support that same concept. In both cases, the emphasis is on connecting with an audience and facilitating their enjoyment. It is doubtful that any other Victorian author’s work would have integrated so well into Holmes’s vision.

Though Holmes may not have intended to create a “serious Dickensian adaptation,” (Holmes 1986: v) his fidelity to Dickens’s artistic vision made *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* the perfect narrative source for his conceptual frame. The freedoms granted to the writer by the genre of the

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concept musical allow him to look back at Victorian culture while simultaneously moving the Dickensian musical forward to intriguing new places. Such innovation may be necessary if the Dickensian musical is to remain relevant, for the conventions of the musical stage have again shifted. Bart wrote *Oliver!* in the golden age of the Broadway musical, thus utilising the integrated book format, while Holmes wrote *Drood* in the more conceptual and experimental era when Sondheim was the dominant force in American musical theatre. In an era of ‘jukebox’ musicals and, worse yet, ‘high-school’ musicals, Dickens will only find a place if composers are willing to take great creative risks in the adaptation of his stories. Perhaps the unavoidable outcome will see a combination of the two aforementioned trends in modern musicals: the creation of a Dickensian musical that takes the audience through a Disney jukebox. There is something enticing about the image of Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller singing the trademark theme to Disney’s *Toy Story* (1995), ‘You’ve Got a Friend in Me,’ as a duet in the Fleet; one can likewise imagine Dick Swiveller promoting the philosophy of ‘no worries’ by taking up *The Lion King*’s (1994) ‘Hakuna Matata.’ Dickens has already been Disneyfied (most recently by receiving the theme-park treatment), and the idea of ‘Disney songs’ becoming ‘Dickens songs’ through a jukebox musical score may be the inevitable next step in his Disneyfication and musicalisation.

Though Bart and Holmes took vastly different approaches to their adaptations, both composers were willing to experiment with the musical potential of Boz, and the enduring power of their adaptations is a testament to their creativity. 2010 marked the golden anniversary of *Oliver!* and the silver anniversary of *Drood*, and it is likely that these two adaptations will remain the benchmarks against which all future musical adaptations of Dickens are measured.

### Notes

1. The term ‘Britishness,’ as used throughout this article in conjunction with my description of both Dickens and music-hall culture, is not meant to imply that any one word could fully encapsulate the qualities and characteristics of Britain’s people. Nevertheless, in referring to the ‘Britishness’ of Dickens’s

writings, I am alluding to the fact that the defining characteristics of his works were intimately associated with British cultural identity. As to the ‘Britishness’ of the music halls, I will cite Roger Wilmut, who describes the entertainment genre as “distinctly British, for although American and European countries had their own equivalents they came from a different tradition and were different in style and atmosphere” (Wilmut 1985: 13).

2. Through his emphasis on English cultural traditions, such as the music-hall patter song, the Christmas pantomime, and the country dance, Leslie Bricusse succeeded in maintaining the Britishness of his Dickensian sources in musicals such as *Pickwick* (1963) and *Scrooge* (1970), even while utilising the American book musical format. Less successful musical adaptations built upon the foundation of the book musical, including Joel Hirschhorn and Al Kasha’s *Copperfield* (1981) and Anthony Newley’s *Mr. Quilp* (1975), inevitably Americanised the sources. Most recently, Jill Santoriello attempted to bypass the transatlantic problem with her musical version of *A Tale of Two Cities* (2008), an adaptation which was structured according to the tenets of the European mega-musical (or ‘poperetta’) format made famous by the decidedly British composer, Andrew Lloyd Webber. In spite of the seemingly natural fit between a Lloyd Webber-style musical and a Dickensian source, the adaptation closed on Broadway after just sixty performances.
3. The relative obscurity of Holmes’s source clearly granted him leeway for such experimentation. Though Bart took many creative liberties in writing *Oliver!*, he was simultaneously aware of the fact that he was working from a cultural ‘text’ which was ingrained in the popular consciousness of his audience.
4. A useful example is John Kander and Fred Ebb’s *Chicago* (1975), in which the songs are all presented as traditional vaudevillian numbers that contribute to the show’s central themes as opposed to telling the story.
5. Both the stage and film versions of *Oliver!* feature representations of early music-hall culture through the staging of the song ‘Oom-Pah-Pah’. The film version of *Oliver!* (1968) presents a particularly early vision of music-hall culture, as Nancy joins in with a group of patrons who are casually singing along to an accordionist’s music; the stage version contains a more formalised music hall, complete with a chairman.
6. Holmes alludes to these caricatures in his adaptation. The Chairman affects an air of dandyish gentility, though his bawdy sense of humor belies his upper-crust mannerisms. Furthermore, various cast members drop hints that Deirdre Peregrine, the virginal ingénue playing the innocent Rosa Bud, is hardly as sexually naive as she appears – a clear parallel to the music hall “shy maiden”

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and “naughty girl” roles. In Holmes’s work, rather than a stage caricature conveying (and then undermining) an image, a Dickensian character is used to help set up the contrast.

7. A patter song was a comic number traditionally associated with music-hall performance; typically, it combined sung and spoken words in a humorous fashion. Deborah Vlock describes “[t]he spoken dialogue, or patter,” as “generally wordy and unwieldy, with lapses in grammar and logic that make it somewhat difficult to follow” (Vlock 1998: 125). A repertory number is best described as a trademark song associated with a specific performer, or, in the case of ‘Off to the Races,’ a group of performers.
8. Though the book musical format is rarely utilised by Holmes in *Drood*, several songs incorporated into the mystery storyline serve the traditional book-musical purposes of either revealing the characters’ personalities or helping to advance the plot. ‘A Man Could Go Quite Mad’, the first number sung by Jasper, reveals his dangerous schizophrenia, while ‘Two Kinsmen’ explores the bond between Edwin and his uncle. ‘Perfect Strangers’, ‘No Good Can Come From Bad’, and ‘The Name of Love’ are all used to move the story forward: the first focuses on the breakup of Edwin’s engagement, the second highlights Neville and Edwin’s growing dislike for one another, and the last provides a climactic conclusion to the first act, as Jasper reveals his lust for Rosa. All of these songs contribute to the *Drood* narrative, but the actors rarely perform their roles as Dickensian characters whilst singing; rather, the shift from speech to song oftentimes indicates a break with the *Drood* storyline and prefigures a subsequent breaking of the fourth wall at the end of the number, as the performers take time to acknowledge the applause they receive.
9. Holmes gives the audience a chance to answer the former two of these three questions, but uses the last question regarding the issue of Edwin’s death (or possible survival) to create an interesting little plot twist of his own. The question of Edwin’s fate is raised in Holmes’s adaptation, as he astutely has his characters reference various theories regarding Dickens’s title for the novel and the other titles that the author supposedly considered, none of which make direct reference to a murder. The issue is resolved rather humorously, as the Chairman extends the privilege of voting on a possible outcome to the cast. The cast votes in favor of Edwin’s death, which greatly offends Alice Nutting, the young ingénue playing the part. Alice throws a tantrum, exits the stage, and then storms out of the theatre itself! However, Holmes leaves room for a surprise twist at the end, as the final scene of the

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play features Edwin miraculously returning from the grave (apparently, Alice’s ‘hissy-fit’ was planned out so as to trick the audience). Edwin sings a jaunty little tune entitled ‘The Writing on the Wall’, in which he explains that the murderer did not kill him but rather knocked him out and left him for dead in the Cloisterham crypt, but he managed to regain consciousness and escape.

10. John Thacker writes that whenever Dickens delved into the genre of mystery fiction, he always focused primarily on the situation surrounding the mystery as opposed to the puzzle itself: “The mystery was very much of secondary importance to novelistic development of character or circumstance” (Thacker 1990: 14). The fact that Jasper seems so obvious a suspect in *Edwin Drood* highlights this fact.
11. In *Dickens and Mesmerism*, Fred Kaplan attributes Jasper’s actions to the combined influence of his mesmerist habits and opium abuse, asserting that the choirmaster is suffering from a split-personality disorder:

Jasper could have conditioned himself to go into mesmeric trance while under the influence of opium: the mesmeric tool might have been the drug itself. But whatever the agent, Jasper lives in double consciousness, with two separate states of being: his everyday mind and his mesmeric state, in which he performs actions that his normal consciousness may be unaware of, may indeed purposely suppress because of the immoral and unsocial needs that are being gratified [...]. Indeed, sometimes the mesmerized subject does not know that he is acting in the present under the power of suggestion previously implanted. (Kaplan 1975: 154).

More outlandish (yet equally fascinating) theories include the hypothesis that Jasper was part of a Thuggee cult and killed his nephew in a sort of sacrificial ritual (see Jacobson 1977: 526-537). No matter what the case, however, Jasper’s guilt seems inescapable.

12. The website launched to publicise the upcoming Dickens bicentennial celebration draws explicit attention to the author’s Englishness: “To the rest of the world, Dickens is as quintessentially English as Shakespeare, the Royal Family, Sherlock Holmes and fish and chips. Two centuries after his birth, he remains one of our most important cultural ambassadors and a timeless icon of our national culture and character” (*Dickens 2012 FAQ* 2009: par. 18).



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13. Coupled with its working-class roots, nobody can deny the fundamental Britishness of music-hall entertainment; Christopher Pulling notes that “the old music-hall songs were a national product” (Pulling 1952: 20).
  14. Kift describes this situation as a test of will that all music-hall performers had to face if they did not want to risk being ignored, or worse, being driven from the stage “by hails of eggs, tomatoes, and other vegetables” (Kift 1996: 70).
  15. Strangely, despite the inclusion of so many different types of popular entertainment forms in his novels, Dickens “pays surprisingly little attention to the music hall” outright (Schlicke 1999: 395). Schlicke mentions two short pieces published by Dickens in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, the first written by Dickens himself (1850) and the second by his colleague Richard Halliday (1866). Both pieces feature a fictitious character visiting some entertainment spots associated with the lower classes. In Dickens’s piece, he insists that the working class has a “right to be amused” (Dickens 1996: 196), and though he acknowledges some of the ‘dirty’, low-brow elements of music-hall culture, he disagrees with those who feel that shutting the saloons down or revoking their licenses is the best solution:

Ten thousand people, every week, all the year round, are estimated to attend this place of amusement. If it were closed to-morrow – if there were fifty such and they were all closed tomorrow – the only result would be to cause that to be privately and evasively done which is now publicly done; to render the harm of it much greater, and to exhibit the suppressive power of the law in an oppressive and partial light. The people who now resort here, *will be* amused somewhere. It is of no use to blink the fact, or to make pretences to the contrary. We had far better apply ourselves to improving the character of their amusement. (Dickens 1996: 198)

Halliday echoes these sentiments in his own sketch, labeling the entertainment of the music hall as coarse but well-intentioned; like Dickens, he believes that reformers should focus on elevating the entertainment rather than shutting down the institution.

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