Introduction: Performing the Neo-Victorian

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Scholars in neo-Victorian studies have often configured themselves around the idea of haunting and hauntedness (see Arias and Pulham 2009; Mitchell 2010). Contemporary culture is still haunted by the nineteenth century's vision of the future, an idea explored by works as diverse as Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993) and the Steampunk movement. This special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* seeks to embed neo-Victorian scholarship more firmly into another space of hauntedness – the theatre and, more broadly, performance culture. As Marvin Carlson has famously suggested, theatre itself is a haunted practice, summoning up ghosts of past productions, styles and performances, often inherited from the Victorian age. Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis draw attention to a similar set of arguments when they trace the shift in academic fashion from the study of 'theatre' to 'performance'. Drawing on the theorists Herbert Blau, Elin Diamond and Philip Auslander, Shepherd and Wallis suggest that 'performance' is haunted by its repressed associations with theatre, even as these critics frequently deny its influence (Shepherd and Wallis 2004: 151-2). Given the many ways that the Victorian era has colonised the popular imagination in terms of our expectations of what theatre is – the red curtain, the limelight, the solid three-dimensional set, the darkened hushed atmosphere, the ornate gilded auditorium – this influence is particularly hard, even futile, to repress in neo-Victorian performance. So neo-Victorian live events often mix elements of the 'old theatre' – nineteenth-century venues, costume and spectacle – with 'new performance', such as projections, recorded sound, and different configurations of performance space, actor-audience relations, performance styles and scripting or devising practices.

Moreover, in recent years, the Victorians have maintained their presence on the British theatrical stage, but are represented in an increasing variety of ways. To name some examples, there have been high-profile

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revivals of twentieth-century plays featuring the Victorians, from Bradley Cooper in Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* (Theatre Royal, Haymarket, 2015) to James McAvoy starring in Jamie Lloyd's unexpectedly topical production of Peter Barnes's *The Ruling Class* at Trafalgar Studios (2015). Rona Munro highlighted the gang life of Victorian Manchester in *Scuttlers* (Manchester Royal Exchange, 2015), while Michael Eaton's *Charlie Peace* (Nottingham Playhouse, 2013) recounted the history and legend of one of the Victorian era's most notorious criminals in a highly metatheatrical style. Glenn Chandler and Charles Miller's musical *Fanny and Stella* at the Above The Stag Theatre (2015) revives the Victorian cross-dressers Fanny and Stella (William Park and Earnest Boulton), drawing on the subjects of Neil McKenna's recent book, *Fanny and Stella: The Young Men Who Shocked Victorian England* (2013). York Theatre Royal dramatised the story of the 'Railway King', George Hudson, in 2015's *In Fog and Falling Snow*, a community project staged at the National Railway Museum, and written by Bridget Foreman and Mike Kenny. A new adaptation of *Jane Eyre* by Sally Cookson, originating at the Bristol Old Vic in 2014, achieved the notable distinction of a transfer to the National Theatre in revised form, followed by a National Theatre Live screening and a national tour. And the West Yorkshire Playhouse produced Brontë Season in 2016, including a radical adaptation of *Villette* (1853) and a work-in-progress staging of a Brontë rock musical, *Wasted* by Christopher Ash and Carl Miller. This brief overview of the last five years of staging the Victorians can leave little doubt that British theatre is taking more risks with its subject matter, eschewing the conventional string of Dickens adaptations and the mimicry of televisual realism in favour of dramas which are often fact-based, and seeking to re-stage, in different ways, the neo-Victorian double-act of surprise and recognition: the Victorians were so strange; the Victorians were strange like us.

        These examples are contemporary but we can also trace an interest in performing the Victorian period back to plays such as Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* (1993), Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979), and Patrick Hamilton's *Gaslight* (1938). This abundance of neo-Victorian performances raises questions, such as the following: Why have so many dramatists and adapters, particularly in recent cultural history, looked to the nineteenth century for inspiration? How does performance take on the nineteenth century and its tropes and why might these constitute a different kind of

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response from film's or fiction's responses to the period? Where might we find neo-Victorian performances taking place, and how might these spaces shift our understanding of the performance? What kinds of experiences of both 'the Victorian' and 'the neo-Victorian' do these performances seek to provide for their audiences? The articles in this issue together frame answers to some of these questions. But we hope that this issue will also serve as a catalyst for further work on neo-Victorian theatre and performance. Attending to theatre and performance can offer what Marie-Luise Kohlke has called "crucial nodal points in neo-Victorian output and dissemination" (Kohlke 2008: 3), re-orienting our map of the critical terrain.

In editing this special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* we have sought to expand the existing neo-Victorian canon and firmly place theatre and performance alongside the more frequently read fictive and filmic works. The earliest and most defining studies in the field have focussed on fiction (see Hutcheon, 1988; Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010), and questions around narrative, plot and fictionality have been a driving force for many scholars (see Flint 1997; Hadley 2010; Kirchknopf 2013). Recently, however, this emphasis on fiction and narrative has been questioned. Critics like Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss have called for a definition of the neo-Victorian that does not exclude "potential media which prove immersive, affective or nostalgic in their engagement with the nineteenth century" (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014: 3). The idea that neo-Victorian scholars might be open to any "potential media" is an exciting one, which allows us to think in broad terms about the kinds of media that could be defined as or by 'performance'. The performance theorist Richard Schechner uses the term very broadly and includes theatre as "one of a complex of performance activities which also includes rituals, sport and trials […], dance, music, play and various performances in everyday life" (Schechner 2003: 179). While many of the essays in this collection attend to the theatre as a performance space, others move outside the auditorium and into theme parks, cosplay and music. Considering neo-Victorian performance in Schechner's terms as a complex or network allows for new connections to be made across genres and media.

Many of the concerns on which scholars have focussed with regards to neo-Victorian fictions can be traced across genres. Sexuality, gender instability, psychological trauma and performativity are as frequently thematised in neo-Victorian stage performances as they are in the fiction of

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neo-Victorian novelists. Indeed the stage brings the neo-Victorian concern with the mutability of identity into even sharper focus. As Sharon Aronosfsky Weltman puts it, "[t]he stage makes explicit the performativity of all identity, including gender, on stage and off" (Aronofsky Weltman 2007: 21). Outside the theatre too, neo-Victorian performances often elicit a heightened or doubled sense of self from their audience. As Juliet John has argued when analysing the Dickens World theme park: "Visitors are not asked to suspend their disbelief, but to employ a double consciousness that they are modern actors in a stylized, theatrical reproduction of Dickens's world" (John 2010: 279). Many of the performances discussed in this issue play with this kind of double-consciousness in their audience, attempting to balance the possibility of immersing the audience in a recreated Victorian world while retaining their sense of contemporary selfhood that experiences the performance intellectually and critically.

Adaptation has been a particularly resonant issue, both in terms of content and methodology, for this special issue. In engaging with neo-Victorian performance it becomes particularly clear that adaptation "is a fundamental part of neo-Victorianism as a concept because all engagements with the Victorian in contemporary culture […] are necessarily adaptations or appropriations" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 244). Linda Hutcheon has argued that theatrical or performance-centred adaptations of texts provide a different kind of experience from adaptations in other media. She writes:

> the different media and genres the stories are transcoded to and from in the adapting process are not just formal entities […] they also represent various ways of engaging audiences. They are, in different ways and to different degrees, all "immersive," but some media and genres are used to *tell* stories (for example, novels, short stories); others *show* them (for instance, all performance media); and still others allow us to interact physically and kinaesthetically with them (as in videogames or theme park rides). (Hutcheon 2006: xvi)

The idea that a performance engages its audience by "*showing*" is of interest to several of the contributors in this issue, but as a whole this collection provides a sense of the interconnectedness of these different types of

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adaptation and audience experience. Many of the texts encountered in this issue –*Alice in Wonderland* (1865)*, The String of Pearls* (1846-47) or *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) – can be experienced via telling, showing or interacting with them. Sherlock Holmes-themed participatory events provide a vivid example of the range of interactive performances, from challenges to escape from a locked room, to tracking down Moriarty around a range of London locations, to proposing the content of improvised Holmes stories at the Edinburgh Fringe. In *The Game's Afoot,* staged at Madame Tussaud's in 2016, theatre company Les Enfants Terribles have devised immersive Victorian murder cases for players to solve. The cross-media nature of many other significant neo-Victorian works is brought into sharp focus by our contributors.

This issue connects with a growing body of scholarly work on the re-presentation of Victorian texts in modern performance settings. Significant work has been undertaken in relation to many aspects of performance media, not least in the pages of this journal (see, e.g., Poore 2009; Salah 2010; Voigts 2013). Some of this work has clustered around individual writers. Dickens has been a powerful stimulus in relation to adaptation, performance and neo-Victorian studies: important works here include John Glavin's work on Dickens on film, small screen and stage, Jay Clayton on *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace* (2003) Juliet John's work on Dickens's afterlives in relation to the heritage industry, and the 2012 special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* on *The Other Dickens: Neo-Victorian Appropriation and Adaptation*. Wilde has also been used as a case study or catalyst for both creative and critical work. For example plays such as Moisés Kaufman's *Gross Indecency*: *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde,* staged off-Broadway in 1997, David Hare's *The Judas Kiss* (1998) or the 1997 Brian Gilbert film, *Wilde*, have inspired critics to discuss directorial methodology, theatre history, and the nature of spectatorship (see Salamensky 2002; Schiavi 2004; Buckton 2013). Other scholars have investigated neo-Victorian performance from the starting point of a particularly resonant piece, such as *Oliver!* (1968) with rich results (see Aronofsky Weltman 2011). Some articles in this issue follow in this trajectory; Louise Creechan writes on *Sweeney Todd* (1979) and Beth Palmer on the frequently adapted *Alice in Wonderland*. Others, however, move into much less canonical territory by dealing with the stage

adaptations of neo-Victorian, rather than Victorian texts, or with adaptations that move beyond the stage altogether.

In the first article of this special collection, Patrick Fleming considers the Kentish tourist attraction Dickens World (first opened in 2007) before and after a significant change of function. Before 2013 it had been examined as a heritage site, as a site for immersive performance, and as a space of postmodernity. Fleming draws on these approaches and Dickens World's repeated comparisons with Disneyland, but offers the first analysis of the site since it was restructured into a guided tour. He considers the differing modes of performance employed in the old and new versions of the attraction and contextualises the historical resonances of the new guided tour, a performance concept that Dickens himself recognised. Yet the move from entertainment to instruction as the dominant experience of Dickens World tourists does not mean the attraction rejects performance altogether. Rather the guided tour shifts the emphasis away from the individual tourist's self-determined interactions with attractions and architecture and towards the individual performer in the shape of the tour guide. Using visitor reviews and first-hand experience, Fleming ultimately attempts to further our thinking on what it means to be "after Dickens" (Glavin 1999) at this meeting place of performance and instruction.

Following on from Fleming's work, Terrance Riley's article also interprets performance in an expansive sense, and he ranges into music, film and visual art. He seeks to apply the concerns of neo-Victorian criticism to performances and texts created before neo-Victorian studies existed as a self-identifying scholarly pursuit. In doing so, he articulates some of the questions posed above concerning the dominance of single-authored fiction in neo-Victorian studies. The article asks us to consider the role of collaboration in neo-Victorianism by thinking about whether notions of self-consciousness apply in the same way when defining neo-Victorian performances or images as when defining neo-Victorian texts. *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and *Yellow Submarine* (1966) have never before been examined through the lens of neo-Victorian scholarship, and the questions Riley poses help the issue as a whole to grapple with *how* exactly neo-Victorian studies might welcome the unexpected into its purview.

Co-editor Beth Palmer's article moves the issue into more canonical territory by considering recent stage adaptations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its follow up, *Through the Looking-*

Glass, and What Alice Found There (1872). The year 2015 saw the 150th anniversary of the first publication of Carroll's iconic _Alice_ book and served as a prompt for numerous performances of Alice and re-creations of the world into which she falls. After discussing the history of adapting _Alice_ for the stage, Palmer goes on to analyse the family-friendly _Alice in Wonderland_ (2015, Les Enfants Terribles) and the musical _wonder.land_ (2015), written by Moira Buffini with music by Damon Albarn and directed by Rufus Norris. She argues that both of these anniversary productions lead us to consider the immersive potential of _Alice_ and the recurrence of a trope in _Alice_ adaptations that invites the spectator to become Alice. Alice and everything she represents seem to fit particularly well with Josephine Machon's definition of immersive theatre, which in her words activates "a childlike excitement for curiosity and adventure, perhaps equally a wariness of compliance" by inviting an audience to enter into a new environment and break down the conventional distinction between audience and actor (Machon 2013: 28). Palmer goes on to interrogate the links between immersion and consumption through the various embodied and digital platforms through which these wonderland worlds are available outside the performance space, concluding that the anniversary celebrations of _Alice in Wonderland_ were more than just an opportunity to cash in on a well-known piece of Victoriana.

Judith Wilt takes us to gothic territory in musical theatre by investigating thematic connections between _Les Misérables_ (1980) and _Sweeney Todd_ (1979), both of which reflect on the violence of the political and cultural changes that occurred in the moment of their settings (the 1830s and 1840s respectively) and in the moment of their first performances. Wilt offers analyses of the libretto and draws out comparisons between the two pieces of musical theatre around issues of cannibalism and vampirism. These same themes also connect with Anne Rice's novel _Interview with the Vampire_ (1976). Here Wilt asks us to consider performativity in the novel (in particular the scenes at the Théâtre des Vampires) in relation to performance on stage. The piece reflects on the possibilities for performance to elude narrative continuity through simultaneity and brings us to a final reflection on the status of neo-Victorian studies as a field that must be able to look in two different directions simultaneously.

Louise Creechan also examines Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's _Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street_ (1979). Rather

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than drawing comparisons with other neo-Victorian musicals, however, she sets it in contrast to the majority of the musical theatre industry. She references the web of texts out of which the nineteenth-century *Sweeney* legend, *The String of Pearls* (1846-47) was amalgamated, but cites Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) as an overlooked parallel text. Creechan formulates an argument for the musical adaptation as a Marxist satire on the dehumanising effects of capitalism through an analysis of its stage effects, music and libretto. She examines the original production in relation to significant revivals in 2004/5 and 2014/15, ultimately offering a challenge to the normative association of the musical theatre industry and its cultural products with "low-brow" entertainment (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 223).

Martin Danahay moves the issue back to performance outside the boundaries of the auditorium by considering gender in steampunk fiction, film and cosplay. Following Judith Butler to theorise performance as a subversion of gender identity, he argues for more attention to be paid to the narrative frame in which a given identity is performed, asserting that Steampunk authors and performers may resist dominant gender ideologies as individuals but also need to be read as part of a wider system of signs that may mark such performances as nostalgic or non-critical. Costume is analysed via its embodied display across various media: at steampunk conventions, in photographic images, or as described in blogs and novels. Both steampunk texts and cosplay, Danahay argues, create imaginative spaces where participants or readers might play with both contemporary identities and those from a re-imagined Victorian past. Yet he also detects an overarching nostalgia for the perceived clarity of gender distinctions encoded in Victorian costume in texts such as the *Lady Mechanika* (2010-2016) comic book series by Joe Benitez and in subsequent cosplay performances of the character. Danahay concludes that, although in many ways, steampunk is perceived and experienced as an alternative culture in which mainstream norms are rejected, it is ultimately a space in which female bodies are displayed and consumed in very different ways to male bodies.

Co-editor Benjamin Poore concludes this special issue with an essay-review of a recent stage adaptation of Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), adapted by Laura Wade and directed by Lyndsey Turner. Poore argues that despite this all-female collaboration, the play still

configures the performative gaze as male. Comparing the novel with the 2002 television adaptation and the 2015 stage adaptation allows Poore to consider the complexities of social, as well as sexual, role-playing. Performance, here, is often confining rather than liberating for the protagonist of these productions. Poore compares the ways that the novel and its stage and screen adaptations represent the protagonist Nancy Astley's subversion and rejection of conventional social and gender roles; he also explores how each version attempts to shape our response to Nancy's treatment of the servant Zena Blake.

Many of these authors are also led to reflect on the practices and methodologies of neo-Victorian studies more broadly in attempting to situate performance in critical paradigms more often used in analysing other genres. Approached through a range of methodologies and theoretical lenses – including gender performativity, Marxism and cultural materialism, Antonin Artaud and metatheatre, cultural memory theory, Michel Foucault and punishment, and Jean Baudrillard's simulacra – we can see how useful and powerful the concept of performance can be in this field. Our hope is that these essays inspire further work in the growing field of neo-Victorian theatre and performance, not only by contributing to the expansion of the neo-Victorian archive, but also by drawing attention to the shifting reception conditions and participatory qualities of these neo-Victorian texts when considered as performances. Viewed in this way, neo-Victorianism becomes as much a set of practices as a collection of artefacts: practices which, as these articles show, can be responded to with varying levels of immersion, interaction, and historical distanciation.

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