Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture, and: Musical Comedy on the West End Stage, 1890-1939 (review)

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REVIEWS

Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004), xxii + 244 pages, illustrated, hardback, £29.50 (ISBN 0 8214 1585 9).

Len Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage, 1890-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 224 pages, hardback, £52.50 (ISBN 1 4039 3225 5).

In the substantial body of work on music hall produced over the last thirty or so years, scholars have been busy demystifying a mass entertainment form sentimentalized in heritage narratives as a cosy Edwardian resort full of song and laughter, whiskers and waistcoats, languid toffs and ardent costers. Historians in particular have bypassed such romantic impedimenta in their reconstruction of the material conditions of production, the social composition of audiences and the dynamics and meanings of music hall entertainment as inflected through specific categories of class, gender, time and place, all set within a larger social context. More rigour, less fun, but better history. Hitching a ride on the linguistic turn, latterday students of the halls have also been alert to the determinant power of language in the formation of a distinctive music hall voice and its influence on popular culture across a wider canvas. Most of this work has concentrated on the discursive properties of music hall song and its performance. Barry J. Faulk moves beyond the in-house exchanges of the halls to scrutinize its representation by a new breed of literary intellectuals and journalists from the late Victorian years to the early 1920s.

Through a selection of reportage and fiction on London music halls, Faulk argues for the emergence of a distinct occupational type, the aesthetic professional parading his or her critical expertise in exalting the pleasures of a hitherto despised demotic mode, its performers and its public. Thus an intellectually enterprising bourgeois fraction is said to consolidate its own subcultural identity in alignment with the broader thrust of professionalisation, represented here as a prime feature of modernity notably conspicuous in the apparatus of a new centralised state. In so doing, this enlightened and enlightening cadre propel the halls from the margins into the mainstream of national attention, a discursively potent operation that translates into enough

new middle-class bums on seats to secure what Faulk terms 'the bourgeois takeover' of a basically proletarian institution (187). Primarily a literary scholar, Faulk leavens his close readings of texts with the promptings of cultural studies, proposing to remedy a major deficiency of the field in its neglect of the professional middle class and its new 'managerial intellectual' as a key ruling group in capitalist culture (4, 6).

The main argument is at times strenuously overstated, as though the claim of high professional status and cultural expertise for this literary ginger group is a displaced bid for professional validation by the author himself, or an expression of the tension that still haunts literary studies of popular culture whose materials by definition lie outside the canon, but whose practitioners must establish equivalent significance according to alternative criteria of uneasy and often contested formulation. Happily, Barry Faulk negotiates the latter minefield with some aplomb. Professing an early form of radical chic the new critics invited fellow class respectables to tap into the unique vitality of the halls, instructed by their acute critical intelligence, the product of frequent intrepid forays into this markedly proletarian territory.

In the complex and ambiguous discourse that constituted this new rhetoric of the popular the halls were promoted both as living sites of modernity and repositories of an essential Englishness invested with the sturdy properties of the traditional in contest with modernity's more threatening features. Thus the advanced sensibilities of the critical elite revealed the vernacular modernism of the crowd's knowing celebration of the modern city's perils and possibilities while registering the halls as a historic resource, the traditional property not of any one class but of a newly defined category of 'the people'. A principal value of the halls was a saving vulgarity – winningly defined by Faulk as 'bracing bad taste' (30) – an antidote to the enervations of modernity and the controls of capitalist entrepreneurs. Among his case studies, Faulk moves from the camp enthusiasms of Arthur Symons, poet and prolific columnist with an undoubted zest for the modern, to the elegaic sentimentalism of T.S. Eliot and his tribute to Marie Lloyd as the departed 'soul of the people'. Mrs Ormiston Chant is awarded a respectful chapter, elevated to membership of a new group of 'nascent state intellectuals' (100), and an assembly of texts by Walter Besant, Hall Caine and Henry Nevinson are deconstructed as critiques of the sexual politics of the halls, a theme with which Faulk concludes the book in revisiting the controversy over the quasi-nude 'Living Pictures' at London's Palace theatre. Here, other middle-class women reformers are said to exercise a form of expert authority, attempting to rescue working-class models who made their

own counter claim to an aesthetic professionalism in a world of fiercely competing knowledges. Foucault takes a discreet bow.

Late Victorian music halls were indeed a focus of intense debate about new cultural forms, their social impact and popular appeal – Max Beerbohm talked of their 'vast importance as indices of national character'. In this regard *Music Hall and Modernity* is illuminating and provocative on some key voices and issues. While it is doubtful that any critical cadre can operate with the kind of uncompromised autonomy argued for here (pace Faulk, Bourdieu still has a point in disallowing any such proposition), the general question of the function of discourse and representation in cultural formation is a compelling one, not least in an era when print media was arguably at its most potent. What is missing is any attention to the equally clamant voices from inside the industry itself, long experienced in boosterish self-representation, despite Faulk's intriguing but unsubstantiated claim that his cultural mavericks were 'often directly involved in it (music hall) as a commercial venture' (25). A more serious omission in a work championing 'managerial intellectuals' is that of the Fabians. For them, as Ian Bradley has shown, the music halls provided a continuous reference point not only in debate, where high cultural disdain was tempered with an acknowledgment of the genuine values of some manifestations of popular taste, but in plans for municipalisation, a hands-on managerial agenda. Chris Waters' work on the wider range of socialist debate on popular culture in the period also goes unacknowledged. And the alleged 'bourgeois takeover' of the halls? It is more likely that the music halls' true centre of gravity continued to rest with the lower middle class, though to borrow from post colonial discourse we might also argue that it was less a case that the middle class transformed the music hall than that music hall transformed the middle class, a point that Barry Faulk goes some way to allow. In the interwar period middle class distance from the popular collapsed into a middlebrow culture of a broader yet more emollient content, one of whose landmark confections was musical comedy as examined by Len Platt, another literary scholar proclaiming commitment to cultural studies.

Basically a play with music that advanced beyond its tributary forms of burlesque and operetta, musical comedy set its romantic narratives in the modern everyday world, its stylized realism glamorised with song and dance and spectacular production values. Its modernity was that of the new social spaces of the big city – shops, hotels, restaurants, exhibition halls. Its subjects were adventuring young men and women eagerly pursuing the goods, services and consequent pleasures they offered. As Platt makes clear in this welcome first full length interpre-

tive treatment of the genre, this was a conservative modernity represented as safe and secure territory for a consumerist middle class newly bent on enjoying themselves. Its keynote was 'gaiety', an unproblematic, commoditised good time, its prime site the Gaiety theatre on the Strand run by the legendary George Edwardes, its most glamorous icons the Gaiety Girls, the original long legged lovelies of the modern chorus line. Platt emphasizes the essentially optimistic world view of musical comedy that not merely reflected but produced – 'constituted' – a blithe confidence among its target public, its gaiety a counter to the angst that haunted the fin de siècle (and has been too often over-read by scholars more commonly pathologising the modern condition). And while comfortably bourgeois in its presumptions, musical comedy and its astute (male) team of writers and producers sold its market formula to a much broader audience, achieving mass exposure nationally and internationally until the early 1920s when the West End original was superseded by the American musical.

In this crisp and incisive analysis Platt shows how musical comedy played to the sensibilities of its audience. Settings in foreign locations – the Continent, the Empire, Asia and 'Arcady' – afforded an agreeable exoticism while reinforcing the message of England's superiority over the natives in culture, manners and jolly good sense. While musical comedy celebrated an end to undue deference it still found place for the aristocracy among its stock characters, retaining a taste for the inimitable glamour of upper-class style and savoir faire. Platt foregrounds the alluring yet contained parasexuality of musical comedy whose female stars provided the ultimate glamour of the erotic commodity, high fashion costuming, visually arresting mise en scene and extensive publicity. (The economics of academic publishing allow examples of the newly ubiquitous picture postcard but not the dynamic colour of the Douglas Hardy posters). And musical comedy was amusing, for no show was complete without the imported drollery of a leading music hall star in an era of competing yet complementary popular forms that also saw the debut of modern revue.

What does the cultural studies approach mean to two literary scholars of late Victorian popular culture? Indeed, what does 'cultural studies' now stand for in its ever widening invocation? Tokenist or pluralist? A set of techniques or 'politics by other means'? For Barry Faulk and Len Platt it means a more searching, theoretically informed exercise of their basic trade in textual analysis, alert to the wider leverage of discourse and representation on page and stage in the cultural construction of modern regimes of pleasure in Britain's, or at least, London's belle époque. The CS hunt for agency is given an uneasy new reading by

Faulk in his nomination of a bourgeois class fraction of cultural gatekeepers as ideologically autonomous, whereas Platt demonstrates how a cadre of cultural producers thrived through their collusive exploitation of a redefined hegemony. Of the two monographs, Platt's is the more satisfactory for its greater attention to social and historical context, still too often absent or scanted in CS, or in literary studies claiming its kudos.

Peter Bailey

Paul Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), ix + 229 pages, illustrated, hardback, £55 (ISBN 0 7546 3297 0).

Nostalgic lists are currently very fashionable in the British media. In any account of the 100 greatest Victorian paintings, judged by criteria such as Tate Britain's best selling postcards or the number of reproductions of an individual canvas in contemporary coffee-table surveys, one would expect to find at least four of John Everett Millais' early oils featured prominently. These are *Isabella* (1849), *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849-50), *Mariana* (1851), and *Ophelia* (1852). Each is deservedly famous in its own right, and is characterised by a meticulously-detailed Pre-Raphaelite surface, by the emotional intensity and complexity of its principal protagonists, by a sophisticated play of realism and iconography and of two and three dimensions, and by subject matter deriving from either the Bible or mainstream British literary history. Further down the same list, one might be similarly surprised if Millais' 1853 portrait of John Ruskin did not figure alongside two of Millais' more melancholy subject pictures, *The Blind Girl* (1854-6) and *Autumn Leaves* (1856). *Cherry Ripe* (1879) and *Bubbles* (1886) are perhaps less palatable to contemporary sensibilities, but would probably also merit a mention.

Given Millais' continuing popularity, it is perhaps remarkable that only four book-length accounts of the painter's work have appeared in the last decade. Millais' scholarly neglect is, of course, part of a broader trend within Art History, in which Victorian painting has been habitually passed over in favour of French art of the same period. Indeed, the historiography of Modern art is widely presumed to bypass almost entirely British art movements, such as Pre-Raphaelitism, in favour of a sequence of 'isms' – Realism, Impressionism, Symbolism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism – that originated in Paris and New York rather than London. What might come as more of surprise to Victorianists of a more literary bent, however, whose research is characterised by a tradition of rigorous, contextualised close