

ARTICLE

The Queen of the Vic: Eliza Vincent's Actress-Management of the Victoria Theatre, London, 1841–1856

Stephen Ridgwell

Independent Scholar

Email: s.ridgwell1@btinternet.com

Early in 1850, Charles Dickens went to the Victoria Theatre in Lambeth. One of several theatres sited close to the bridges linking the southern bank of the Thames with the north, the Vic was a prominent neighborhood institution catering to a mostly working-class audience. Launched in 1818 as the Royal Coburg Theatre, a move designed to coincide with the opening of Waterloo Bridge, its investors' hopes of drawing a more upmarket crowd were largely disappointed. Visiting the theatre in 1820, William Hazlitt was distressed to find Junius Brutus Booth among an ill-assorted and noisy throng, and in 1831 Edmund Kean was reduced to haranguing the “unmitigated brutes” gathered before him. Pelted with orange peel and nutshells, he still drew his nightly fee of £50.¹ Although research by Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow has revealed an audience more varied than once assumed, upon the changing of its name in 1833, the Victoria's core clientele was more or less established, as indeed was its reputation for the bloodier aspects of popular drama.² It had also experienced regular changes of management, sudden spells of closure, and periodic clashes with the authorities. Suitably enough for what follows, by 1840, the Vic was judged to have suffered “more vicissitudes” than any other theatre in London.³

The place visited by Dickens in 1850 was both similar and different to that described above. On the one hand, its audience continued to be largely drawn from the surrounding population of laborers, small tradesmen, seamstresses, and servants. In his journalistic inquiry into the “Amusements of the People,” Dickens had good reason to put himself in the invented company of the playgoing costermonger, Joe Whelks: “not much of a reader” but fully determined to “unravel a story through all its entanglements.”⁴ In terms of repertory, on the other hand, honor and love were now as evident as larceny and murder. Central to this change in tone was the arrival at the Vic in 1841 of David Osbaldiston (1794–1850) and Eliza Vincent (1815–56). Ushering in the longest period of continuous management prior to the twentieth century—when under Lilian Baylis the theatre became celebrated as the Old Vic—from this point until Vincent's death in 1856 its vicissitudes were usually a matter of dramatic construction. And as Dickens and Mr. Whelks would discover, under this much-loved theatrical regime, no one experienced the ebbs and flows of fortune more than Eliza Vincent.

Thanks to the work of Tracy C. Davis, Jacky Bratton, and others, we have learned much about the range and extent of the female contribution to nineteenth-century British theatre.⁵ To be sure, the profession continued to be dominated by men, but relative to other areas of cultural and economic life, as performers, playwrights, and managers, women's involvement was widely recognized and appreciated. Across the period in question, it is now impossible to understand the metropolitan stage without reference to Lucia Vestris, Mary Anne Keeley, Helen Faucit, and Céline Céleste. However, though Janice Norwood has recently shifted the focus beyond the West End to more outlying and provincial localities, and in doing so has considered a broader range of careers, many theatre women of note have remained in the historical wings.⁶

Looking in particular to Norwood's work on Sara Lane—for half a century a key player at the Britannia Theatre in the East End—the following concentrates on the thirty-year career of Eliza Vincent, a child star turned successful actress-manager who, unlike Lane, also performed on the capital's principal stages.⁷ Indeed, between 1826 and 1837, she appeared at all three of its royally patented "major" theatres: Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket. Yet as was the case with Lane, Vincent's reputation was made and sustained in so-called minor theatres, both in the East End (as at the City of London), and south of the river at the Surrey, before finally settling at the Victoria.

In addition to recovering an unusually rich theatrical life, spending time with Vincent is also to witness the independence and agency that actresses of her class were sometimes capable of wielding. Vincent was no Madame Vestris, now widely recognized as an influential shaper of the emerging West End,⁸ but set within her own context she was an important public figure. When her 1852 marriage to Benjamin Crowther rapidly foundered, it was rumored that the young actor's sanity had collapsed upon finding himself tied to such a powerful lady. Convinced that "murderous enemies," including Osbaldiston, were out to get him, Crowther was eventually committed to Bedlam.⁹ Yet whatever the reason for his descent into madness, the point about Vincent's self-made status was undeniably on the mark.

A study of Vincent also leads us to Victorian domestic drama, a subgenre of melodrama that originated in venues like the Coburg in the 1820s.¹⁰ Representing what its bills variously described as "affecting scenes of real life" and "hope and despair in the opposite extremes," the Vic's domestic dramas were grounded in close and continuous interaction with the audience—or as a bill for T. E. Wilks's *Woman's Love; or, Kate Wynsley the Cottage Girl* (1841) put it, "sighs and tears, mixed with laughter and applause."¹¹ Although many of these dramas found their way into print, including some by Wilks, essentially these were working texts meant for those trained in their performative demands: for example, the externalization of feeling through an established vocabulary of gesture, and the not easily mastered skill of synchronizing movement to music. Forming part of the genre's extensive array of "feeling-technologies," such devices, notes Erin Hurley, were carefully geared to maximize affective exchange with the audience.¹² For an actress like Vincent, there was nothing worse than an emotionally unmoved pit or gallery.

If the medium was integral to the message, there was still the message to be communicated. As the name implies, domestic dramas were steeped in recognizable

daily concerns. The world being presented was never meant to be real, and audiences understood and appreciated the artifice involved, but the force and feeling of the spectacle lay in seeing and hearing the familiar. However exaggerated the plots and contrived the settings, within what Mathew Buckley reads as a “discourse of popular political and social expression,” these dramas traded in the hardy perennials of home, family, and community, and the counterforces of disruption via personal villainy, malfunctioning authority, or just plain bad luck.¹³ But whatever the dynamics in play, invariably taking center stage was the heroine.

Presented in the Vic’s playbills as the “acknowledged heroine of domestic tragedy,” an act of self-promotion that delighted the satirists at *Punch*, Vincent’s connection to a dramatic form traditionally overlooked by serious historians of nineteenth-century theatre meant a successful career that passed quickly from the record.¹⁴ Important revisionist studies by Michael Booth (1965) and Gilbert C. Cross (1977) left the situation unchanged, and the recent *Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama* (2018) has continued the trend.¹⁵ Though Vincent has not been alone in suffering this neglect, a fate commonly shared by actors and actresses of her generation and background, it in no way reflects her personal force and standing at the time.

Tying domestic drama to one of its most effective/affective performers, the following is organized into three sections. The first covers Vincent’s working life up to the moment of her arrival at the Vic in 1841. Theatrical management was always a risky speculation, especially in the economically turbulent 1830s and 1840s, and hard-won experience, as much as dramatic talent (and luck), was often the difference between success and failure. Whatever the record now shows, there was nothing certain about Vincent’s success at the Vic, and its chances were much improved by the knowledge and know-how she brought to the venture.

In the second section, I consider the period 1841–5, the critical opening phase of Vincent’s tenure at the Vic, when in collaboration with writers and actors such as George Dibdin Pitt and E. F. Saville, her mature style and identity were fixed. Always the same but always different, Vincent exemplified what has been termed “ghosting”—the process whereby the “recycled body of an actor” will, in the right circumstances, “evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles.”¹⁶ On a stage “haunted” by the memory of previous encounters, and the expectation of what was to come, Vincent’s beleaguered but spirited young women tirelessly restated the ideals of innocence, faithfulness, and resilience, and the enduring hope that right would eventually prevail.

The final section takes the story from 1846 to 1856, a period that splits either side of Vincent becoming the Vic’s sole lessee and manager (or directress, as she called it) in 1851. During this period, Vincent continued to work with Dibdin Pitt, while also forging new creative partnerships with the writer John Courtney and the actor Newton (N. T.) Hicks. As we shall see, it was with Courtney and Hicks that Vincent realized the first ever staging of *Jane Eyre*, just months after its first appearance in print. Though delayed by interference from the Lord Chamberlain, she would also bring Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* to the stage in 1851. By this time, however, Vincent herself rarely performed. In part, one suspects the impact of Osbaldiston’s death and the disastrous marriage that ensued, but there is also the fact of Vincent having had a long and demanding career—

successful certainly, but not without its attendant stresses and strains. It is to the beginnings of this career, and its development up to 1841, that we now turn.

Earlier Stages

Eliza Vincent was born in Lambeth in 1815 to a family of local news vendors. A child of the romantic age, Vincent's life spanned the transition from Georgian to Victorian, a period of dramatic social and economic change that was often reflected in the roles that made her name. Though apparently having no familial links to the stage, in 1821 she made her debut at the Surrey Theatre in Blackfriars in Thomas Dibdin's *The Ruffian Boy*. Along with Astley's Amphitheatre and the altogether less salubrious Bower Saloon, the Surrey was one of a trio of theatres in close proximity to the Victoria, to say nothing of the unlicensed penny gaffs and concert rooms that proliferated in the area. Vincent was again at the Surrey in 1823 when she played the dwarfish Sir Geoffrey Hudson in Edward Fitzball's *Peveril of the Peak*, and later in the year she performed for the first time at the Coburg/Victoria. Billed as the Infant Roscius, she recited Agnes Strickland's *The Seven Ages of Woman*, a female-centered reworking of Jaques's speech from *As You Like It*.¹⁷ Following in the footsteps of the well-known child star Clara Fisher—as Anne Varty has shown, the “infant phenomenon” satirized by Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* was a familiar presence on the nineteenth-century stage—in 1824 she moved to Sadler's Wells to play in William Oxberry's one-act *The Actress of All Work* (1819).¹⁸

Presenting a significant test of her progress, the part required the impersonation of six different characters, including a deaf old lady and a literary fop called Lounge. Now subject to her first major round of reviews, Vincent was described by one critic as showing “wonderful” versatility and mature understanding of the piece. Apparently, this was not the demonstration of a child “drilled and screwed into a lesson,” but the assured display of a naturally instinctive performer.¹⁹ In January 1825, Vincent was back at the Surrey as the mischievous schoolboy Little Pickle in *The Spoiled Child*, a one-act farce from 1790 first performed by the legendary actress and courtesan Dorothea Jordan. As a mark of the obscurity into which Vincent has fallen, Varty's careful listing of Little Pickle interpreters fails to record her ever playing the role, even though for a decade it was a staple part of her repertoire.

Recruited to Drury Lane by the veteran actor-manager Robert Elliston, Vincent had further breeches roles in *Richard III* and *William Tell*: in the former she played the Duke of York, and in the latter she was the son of William Macready's eponymous Swiss hero. Still only eleven years old, in 1826 she was cast as the fairy-king Oberon in the musical fantasy *The Charmed Horn*, an occasion recorded in Figure 1. According to the accompanying remarks, not only did Vincent combine a “singularly beautiful” countenance with a “melodious” voice, but picking up on earlier comments she was also credited with having a natural understanding of the part assigned her.²⁰ As we shall see, Vincent's ability to inhabit her roles seamlessly would be a key factor in her adult success. Child stars of the day frequently came and went, but this South London prodigy would more than stay the course.

By the time she entered her teens, Vincent was back at the Surrey, and again under the management of Elliston. It was at this point that Vincent met the



Figure 1. Eliza Vincent as Oberon, Drury Lane 1826. © British Library Board, 1606/1495 (5).

Surrey's leading man and stage manager, David Osbaldiston, a much-traveled actor mostly associated with action-filled dramas such as Isaac Pocock's *The Miller and His Men* (1813). Between now and the start of Osbaldiston's own management of the Surrey in 1832, Vincent appeared with him in numerous dramas, including his self-penned *The Brigand* and a partially sung version of *Macbeth*—the musical parts designed to circumvent the law that continued to reserve “legitimate” spoken-word drama to the royally patented houses.²¹ As well as performing the kind of breeches roles popularized in the West End by Madame Vestris (Captain Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*, for instance), Vincent also appeared in various Surrey-based productions with Dibdin Pitt, then in the process of moving from

acting to writing. Now regarded as the belle of the establishment, in 1833 she was perfectly cast as Sally Sighabout in one of the Surrey's biggest hits, Fitzball's ingenious murder drama *Jonathan Bradford*. With Osbaldiston playing the title role, *Jonathan Bradford* ran for 161 consecutive nights, a record unsurpassed until Dion Boucicault's 1860s sensation *The Colleen Bawn*.²²

Despite this success, Osbaldiston's days at the Surrey were numbered. In a drama to rival anything seen onstage, in the summer of 1834 he set up home with a heavily pregnant Vincent. Twice her age, and married with a family, Osbaldiston was forced by the ensuing scandal to resign his lease of the Surrey and temporarily retire from the public eye.²³ Pursued in the courts by her outraged father, and physically needing to rest, Vincent also disappeared from view. Yet with the earning of livings now ever more pressing (Vincent eventually gave birth to a son), come the new year they had both returned to the stage: Osbaldiston (for the first time) at the Victoria, and Vincent at the Queen's Theatre on Tottenham Street.²⁴ In the spring of 1836, Vincent transferred to the royally patented Haymarket, by which point Osbaldiston was managing Covent Garden, a situation regarded with a mix of incredulity and outrage by much of the theatrical establishment. First stirring controversy with his populist approach to lower pricing, Osbaldiston sparked further criticism with his recruitment of Vincent in the autumn.²⁵ This in turn led to the creation of high-profile roles such as *Thalaba the Destroyer*—a spectacular adaptation by Fitzball of Robert Southey's epic poem, complete with horses, "gigantic" bulls, exotic birds, and a camel.²⁶

At that same time, however, Vincent also appeared in more conventional works with the likes of William Macready, William Farren, and Harriett Taylor, plus the rising young tragedienne Helen Faucit.²⁷ When, in June 1837, Osbaldiston's only attempt at patent-house management suddenly ended, she was certainly thought good enough to be reengaged at the Haymarket (her Ophelia was reportedly played with a "touching melancholy"), and in September she joined Macready at the start of his own management of Covent Garden.²⁸ Overshadowed by the likes of Faucit and assigned to minor roles, her time with the unforgiving Macready was unsurprisingly short, and at the end of the year Vincent was reunited with Osbaldiston at Sadler's Wells. Beginning a run of joint managements that would eventually culminate at the Victoria, the pair now formed an unbreakable theatrical partnership—an artistic and commercial enterprise in which Vincent increasingly took the lead.

Critical to their success at the Victoria, especially in finding the best way to exploit Vincent's personality and abilities, were the three years spent at the recently opened City of London Theatre. Built in 1837, the City was located just beyond the bounds of the city proper in the eastern district of Spitalfields. One of a number of theatres in a densely populated urban area (in this it was similar to the Victoria), the City had briefly been run by Laura Honey, a glamorous young actress born a year after Vincent. Though Honey failed to repeat the success of fashionable role models such as Madame Vestris, the City's potential had clearly been established. Honey's sophisticated charms as *Don Juan* worked well enough, but more relatable stories, often with a domestic theme, played better.²⁹ Standing between a rope manufacturer's and a haircutter's, this was the establishment to which Vincent and Osbaldiston came at Easter 1838.

Although Osbaldiston was officially the lessee and manager of the City, there is little doubt that in practical terms the overall direction of the theatre was shared. It is also clear that Vincent's influence grew over time, as Osbaldiston-led pieces such as *Rob-Roy*, one of the period's numerous adaptations of a Walter Scott novel, yielded to the kind of smaller-scale domestic dramas in which Vincent would excel. Between an interim version of *Nicholas Nickleby* in November 1838 (at this point it was still being serialized) and a full and complete one in November 1840, Vincent collaborated in a successful run of dramas with the astonishingly prolific Dibdin Pitt. Best known today for bringing *Sweeney Todd* to the stage (first seen at the Britannia in 1847), Dibdin Pitt was coming into his own as a versatile and inventive minor theatre playwright, as comfortable with domestic drama and the Newgate Calendar as with the revolutionary life of Toussaint Louverture.³⁰

Drawing on her training in breeches roles, in two of these dramas Vincent was a Dickensian boy (Smike in *Nickleby* and Oliver in *Oliver Twist*), and in two others she played the criminal antiheroes Jack Sheppard and (a singing) Dick Turpin.³¹ In three more, she represented her own sex: the London apprentice girl Mary Clifford, a condemned poacher's wife called Mabel Allison, and Agnes Primrose in *The Wreck of the Heart*—a reworking of Elizabeth Inchbald's 1796 novel *Nature and Art*. Demonstrating just the kind of creative agency and control that influential actress-managers were able to exert, and which according to Jane Moody render conventional notions of dramatic authorship a "theatrical fiction," in all of these pieces Dibdin Pitt was writing specifically for Vincent, an actress increasingly recognized for her emotionally open style and "powers of captivation."³² This gift for connecting with the audience was considerably enhanced by a fresh-faced, and essentially unthreatening, femininity (Fig. 2). In the words of one reviewer, to see Vincent at this time was to be reminded of "green fields and summer breezes," a potently romantic idea for the capital's swelling number of rural-urban migrants.³³

Arguably the best of these Dibdin Pitt-Vincent productions was the three-act drama of *Mabel Allison; or, The Murder of the Five Fields Copse* (successfully restaged at the Victoria as *Simon Lee*). Dealing with the controversial workings of the privilege-upholding game laws, it powerfully articulated the wider struggles faced by the poor and politically disenfranchised. Singled out for her telling performance—according to the *Era* as good as anything in the West End—in delivering lines such as "I come not now to beg for charity, but to demand justice," Vincent was not only representing a desperate mother, but expressing a key sentiment of those currently agitating for change.³⁴ Moreover, the swooning collapses that punctuated the action were less the product of the character's inherent female weakness than of her bearing literally unbearable pressure, or what Christine Gledhill would see as the manifestation of the actress as a "site [] of extremity."³⁵

Physically embodying the conflicts driving the narrative, Mabel's/Vincent's shocking act of self-destruction brings resolution at a terrible price. Providing a memorable *coup de théâtre*, news of her husband's reprieve comes just as she has taken a fatal dose of poison. With the action held in tableau, on this desolate scene the curtain falls—the breathless audience shocked into silence. While not wishing to push the point too far, in such emotionally loaded moments as this, Vincent brought to the minor theatre stage of the 1830s and 1840s what Sarah



Figure 2. Vincent as Agnes Primrose in George Dibdin Pitt's *The Wreck of the Heart* (1839). Credit: University of Bristol Theatre Collection / ArenaPAL.

Siddons had given to Drury Lane in the 1780s and 1790s. Within what George Taylor discerns as the Victorian “theatre of feeling,” Vincent embodied the romantic tradition of sensibility.³⁶ Allowing for differences in context and time, audience offers of help to characters played by Siddons—as reportedly happened in productions of *Jane Shore*—were not so different from those later made to Vincent.³⁷ Having conquered the City, the news vendor’s daughter was more than ready to take on the Victoria (Fig. 3).

Making the Vic Her Own: 1841–1845

Vincent’s reign at the Victoria began on Easter Monday 1841, a traditional date for new beginnings at London’s minor theatres. Thanks to widespread coverage in the



Figure 3. Though dating from ca. 1870, this scene gives a good sense of the Vic's surrounding neighborhood during Vincent's time there. © British Library Board, Wq7/8589.

press, and Osbaldiston's well-practiced facility with playbills, the ground had been well laid. In addition to a new and enlarged gallery, "Whereby a Bold and Uninterrupted View of the Whole of the stage is secured to Every Visitor," the theatre boasted a new method of gas lighting, the "chasteness" of a "noble chandelier," and a drop-scene by the leading theatrical painter William Telbin. In justice to this "elegant" and "commodious" interior—according to one report, a "complete metamorphosis"—an "excellent" company of "first-rate artists" had also been assembled.³⁸ The most significant among this number was the Victoria's new leading man and stage manager, and a perfect foil for Vincent, E. F. (Edward Faucit) Saville.

Born into a large theatrical family (he was an older brother of Helen Faucit), Saville had worked for three years in Bath before going to the Surrey in 1837. Though Macready thought him inclined to "vulgar rant," in an admiring profile in the *Theatrical Journal* his style was given as "Bold and energetic, yet tempered with discretion."³⁹ And as his performance in the Victoria's 1842 version of *Oliver Twist* makes clear, Saville, like Vincent, also knew how to connect with the audience. Against Vincent's playing for pathos as Oliver, in the villainous role of Bill Sikes he goaded to extreme those watching his killing of Nancy. Having slowly and deliberately smeared his victim with ocher, this established favorite (or *host*) smilingly came forward and took a bow. Provoked beyond restraint, "a thousand enraged voices, which sounded like ten thousand," exploded in the auditorium.⁴⁰

With Vincent's reputation for domestic drama now firmly established, her opening night at the Vic saw her treading familiar ground, albeit in a new production.

On this occasion the writer was not Dibdin Pitt, but Thomas Egerton Wilks. Though little known today, experienced professionals like Wilks were crucial to the ever-changing programs then offered by places such as the Victoria. Occasionally, as in the case of *Woman's Love; or, Kate Wynsley the Cottage Girl*, they would produce a hit show with a multiweek run. Usually paid up front for their work—around thirty shillings was the going rate—this kind of success tended to benefit the theatre, not the writer. In this case, however, Wilks was able to generate some extra income by having the play published in a sixpenny edition, the same as then charged for admittance to the Vic's gallery.

Claiming that numerous other theatres would gladly have staged it, and when eventually given the chance had done so, Wilks conceded that much of this work's success was down to those who had first performed it. None more so, of course, than Vincent, whose "truthfulness" as Kate—both in the quieter scenes and "those most powerfully interesting"—stimulated in men and women alike the "natural emotions of the heart." Noting Vincent's "graceful and impressive" acting, as well as Saville's restrained playing of the secretly aristocratic Wilfred Clitheroe, one popular weekly recorded "the tears trickling down the grimy cheeks of genuine costermongers, and sweeps unwashed"—a pleasing sign, it thought, of a more respectable Victoria audience emerging.⁴¹

Centering on the marriage between a farmer's daughter and a mysterious outsider—a clandestine arrangement that has also produced a child—the drama unfolds as a series of mounting challenges for the "unspotted, proud-spirited," and pointedly intelligent young woman.⁴² Unwilling to jeopardize her husband's inheritance (an earldom) by revealing his socially inappropriate match, Kate/Vincent stoically suffers the village "whisperings" to the point of alienating her own family (10). Later in the drama, with husband and wife both believing the other to be dead, we find the newly ennobled Clitheroe remarried, and Kate inadvertently employed as the governess to her own child. Thanks to the fortuitous drowning of the unsympathetic Lady Clitheroe, the tangles are eventually resolved, but not before Kate again jeopardizes her happiness for the sake of her husband. Whatever the inherited rank of the man restored to her, in Kate's unflinching loyalty and resolve, the cottage girl is "as a queen" (40). Hardly a radical sentiment, but not entirely deferential either.

Having launched their campaign with a specially commissioned piece from Wilks,⁴³ the new management team followed with a pair of Dibdin Pitt–Vincent imports from the City. In *Rookwood* Saville took the title role—Vincent reprising the part of Dick Turpin—and in *Mabel Allison* (now renamed *Simon Lee*), Saville and Vincent again played husband and wife.⁴⁴ Retaining the power of its first iteration, *Simon Lee* was still being performed in the 1850s. Although a number of actors would eventually play the determinedly rebellious poacher (including the much-admired N. T. Hicks), it was always Vincent who took the fatal dose of poison. Yet however popular this drama continued to be, it paled beside what immediately followed it, the work that more than any other secured Vincent's reputation as the leading domestic heroine of the day: *Susan Hopley; or, The Trials and Vicissitudes of a Servant Girl*.

Opening at Whitsun 1841, this latest collaboration with Dibdin Pitt was loosely based on Catherine Crowe's *Adventures of Susan Hopley; or, Circumstantial Evidence*. Published at the start of the year, a pirated version of the novel was

soon appearing in the *Penny Sunday Times*, Edward Lloyd's first foray into mass-market weeklies.⁴⁵ Still to run its serialized course, it was this version, as much as Crowe's, that inspired Dibdin Pitt's most commercially successful play and gave Vincent her defining role.⁴⁶ Mixing elements of Gothic with the period's well-documented fascination with murder—and featuring dream visions, an Old Manor House, and a bogus Transylvanian count—*Susan Hopley* had almost everything.⁴⁷ It also had an advertising campaign that cleverly addressed the capital's growing number of domestics with performances promised to end by 8.30 P.M.—thus ensuring their “Mistresses’ permission to witness its representation.”⁴⁸ Exemplifying Jacky Bratton's notion of “intertheatricality,” playbills also ran a commentary on the progress of this drama's “brilliant career,” which eventually took it to the United States and Australia. Testament to their “taste and discrimination,” the Victoria's success with *Susan Hopley* became its patrons' success too.⁴⁹

Enjoying what the press described as a “more than common cordiality” with the audience, at the passionate heart of it all was Vincent. Able to invest the highly colored action with a “species of forcible truth”—even inducing audiences to offer money in aid of her plight—in a very real sense, it seems, she *became* Susan Hopley.⁵⁰ Under the direct supervision of Osbaldiston, Dibdin Pitt's tightly constructed drama subjects its heroine to all manner of dire situations. These not only threaten Susan physically, but also, and as important, reputationally. Placing more emphasis on domestic settings than Crowe's scene-shifting novel, the drama opens at Oakland Hall, the country home of the widowed wine merchant Mr. Wentworth. Happily in service here are Susan Hopley and her footman brother, Andrew. Courted by the comically ardent village greengrocer, Dicky Dean (who, doubtless to the delight of the Vic's audience, later becomes a costermonger), Susan's true love remains Dicky's cousin, the miller's son, William Dean (Saville). The naming here is significant. Working with the generic grain, the audience would almost certainly have recognized that William and Susan—the “hero and heroine of humble life”—were also the main protagonists in Douglas Jerrold's 1829 tearjerker *Black-Eyed Susan*, a canonical domestic drama that was often used as a referent for Dibdin Pitt's later effort.⁵¹

Into this settled rural idyll comes the fiendish Walter Gaveston and his dissipated partner-in-crime, George Remardon—owner of a decaying manor at nearby Upton. Soon to be married to Wentworth's daughter, Gaveston cynically seeks to gain his future wife's entire fortune. This involves murdering her father and disposing of his will. Lured to Upton on a false pretext, Wentworth is bloodily dispatched by the murderous duo. Bravely coming to his master's aid, so too is Andrew. With Wentworth's body having been concealed in a secret compartment, the blame for his murder conveniently falls on the missing footman.⁵² Guilty by association, Susan is dismissed from her post and forced to seek a place in London. In the drama's most memorable scene, the awful fate of Susan's brother is shown in a dream/supernatural vision: just past midnight at Oakland Hall, the bloodied ghost of Andrew guides his sister—and thus the audience—through the evil doings at Upton (Fig. 4).⁵³

Hitherto a fairly passive character, Susan is now galvanized into action. As she determinedly announces upon leaving Oakland Hall at the start of act 2:



Figure 4. Susan's dream vision. Cover illustration to the Dicks' Standard Plays edition of Dibdin Pitt's *Susan Hopley*, ca. 1880. © British Library Board, 11770.bbb.4/395.

I may starve for want of food to support my sinking frame, or without a home to shelter me from the cold, perish in the street before the time comes, still the day will come, when the memory of Andrew will be cleared from the foul stain of murder. (26–7)

And though she loves William dearly, her need to see justice done means that the broken-hearted Susan must deny—at least for now—her offered salvation. Thus the rest of the drama unfolds around the heroine's sacred quest. She will be robbed of her savings, almost murdered in her bed, and once more given sight of Andrew, but in the end she will emerge triumphant. The criminals exposed, her brother exonerated, and her own good name intact, in what was deemed to be her finest delineation of the “sorrows and energies elicited by domestic life,”⁵⁴ Susan faces out to Vincent's adoring audience:

Hear—hear, ye heavens!—hear, ye winds! and bear it far and wide! The fate and fidelity of Andrew are proved! Susan hath kept her word, and the character of the servant girl is for ever unimpeached. (50)

Cue thunderous applause, and not a dry eye in the house.

While numerous other Susan Hopley-style dramas would inevitably follow (from *Mary White* to *Marianne, the Child of Charity*), the Victoria's management was canny enough to offer a mixed program of entertainments. This also gave Vincent the chance to display her versatility and skill as an all-around theatrical performer. Thus we find her in nautical dramas such as J. T. Haines's *Ruth; or, The Lass That Loves a Sailor* (1843), and in breeches roles such as the *Life and Adventures of Little Joey* (Dibdin Pitt: 1845). Given her unusually warm relations with the audience, she was also perfectly cast as the merrymaking Spirit of Christmas Present in one of numerous versions of Dickens's *Christmas Carol* (1844). Two years later, she was one half of the Peerybingles (Saville the other) in the enormously popular *The Cricket on the Hearth*—versions of which were also staged by Mary and Robert Keeley at the Lyceum, and Maria and Robert Honner at the City of London.⁵⁵

There were also regular excursions into more legitimate drama, including Juliana in John Tobin's *The Honeymoon*, Julia in Sheridan Knowles's *The Hunchback* (the part that had made Helen Faucit's name at Covent Garden), and Belvidera in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*. Also there was Shakespeare, the performance of which became easier following the licensing reforms of 1843. Usually paired with Saville, Vincent was Desdemona to his Othello, Ophelia to his Hamlet, and Juliet to his Romeo. Much less rewarding was the 1844 encounter with the young American actor J. Hudson Kirby. Having been engaged to appear with Vincent in *Othello* and *Hamlet*, Kirby's knowledge of Shakespeare was quickly shown to be sketchy at best. Refusing to be "humbled by a damned Yankee," whom he also accused of drunkenness, Osbaldiston had Kirby banned from the theatre. Meanwhile, Vincent took to the press to explain the insults that she and the paying public had been forced to endure.⁵⁶ Kirby retaliated with his own indignant account of the affair. The transatlantic guest-star experiment was not attempted again.

While success at the Vic was not automatically guaranteed, there was always the recourse to *Susan Hopley*. In 1842, it played with *Oliver Twist*, and in the spring of 1846 it shared billing with *The Stranger*, August von Kotzebue's 1798 drama in which Vincent played Mrs. Haller (first performed at Drury Lane by Sarah Siddons). Seen for the last time in its original form in October 1846, a move that coincided with Saville's departure for the City of London, by the end of the decade *Susan Hopley* was nearing four hundred performances. Needless to say, Vincent was still playing Susan.⁵⁷ However, though Saville's departure in some ways marked the end of an era for Vincent and the Vic, his replacement by N. T. Hicks, and the emergence of new writers such as John Courtney, also resulted in significant new work. With Vincent moving into her prime, it is to this part of her career that we now turn.

"Bray-vo Vincent": 1846–1856

In the autumn of 1846, change was in the air at the Vic. In the same week that a new pricing regime was introduced—an ostensibly democratizing move designed to permit "sterling performances at a charge within the means of all classes"—the bills were announcing the engagement of the former Surrey favorite, N. T. Hicks.⁵⁸

Though in reality a response to growing competition and a current squeeze on living standards, as Osbaldiston later informed the Lord Chamberlain, the switch to lower prices (seats in the pit were reduced from 1s. to 6d., and those in the gallery from 6d. to 3d.) sparked a “very great improvement” in business.⁵⁹ In a case of both cause and effect, this in turn gave him the scope to bring in fresh creative blood and to put on new work. Intended as a replacement for the outgoing Saville, Hicks was both the same age as his predecessor and of similar experience. Judged to be the very “beau ideal” of a leading man, he was “robust in appearance, graceful in action . . . and almost as agile as a tiger.”⁶⁰ And if not quite in the same league as Saville, during his time at the Vic he supported Vincent in three of her most interesting roles: Pauline de la Reynerie in *The Black Doctor*; Mary Milford in Dibdin Pitt’s adaptation of *The Bottle*; and the “poor” and “obscure” but nonetheless passionate Jane Eyre.⁶¹

Advertised as “one of the very best French pieces ever produced in the city of Paris,” *The Black Doctor*—adapted from the original *Le Docteur Noir* by Thomas Archer—opened at the Vic in late November and was still in circulation come the following February. In what later became a signature role for Ira Aldridge, the part of the central character, Fabian, was played by Hicks.⁶² Although, as an illustration from the *Theatrical Times* reveals, the actor performed the role in traditional blackface, the play was unusually modern in its heroizing of Fabian and his doomed (but reciprocated) love for the aristocratic Pauline de la Reyniere.⁶³ Providing Vincent with a large and sympathetic part, albeit in the form of an atypically elevated character, she got to speak such resounding lines as “my lord—my husband, in the sight of heaven, and in mine . . . is he not noble, has he not a right to be proud of himself?”⁶⁴ At the end of the drama, his mind broken by prejudice and imprisonment in the Bastille, Fabian dies in the arms of his wife—her convention-defying marriage now the means of surviving the unleashed forces of revolution.

Whereas Vincent was effectively unchallenged as Susan Hopley, she was not the only one of her contemporaries to play Pauline de la Reyniere. Across the river at the City of London, the highly regarded Maria Honner was also gaining plaudits in the role. Consciously or not, Vincent and Honner (also the partner of a well-known actor-manager) were the principal players in a clearly developing rivalry. This was much in evidence in 1847, when both the Victoria and the City presented versions of George Cruikshank’s temperance-inspired series of prints, *The Bottle*. Published in the summer of that year, and available in variously priced editions, it was Cruikshank’s most sustained attempt at stand-alone narrative. A Hogarthian “progress” in human folly, it traced the decline and fall of the working-class Thornley family at the hands of the demon drink. Comprising eight superbly executed stop-action tableaux, as cozy homelife turns to squalor and violence, *The Bottle*, according to the dramatist and journalist Douglas Jerrold, was a “perfect domestic drama” that demanded to be staged.⁶⁵

Although Jerrold was correct in suggesting that there was excellent material here for Vincent, he failed to anticipate the competition. Even before T. P. Taylor’s dramatization opened at the City on 1 October, three other East End theatres had entered the field, including the Britannia and the Pavilion, while closer to the center of town the Queen’s was also offering a version. But with Honner playing the

doomed Ruth Thornley, and with Saville as the alcoholic Richard Thornley, it was the City's version that appears to have set the standard. Whatever the undoubted merits of this Cruikshank-endorsed production, on its own terms the Victoria's slightly later attempt (11 October) had a number of advantages. First, there was the absence of local "south-side" competition; second, it again paired Vincent with the ever popular Hicks; and third, it reunited Vincent with Dibdin Pitt.⁶⁶

Though in plot terms not greatly different from Taylor's work for the City—convention and the force of Cruikshank's images had established a clear template—in a typical Dibdin Pitt touch, the stricken family's landlady is given the aptronymic name of Moneygrub. Thus, while the renamed John and Mary Milford are responsible for their own personal ruin, they play it out in a socially critical context. However, where the Vic's version of *The Bottle* most stands out is in the graphically performed killing of Mary—a moment allowing Vincent to exercise maximum affective power. Whereas the Honners followed Cruikshank in eliding between the start of the assault (Fig. 5) and its fatal aftermath, audiences at the Vic were spared nothing of the unfolding horror.

Convinced that an uncle's offer of help has been gained at the expense of sexual favors, John Milford viciously orders his faithful wife to "go to your paramour." Finding reserves of pride in her brokenness, Mary responds with impressive force:

Beware John Milford. I have endured much for you—misery, hardship, illness, and starvation—but don't let the husband who has brought me to it say aught against my character . . . you are a villain. And so is every man that would at the altar promise to love, to cherish and to protect a woman.⁶⁷



Figure 5. Plate 6 from Cruikshank's *The Bottle*. The supporting caption reads: "Fearful quarrels, and brutal violence, are the natural consequences of the frequent use of the bottle." Wellcome Collection.

Enraged at this speech, and by Mary's attempt to keep him from leaving, Milford resorts to physical violence. With their two surviving children, Barbara and Basil, caught up in the fray, husband and wife fall into a desperate struggle. Seizing the bottle from the mantelpiece (see Fig. 5), Milford repeatedly strikes Mary over the head. As the manuscript held by the University of Kent helpfully tells us, the bottle is "made of tin, but lacquered and coloured to look like glass." Carefully choreographed to music, the fatal blow is finally delivered. With policemen and neighbors now entering the scene, all that a dying Mary can do is plead forgiveness for her drink-maddened husband, the self-confessed "wretch of wretches—the drunkard, lost and accused forever."⁶⁸

In 1848, Cruikshank produced another series of prints charting the unhappy fate of *The Drunkard's Children*. This inevitably prompted a number of stage adaptations, including the Cruikshank-endorsed offering at the Surrey in early July. Recently departed from the City, the drunkard's tragic daughter was played by Maria Honner. Faced with this double challenge from its closest rival, the Vic duly responded with *Life! or, Thrilling Scenes of Early Vice*—a forced retitling under threat of legal action—with Vincent taking the lead as Barbara.⁶⁹ Though retaining the family names provided by Dibdin Pitt, the author of the piece was in fact the actor-turned-writer John Courtney. With Vincent officially responsible for reading new plays and choosing the repertoire, Courtney also provided the Vic with locally based dramas such as *The Carpenters of Lambeth; or, The Bride of the Thames* (1848), the antiwar *The Soldier's Progress* (1849), and *May Morning; or, The Mystery of 1715*, the play that Dickens saw with Joe Whelks in 1850.⁷⁰ In all of these Vincent played the female lead.

Allowing Vincent to be doubly "ghosted"—orphans and governesses were much in her line—by far the most interesting of these roles came in the form of *Jane Eyre; or, The Secrets of Thornfield Manor* (Fig. 6).

Appearing in January 1848, not only was this the first ever staging of Charlotte Brontë's novel, albeit one still credited to Currer Bell, but also it was known to the author herself.⁷¹ Although Brontë complained to her publishers that "all would be woefully exaggerated and painfully vulgarized," especially given its "afflicting" minor theatre provenance, the speed of *Jane Eyre's* transition to the stage (four months) was not of itself unusual.⁷² Nor were the additions and deletions that together ensured a manageable three-act length and a more relatable plot. If, as the period's leading theatrical newspaper noted, this "entirely domestic" story lacked neither "the odour of romance nor the hue of sentiment," it still had to work as drama.⁷³ And work as drama it did. Shifting its attention from novel to play, the *Era* described a *Susan Hopley*-like piece in which the actress displayed "feeling and good taste" in "exactly the part to suit her." Paired with *Romeo and Juliet* in the second week of its run, it was not perhaps the "rant and whine" snobbishly expected by Brontë.⁷⁴

Reflecting its mystery-filled subtitle, Courtney's version of the "eventful story" of *Jane Eyre* focuses heavily on events at Thornfield Manor (Hall in the original).⁷⁵ The novel's early chapters are ignored entirely, and the subsequent events at Lowood are quickly covered. Yet while the action at Jane's charity school is kept brief, it provides us with Betty Bunce, Joe Joker, and Sally Suds. All inventions of Courtney, this trio of servants regard Lowood as a form of prison and, like

Misses Edgar, Lawrence, Sharpe, Wilks, Andrews, &c. &c.

**On Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday,
February 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1848.**

Will be performed (Tenth Time) an entirely New Drama, in Three Acts, founded on the Celebrated Work of the same name, by CURRER BELL Esq., and now engaging the attention of all readers, entitled

JANE EYRE!

OR THE SECRETS OF Thornfield Manor.

Mr Naomi Brocklehurst, { Superintendent of Lowood Orphan Institution. } **MR DALE**
 { or Charity School, }
Edward Rochester, (Owner of Thornfield Manor) **MR W. T. HICKS,**
Mason the Stranger, (from Spanish Town, in Jamaica) **MR HENDERSON,**
St. John, (a young Student) **MR T. H. HIGGIE,** **Mr Carter,** (a Surgeon) **MR FITZJAMES**
Joe Joker, (Drudge at Lowood, afterwards in the service of Rochester) **MR FORBES**
Mr Jehediah Piper, *alias* **Daddy Piper,** (Grocer and Mealman of Millcote) **MR W. SEARLE**
Sam Small, (a dapper little Footman at the Manor, rather inquisitive) **MR J. HOWARD,**
Mr Briggs, (Solicitor for John Eyre, Esq Merchant of Madeira) **MR HITCHINSON,**
Colonel Dent & Mr Wilson, (Guests at Thornfield.) Messrs **SMITHSON & HAMBLIN,**
Rev Mr Walters, (Rector of the little Village of Millcote) **MR SMITH**
Timothy Magog Snobbins, (Butcher and Beadle of Lowood) **MR MORELLI,**
Mr Ballefax, (Cordwainer and High Constable) **MR HUTCHINGS**
Tom, (Shopboy to Mr Jehediah Piper, the Mealman) **Master COHEN,**
Bobwig & Toddlers, (Coachman & Footman to Mr Brocklehurst) Mess **RANDALL & SMITH**
 Villagers, Independent Electors of Millcote, Servants, Mob, &c &c

Miss Temple & Miss Scratchard, } Teachers at { **Mrs N. T. HICKS & Miss SHARP**
 } Lowood School }
Jane Eyre, (an Orphan Girl) **Miss VINCENT,**
Mrs Fairfax, (Housekeeper at Thornfield Manor) **Mrs COOKE,**
Betty Bunce, (Maid of all-work at Lowood, afterwards in the } **Miss BURROUGHLIFFE**
 service of Mr Piper, }
Grace Poole, (the Mysterious Woman of the secluded Chamber at Thornfield) **Miss EDGAR**
 (the Maniac) **Mrs. G. I. E.**

Diana, (Sister to St John) **Miss YOUNG,** **Sally Sudds,** **Miss SHARPE**
Julia Scream, (Scholar at Lowood) **Miss WOOD,** **Hannah,** (Servant to St John) **Mrs ANDREWS**
 Scholars at Lowood Institution. **Misses LAWRENCE, WILKS, ARTHURS, BOND, JONES, &c.**

School-Room in LOWOOD Orphan Institution.
 Jane's early Home. Tyranny of Mr. Brocklehurst. The Cant of Hypocrisy:
The House in an uproar. Affray between **Joe Joker** and the **Beadle**
 who, with the **Constable**, finally make their Exit out of the Window into the Water-Butt.

Rich Chamber, Thornfield Manor House
 Jane installed in her New Service. Her Meeting with Rochester.
 Sudden Arrival of the Stranger Mason from Spanish Town in the West Indies.

CORRIDOR IN THE MANOR HOUSE
 Secrets of Thornfield. The Wild Unearthly Yell and Scream!
Gallery & Sleeping Chambers of the Mansion.
 The Maniac. Mason's Apartment entered. The Attempt at Murder!
THE MANOR HOUSE. Affecting Interview between Rochester and Jane Eyre.
 The Orphan Girl consents to become the **Wife of Rochester.**

JANE EYRE'S SLEEPING CHAMBER.
 Mysterious Appearance of the Maniac. Perilous Situation of Jane. A Night of Terror!!!

Exterior of the RUSTIC VILLAGE CHURCH
 Of Millcote, and Surrounding Country.
 The Wedding. - "Poor Jane, a Serpent is near to mar thy Dream of Joy!"
 Jane's Last Interview with her Master. - The Struggle between Love and Duty!

Extensive View of THORNFIELD MANOR HOUSE,
 In the Elizabethan Style - Gables, Turrets, Oriel Windows, &c.
Embracing the entire Width of the Stage!
The Maniac Fires the Mansion!!! Breaking in of the Massive Walls & Windows
 The Fire gains the Roof - Perilous Situation of Rochester -
 Destruction of the Manor House, - And the Maniac Buried in the Burning Ruins

Country Road and Residence of St. John.
THE ORPHAN GIRL'S DOWER!

Rustic Landscape in the Vicinity of Thornfield.
RUSTIC PARSONAGE HOUSE OF MILLCOTE.
 The Wheel of Fate Revolves, Disclosing the Termination of

THE EVENTFUL STORY OF JANE EYRE!

Figure 6. Victoria Theatre playbill for 9–12 February 1848, with Vincent in the title role of John Courtney's *Jane Eyre*; or, *The Secrets of Thornfield Manor*. Credit: Bristol University Theatre Collection / ArenaPAL.

the young pupil-teacher, they yearn to get away. Partly a source of crowd-pleasing humor—the addition of comic characters was a common device in the Vic’s adaptations of novels—they also embody resistance to misused authority as together they confront the school’s bullying director, Mr. Brocklehurst. Turning the tools of their unwanted trade into weapons, they set about their oppressor with brooms, and when a beadle attempts to intervene he is plunged into a water butt.

The cause of this disturbance has been Jane’s own defiance of the hated Brocklehurst. Again departing from the novel, her silent suffering is replaced by a rousing speech. Insisting that “I will be heard,” she tells her blustering tormentor how for eight years

I have endured all that falls to the lot of the poor orphan girl. . . . Instead of kindness from you, I and those around me meet but scorn. . . . Charity! Oh, ’tis a monstrous mockery of it, ’tis persecution upon the helpless and unprotected. . . . you should blush to own such feelings as inhabit your cold and uncharitable heart. (35)

Opening with a suitably moody soliloquy from Rochester (Hicks), “the wind shakes the gables of these old towers” (38), we now enter the shadowy world of Thornfield Manor. As well as stressing the novel’s more Gothic features—within moments of Jane’s arrival she confesses to a “thrill of fear” (39)—Courtney continues to invent new characters such as the choruslike footman Sam Small.

Further helping to keep the audience engaged, the sympathetic working-class figures of Betty Bunce and Joe Joker also return to the action. Having escaped Lowood’s tyranny at the same time as Jane, Betty has found work in the nearby town of Millcote (neatly offering a chance to make fun of local politics), while Joe is now Rochester’s coachman. In contrast to the visibility of these figures, the more upper-class inhabitants of the novel, Thornfield’s owner excepted, exist only offstage. Here, at least, the well-born are the marginal. At the same time, however, Rochester’s gentlemanly authority wins the instant respect of Joe. In keeping with the original story, the fire that consumes Thornfield will be set by the deranged Bertha (cast as the “Maniac” in the bills), but it will be the servant who rescues the master.⁷⁶

Her marriage to Rochester thwarted, and forced to endure a night on the moors, in quick succession Jane finds her long-lost cousins and inherits a fortune—one she naturally pledges to share with her newfound relatives and friends. Learning of the fire and Rochester’s blindness, Jane determines to claim her lost love. In the play’s final scene, designed for a typical display of Vincent pluck, she finds Bertha’s maddened brother trying to kill Rochester. Fending off the would-be assailant, Jane is rescued by Joe. Within the populist ordering of the Victoria’s world, Rochester needs the orphaned and the lowly as much as they need him. Brave and virtuous to the end, it is once again Vincent—as Kate Wynsley, as Susan Hopley, as Jane Eyre—who finally emerges triumphant. Or as the costermongers cheering from the gallery liked to put it: “Bray-vo Vincent! Go it my tulip!”⁷⁷

When Henry Mayhew heard these words in the autumn of 1850 (he had been watching a performance of Osbaldiston’s *Child of the Storm*), Vincent had been reigning at the Vic for almost a decade. Appropriately enough, Osbaldiston’s final work for the stage concerned the improbable rise of Peter the Great’s second

wife, Catherine I, a woman of humble birth reputed to have once been a laundress. Never one to undersell himself, Osbaldiston played the mighty tsar.⁷⁸ However, while her partner's death at the end of the year formalized Vincent's managerial dominance (upon inheriting the remainder of Osbaldiston's lease on the Vic she took the title of directress), her practical involvement with the theatre, most notably as a performer, markedly declined. Although she was responsible for commissioning Courtney's adaptation of Gaskell's *Mary Barton*—a full sixteen years before Dion Boucicault's version for the Lyceum—when it was eventually performed in 1851, the title role was taken by Hudson Kirby's widow.⁷⁹ Left destitute by his death in 1848, Kirby's actress-wife had subsequently turned to her fellow performers for help and support. In the close-knit community she inhabited—the wives of Saville and Hicks also regularly appeared onstage—this was not an uncommon occurrence. Meanwhile, facing a bitter dispute over her inheritance, and soon to be embroiled in her disastrous marriage to Benjamin Crowther, the Vic's leading light had plenty of her own offstage drama with which to contend.⁸⁰

In the autumn of 1853, with her unhinged husband now safely institutionalized and her legal and financial status secured, Vincent returned to performing. Whether this welcome reappearance was prefaced by her customary curtsy to the audience is not known, but, paired with the Vic's version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the piece selected for her comeback was *Susan Hopley*. Sticking with the familiar, she followed this with *The Black Doctor*, *Simon Lee*, and *Woman's Love*.⁸¹ Continuing under her maiden (brand) name, Vincent played her most celebrated role for the final time in November 1854, with E. F. Saville, increasingly struggling with alcoholism, as Susan's staunchly loyal sweetheart, William.⁸² Though the (expired) lease of the Vic had passed into other hands in the summer of 1856, Vincent retained the title of directress. It was in this capacity that she was last seen at the theatre just two days before her death on 10 November at the age of forty-two. That evening, the Vic stayed dark, but the following day the show went on. In a poignant piece of oversight, Vincent's name still appeared on the bills.

Writing on the largely forgotten playwright Marianne Denvil, Katherine Newey insists how careers such as hers place “female activity and agency at the centre of theatre making.”⁸³ Active in the 1840s and 1850s, Denvil was undoubtedly a major asset to the various East End theatres managed by her husband. Not to underestimate Denvil's achievement, or indeed that of the talented and versatile Maria Honner, it pales beside that of Eliza Vincent's—a performer of rare power and grace whose career touched the lives of thousands of ordinary playgoers. Denvil wrote an alternative version of *Susan Hopley*, but she was *not*—nor ever could be—Susan Hopley. Although prudishly unable to overlook the “errors” in her private life, the *Era's* final word on Vincent was rightfully to celebrate an actress whose singular style was characterized by “great force of expression and intensity of feeling.”⁸⁴ This was not a lone view. According to one account of the nineteenth-century stage, Vincent used to “bathe a Lambeth audience in tears,” and Henry Barton Baker recalled an actress as good as any of her contemporaries.⁸⁵ If, as recently claimed, the presence of the Victorian actress was potentially “magnetic,” through Vincent's delicate frame flowed a powerful attractive force.⁸⁶

The heart of an establishment that Charlotte Brontë thought “loathsome” (and this merely on hearsay), Vincent brought to the Vic an emotionally intense

morality that more informed observers recognized for its “healthful” benefits.⁸⁷ Today, these might be described as the affirmation and encouragement of “feeling,” or the sensorial reclaiming of everyday lives for “something other than work.”⁸⁸ And if Vincent’s trials and vicissitudes were vicariously those of her audience, so too was her self-reliance and agency. For a group still largely denied a political voice, and vulnerable to the vagaries of the marketplace, in the “sovereign power of the hiss or the cheer,” to spend an evening with Vincent at the Vic was in no small way to be empowered.⁸⁹ Whatever the ideological content of the dramas in which she appeared—typically a curious blend of populist radicalism and romantic Toryism—from servant girl, to governess, to future empress of Russia, Vincent’s reign at the self-styled People’s Theatre was thoroughly democratic.⁹⁰ Her collaborations with the likes of Dibdin Pitt, Saville, and Courtney—and also of course her partnership with Osbaldiston—further emphasize the point.

By any conceivable measure, Eliza Vincent’s career on the stage was remarkable. In a journey that took her from minor house to major and back again, from child star to mature actress and manager, we have a theatrical life rich in variety and success. Even if we subtracted her years at the Vic, this would still be so. For instance, of the quartet of women who managed or comanaged the City of London Theatre, Vincent was the obvious standout.⁹¹ Her pre-Vic years were impressive enough; when viewed as a whole, her career was a compelling and consistent study in achievement. At the peak of her celebrity in the 1840s, there was no one outside the West End of comparable charisma or impact. In a place that once boasted a looking-glass curtain, a pan-optic novelty that put its patrons on the stage, Vincent nightly reflected back her audiences’ hopes and fears. Those up in the gods had it right. Bray-vo Vincent indeed.

Endnotes

1 Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 175–9; Terry Coleman, *The Old Vic: The Story of a Great Theatre from Kean to Olivier to Spacey* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), 12.

2 Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840–1880* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 6–14, 20–3. Though the Vic’s audience was predominantly working class, it was not necessarily an inattentive one. See F. G. Tomlins, *A Brief View of the English Drama* (London: C. Mitchell, 1840), 60. Dickens found the same in “The Amusements of the People” [I], in *Dickens’ Journalism*, vol. 2: “The Amusements of the People” and Other Papers: Reports, Essays and Reviews, 1834–51, ed. Michael Slater (London: J. M. Dent, 1996), 179–85, at 181–2.

3 Tomlins, *Brief View*, 59.

4 Dickens, “Amusements,” 181.

5 Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991) and *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. chap. 8; Katherine Newey, *Women’s Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Jacky Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage: Marriage, Management and the Mapping of Gender in London, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

6 Janice Norwood, *Victorian Touring Actresses: Crossing Boundaries and Negotiating the Cultural Landscape* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

7 For the most recent work on Lane see Janice Norwood, “Picturing Nineteenth-Century Female Theatre Managers: The Iconology of Eliza Vestris and Sara Lane,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 33.1 (2017): 3–21.

8 See Rohan McWilliam, *London’s West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 72–3, 80.

- 9 *Era*, 27 March 1853, 12; Edward Walford, *Old and New London*, vol. 6: *The Southern Suburbs* (London: Cassell Petter & Galpin, 1878), 398.
- 10 For recent work on domestic drama, see Christine Gledhill, "Domestic Melodrama," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 61–77.
- 11 British Library [hereinafter BL] Playbills (microfilm collection): Reel 391, Victoria Theatre.
- 12 Erin Hurley, *Theatre & Feeling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 45.
- 13 Mathew Buckley, "Early English Melodrama," in Williams, ed., *English Melodrama*, 13–30, at 22.
- 14 For example, *Punch's* review of *Mary White; or, The Murder at the Old Tabard*, 26 February 1842, 93.
- 15 Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: H. Jenkins, 1965); Gilbert B. Cross, *Next Week—East Lynne: Domestic Drama in Performance, 1820–1874* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1977); Williams, ed., *English Melodrama*. Vincent is noticed, however, in chapter 3 of George Rowell's *The Old Vic Theatre: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and in chapter 3 of Terry Coleman's more recent *Old Vic*.
- 16 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 8.
- 17 *Morning Advertiser*, 6 May 1823, 2. Biographical information on Vincent is taken from various contemporary profiles and obituaries, for example: *Theatrical Journal* 248.5 (14 September 1844): 289–90; *Theatrical Times*, 13 February 1847, 41–2; *Musical Gazette* 1.43 (15 November 1856), 508.
- 18 Anne Varty, *Children and Theatre in Victorian Britain: "All Work, No Play"* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1–9, and quote on 110; William Oxberry, *The Actress of All Work* [1819] (London: J. Duncombe, 1852).
- 19 *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser*, 7 July 1824, 3.
- 20 *Oberon; or, The Charmed Horn* (London: Cumberland's Theatre, 1826), 2.
- 21 The Theatre Regulation Act (1843) gave all theatres the right to stage spoken-word drama, but it also made them subject to censorship by the Lord Chamberlain.
- 22 M. St. Clare Byrne, "Early Multiple Settings in England," *Theatre Notebook* 8.4 (1954): 81–6, at 84.
- 23 *St. James's Chronicle*, 7 June 1834, 4; *Weekly Dispatch*, 8 June 1834, 3; Rowell, *Old Vic*, 32.
- 24 It is possible that the couple's son, George, became an actor at the Surrey Theatre. See William G. Knight, *A Major London 'Minor': The Surrey Theatre, 1805–1865* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1997), 292.
- 25 One response was to wonder who now wore the managerial breeches. On Osbaldiston's time at Covent Garden, see Henry Saxe Wyndham, *The Annals of Covent Garden Theatre. From 1732 to 1897*, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906), 2: 99–122.
- 26 BL Playbills, 1780–1861 (digital collection). Playbills from Covent Garden, 1835–6; Saxe Wyndham, *Annals*, 2: 108.
- 27 For example, in May 1837 she performed with Macready and Faucit in Robert Browning's *Strafford*. In an untypically aristocratic role, she played Queen Henrietta Maria, the wife of Charles I.
- 28 *Morning Post*, 13 June 1837, 3.
- 29 Stephen Ridgwell, "City Women: Managers and Leading Ladies at the City of London Theatre, 1837–1848," *New Theatre Quarterly* 39.3 (2023): 200–15.
- 30 For a summary of Dibdin Pitt's work, see Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, "Introduction: George Dibdin Pitt's 1847 *Sweeney Todd*," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 38.1 (2011): 1–22.
- 31 Hackney Archives, City of London Theatre Playbills.
- 32 Jane Moody, "Illusions of Authorship," in *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 99–124, at 121; *Theatrical Journal* 1.39 (12 September 1840): 319.
- 33 *Odd Fellow*, 30 October 1841, 2.
- 34 *Era*, 5 May 1839, 3; George Dibdin Pitt, *Simon Lee; or, The Murder of the Five Fields Cope* (London: Dicks' Standard Plays, 1887), III:2, 14.
- 35 Christine Gledhill, "Domestic Melodrama," in Williams, ed., *English Melodrama*, 61–77, at 71.
- 36 George Taylor, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 30–7.
- 37 Jean I. Marsden, *Theatres of Feeling: Affect, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 59.

- 38 BL Playbills: Reel 391; *Era*, 28 March 1841, 5; *Morning Chronicle*, 13 April 1841, 3; *Sun*, 13 April 1841, 7.
- 39 *The Diaries of William Charles Macready*, 2 vols., ed. William Toynbee (London: Chapman & Hall, 1912), 1: 211; *Theatrical Journal* 4.169 (11 March 1843): 79.
- 40 John Hollingshead, *My Lifetime*, 2 vols. (London: Sampson Low, 1895), 1: 189–90, quote at 190.
- 41 Thomas Egerton Wilks, “Preface,” in *Woman’s Love; or, Kate Wynsley the Cottage Girl* (London: H. Hughes, n.d.), iii–iv, quotes at iv; *Bell’s New Weekly Messenger*, 18 April 1841, 6.
- 42 Wilks, *Kate Wynsley*, 20. Page numbers are given parenthetically for subsequent quotations in this edition of the play.
- 43 Wilks gave Osbaldiston and Vincent another hit in 1842 with *The Dream Spectre*.
- 44 In the autumn of 1841, *Mary Clifford* and *The Wreck of the Heart* were also produced, with Vincent taking the lead in both.
- 45 Lucy Sussex, “The Detective Maidservant: Catherine Crowe’s *Susan Hopley*,” in *Silent Voices: Forgotten Novels by Victorian Women Writers*, ed. Brenda Ayres (Westport, CT: Praeger/Greenwood, 2003), 57–66.
- 46 So close had their partnership become that in 1842 it was spoofed in consecutive issues of the *Theatrical Journal*; see “Hints for Melo-dramas, No. 2: Love and Friendship,” 3.119 (26 March 1842): 101–2 and 3.120 (2 April 1842): 111.
- 47 BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 48 Victoria and Albert Museum, Theatre Collections, Victoria Theatre Production Files.
- 49 BL Playbills: Reel 391; Bristol University Theatre Collections, Victoria Theatre Playbills, OVP/71/114–121. On the “intertheatrical” role of playbills, see Jacky Bratton’s *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chap. 3.
- 50 *Odd Fellow*, 28 August 1841, 2; *New Court Gazette*, 8 January 1842, 12; Edwin Fagg, *The Old “Old Vic”* (London: Henderson & Spalding, 1936), 86.
- 51 Bristol: OVP/SB/231.
- 52 Following the recent Courvoisier case, master-killing servants were then much in the news. In the summer of 1840, the Swiss-born valet, François Courvoisier, was hanged for the murder of Lord William Russell.
- 53 The vision occurs as the climax of act 1. George Dibdin Pitt, *Susan Hopley; or, The Trials and Vicissitudes of a Servant Girl* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1850), 23–4. Page numbers are given parenthetically for subsequent quotations in this edition of the play.
- 54 *Weekly True Sun*, 8 August 1841, 14.
- 55 BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 56 BL Playbills: Reel 391; Knight, *Surrey Theatre*, 208–12.
- 57 Bristol: OVP/71/98–106; BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 58 BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 59 The National Archives: Lord Chamberlain’s Papers, LC7/6.
- 60 *Era*, 2 March 1873, 11.
- 61 John Courtney, *Jane Eyre; or, The Secrets of Thornfield Manor*, in Patsy Stoneman, ed., *Jane Eyre on Stage, 1848–1898* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 32–63, at 51. Page numbers later given parenthetically for subsequent quotations refer to this edition of the play.
- 62 Thomas Archer, *The Black Doctor* (London: Dicks’ Standard Plays, 1883). This edition wrongly credits the play to Ira Aldridge.
- 63 *Theatrical Times*, 28 January 1847, 17.
- 64 Archer, *Black Doctor*, 9.
- 65 George Cruikshank, *The Bottle: In Eight Plates* (London: David Bogue, 1847); Jerrold quoted in Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 124.
- 66 BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 67 George Dibdin Pitt, *The Bottle*, manuscript, University of Kent, Pettingell Collection, PETT MSS.B.77, ff. 45–9.
- 68 *Ibid.*, ff. 45–9.
- 69 BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 70 BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 71 Stoneman, “Editor’s Notes,” *Jane Eyre*, 19–31, esp. 20.

- 72 *Ibid.*, 30. From Brontë's correspondence with her friend (and reader for her publishers, Smith, Elder & Co.), William Smith Williams, dated 5 February 1848; cf. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, vol. 2: 1848–1851, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 25.
- 73 *Era*, 14 November 1847, quoted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 78.
- 74 *Era*, 6 February 1848, 12; Smith, ed., *Letters*, 2: 25; BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 75 BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 76 BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 77 Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 3 vols. [1861] (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), 1: 19.
- 78 David Osbaldiston, *Catharine of Russia; or, The Child of the Storm* (London: S. G. Fairbrother, 1850).
- 79 Andrew Maunder, "Mary Barton Goes to London: Elizabeth Gaskell, Stage Adaptation and Working Class Audiences," *Gaskell Journal* 25 (2011): 1–18. Despite interference from the Lord Chamberlain, Courtney's version of *Mary Barton* was far more socially critical than Boucicault's.
- 80 Osbaldiston's will, which left the bulk of his estate to Vincent, was fiercely contested by his legal wife since 1819, the actress Harriet Dawson. The dispute was eventually resolved in Vincent's favor in 1853.
- 81 Rowell, *Old Vic*, 43; BL Playbills: Reel 391.
- 82 *Era*, 19 November 1854, 1.
- 83 Katherine Newey, "Melodrama and Gender," in Williams, ed., *English Melodrama*, 149–62, at 161.
- 84 *Era*, 16 November 1856, 10.
- 85 Clement Scott and Cecil Howard, *The Life and Reminiscences of E. L. Blanchard*, 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1891), 1: 34; Henry Barton Baker, *History of the London Stage and Its Famous Players, 1576–1903* (London: George Routledge, 1904), 354, 398.
- 86 Renata Kobetts Miller, *The Victorian Actress in the Novel and on the Stage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 1.
- 87 Smith, ed., *Letters*, 2: 27 (to W. S. Williams, 15 February 1848); George Augustus Sala, *Twice Round the Clock; or, The Hours of the Day and Night in London* [1859] (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1971), 271.
- 88 Hurley, *Theatre & Feeling*, 55–8, quote at 58.
- 89 Cross, *Next Week*, 89.
- 90 Bristol, OVP/71/67/P/1/3.
- 91 Ridgwell, "City Women," 204–8.

Stephen Ridgwell completed a Ph.D. in History at Sussex University (UK) in 2017. His work on nineteenth- and early-twentieth century popular culture has appeared in various journals including *Early Popular Visual Culture*, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, the *Journal of Victorian Studies*, and *New Theatre Quarterly*. He is currently researching the radical nature of the Victoria Theatre in the 1840s and the career of the theatrical impresario and pantomimist Nelson Lee.

Cite this article: Stephen Ridgwell, "The Queen of the Vic: Eliza Vincent's Actress-Management of the Victoria Theatre, London, 1841–1856," *Theatre Survey* 65.2 (2024): 71–93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557424000097>.