***The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict*, by Dagmar Kift. Trans. Roy Kift. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.**

In this meticulously researched and closely argued book based on a 1989 Free University of Berlin doctoral thesis, Dagmar Kift sets out to ask a different set of questions about the history and role of the English music hall. Previous historians were concerned with the following questions: What was the music hall? How did it work? Who worked there and for whom? What does music hall tell us about the world view of the audience? Her concern is with slightly different, albeit related issues. How did various groups of Victorians react to the halls, their programmes and popularity? What was the nature of the conflicts that arose between supporters and opponents of the halls? And how did these conflicts differ from locality to locality, region to region?

In section I Kift presents chapters on the history of the halls, their programmes and audiences. Section II includes chapters on the conflicts that arose between those who sought to reform or even abolish the halls, and those proprietors and their audiences who defended them as legitimate expressions of (predominantly) working-class culture. What is particularly impressive about these chapters is the complexity of the arguments. Previous historians have tended to develop straightforward arguments in terms of categorising music-hall programmes as constituting a "culture of consolation" (Gareth Stedman Jones); in presenting the conflicts over music halls as reflecting an attempt by a middle class committed to rational recreation to suppress a working-class culture of enjoyment and pleasure for its own sake; and in claiming that the history of London is the history of the English music hall. Kift argues rather that the songs, characters and variety acts presented in the halls reflected a kaleidoscope of values, a culture not only of consolation but of bombast, glitter and alcohol, in other words of celebration. Moreover, in her studies of the role of music hall in such cities as Bolton, Sheffield, Leeds and Liverpool, she demonstrates that opposition to their existence, at least in the 1860s and 1870s when the issue was alcohol and its influence, had more to do with local than class circumstances. As a result, some members of the middle class supported the halls, and some nonconformist members of the working class opposed them. Only in the late 1870s and through the 1880s, when the campaign against the halls focused on the allegedly lewd and blasphemous qualities of their programmes, did it become an almost exclusively middle-class movement, one reflecting rising class tensions in an increasingly industrial society. Finally, Kift convincingly argues that the history of music hall outside London followed a different path. In the first place, London's Canterbury Hall was not the prototype for others, for in fact music halls were appearing in the north before the famous London institution was built. More importantly, the issues that caused controversy in the north—alcohol and programmes—were of little significance in the capital. Here the attack on the halls was led by those who argued that music halls were dens of prostitution. Such was the strength of their campaign that in 1894 they even succeeded in forcing the temporary closure of the famous Empire, whose promenade was a favourite haunt of high-class prostitutes.

These arguments provide us with a deeper and more complex understanding of the important and to some extent contradictory role of music hall in nineteenth-century English culture. At a more specific level Kift also takes issue with the detail and nuances contained in writings about music hall by other historians such as Summerfield,

Cunningham and others, but these historiographical "corrections" are concerned with what seem to me to be relatively small issues. As such, they are likely to attract the interest only of aficionados, those who have devoted their scholarly lives to the subject, rather than cultural historians concerned with broader issues. Indeed it is when this book takes issue with such writings that it most clearly reveals its doctoral origins.

Kift has asked new questions, dealt with a broader range of material than other historians of music hall, but there is still a very insular quality about the book and its arguments. One of the themes of the book focuses on the commercialisation of music-hall programmes in the late nineteenth century. However, it also seems to me that one of the critical processes taking place in British and American popular culture and theatre in this period was internationalisation. The advent of the steamship allowed British, American and indeed Australian performers and their acts to become internationally known. What this meant, of course, was that English music-hall programmes were influenced by other genres of theatre, many of them imported. Blackface acts were as much a part of the music hall as they were of the minstrel stage programme; the spectacle scenes reflected the influence of melodrama; and burlesque shaped the manner in which women were portrayed in character and dance acts. In focusing on those acts which are identified as reflecting local culture and character, Kift can conclude that the halls propagated a culture that strengthened the culture of the working class, thereby dismissing Patrick Joyce's arguments against the formation of working-class consciousness in nineteenth century England. Perhaps in part they did, but music-hall programmes, along with those to be found in theatres presenting minstrelsy, vaudeville, melodrama and burlesque, also contributed to the development of a commercialised and trans-national popular culture, whose appeal extended far beyond the English working class.

Richard Waterhouse

***Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori*, by Michael R. Booth, John Stokes and Susan Bassnett. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.**

In her lively and evocative account of the career of Adelaide Ristori, the Italian actress considered to be the greatest in the world in the 1860s and 1870s, Susan Bassnett quotes these comments by Italian critic Fernando Taviani on the difficulties of reconstructing the work of nineteenth-century performers: "We can watch them travelling, we can watch them going into the theatre, we can watch them being applauded and occasionally coping with failures, we can watch them setting off again, but we cannot actually see them performing" (165). This dilemma is illustrated by the cover photo of *Three Tragic Actresses* which shows the interior of an unidentified London theatre, with a Victorian audience on their feet, cheering a diminutive, barely visible female figure standing centre stage surrounded by flowers. The date is June 1861 and the actress is Rachel Felix, the French performer who was touted by the mid to late nineteenth-century European theatre media as Ristori's main rival. In my own attempts to reconstruct Ristori's 1875 Australian tour, I had to extrapolate from an unreliable travel diary by a