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

retired Italian military officer, Bartolomeo Galletti, who was something of a hanger-on entrusted with keeping a record of box office accounts and listing Ristori's performances (which he did inaccurately), and who provided fascinating descriptions of Australian life in 1875 but never described a single performance or gave a close-up description of Ristori. This frustratingly limited source was augmented by local newspaper reviewers' often extremely detailed accounts of the plots of the plays which Ristori performed, together with audiences' responses and often impassioned opinions about the greatness of her performances, as well as the cultural events, controversies and debates which her tour stimulated. However, any clear sense of what actually happened on stage was still left largely to conjecture. All three authors of this book manage to provide stimulating conjectures which convey valuable insights into the work of these three actresses and the ways in which they reflected social issues, attitudes, values and inhibitions.

At least Ristori left her memoirs which discuss in some detail her psychological preparations for her major roles of Elizabeth, Lady Macbeth, Phaedra, Medea and Mary Stuart, so we are given an insight into her technique and stagecraft which, although obviously pre-Stanislavski and pre-realist "face acting," relies heavily on empathising with these characters and subsuming her own personality into what she perceived were their prominent character traits. This meant that although she detested Elizabeth's coldness and cruelty and found playing this and other roles such as the incestuous Mirra distasteful, she was able to construct a sense of psychological plausibility (within the rather mannered and melodramatic acting style that was current) which cut against academic conventionalism and managed to provoke strong emotions in her audiences, male and female (particularly when she performed the role in colonial Australia). This, as Bassnett points out, was in marked contrast to the florid, flighty and mannered style of Eleonora Duse, whom Ristori nonetheless influenced in deep-seated ways.

One highly stimulating suggestion that the three authors of this book make in their introduction is that all three performers treated here in their different ways were able to explore taboo social and psychological territories through displaying the desires, sufferings, transgressions, eroticism and "dangerous and seductive emotions" (9) of the historical and mythological characters they played: "As a contribution to sexual politics, tragic acting involved both psychic assertion and an irresistible, often erotic form of self-display" (9). While this highly-charged on-stage display contrasted sharply with the stolid, dour but almost megalomaniac, regal sense of moral probity and respectability which Ristori displayed in her private life (she was always accompanied by her wealthy, aristocratic and meek Marquis husband-manager on tour, and in later life became a lady in waiting to the Queen of Italy), it added spice to Rachel's rumoured affairs with influential figures and mentors and the rather colourful, loose reputation she acquired. John Stokes provides a close textual commentary on Rachel's main performances in an attempt to determine "what exactly Rachel did on stage," and manages to evoke convincingly the idiosyncrasies of her readings of roles such as Camille, Andromaque and Phèdre, quoting extensively from the French texts and English reviewers (such as the playwright Boucicault) of her performances. Stokes concludes that "in her wild tirades, her dangerous silences and her violent transitions, she had seemed to intimate the rhythms of history itself" (116) in the first half of the nineteenth century. He also argues that Rachel's volatile, erotic self-consciousness provided a challenge to prevalent

patriarchal values of the time, anticipating Bernhardt's more melodramatic and confronting sexuality.

While an important influence on both Rachel and Ristori in her Shakespearean roles, Siddons's domestic subservience to her overbearing husband and her restricted mobility set her apart from the other two actresses who seemed much more in control of their careers and destinies. While Ristori ran her own touring company (with her husband's assistance) in the Italian tradition of actor-managers and Rachel was able to tour independently for fifteen years despite a stormy on-again-off-again relationship with the Comédie-Française, Booth relates Siddons's immensely powerful portrayals of grief and suffering to the frustrations of her home life and its stifling of any outlet for her emotions. In this respect she emerges as a tragic figure in life as well as on stage, and Booth's rather florid and melodramatic account of her career tends to emphasise her as a heroic victim rather than a transgressive performer of emotions and desires, despite her Lady Macbeth which "comprehended both the feminine, delicate woman and the ruthless fiend" (42).

One of the values of this book is that it extends considerably the perceptions of a work such as Henry Knepler's 1968 study of Rachel, Ristori, Bernhardt and Duse, *The Gilded Stage. Three Tragic Actresses* draws on late twentieth-century feminist perspectives in assessing the careers of these three important actresses whose work, despite reflecting the relatively disempowered status of women in society in the nineteenth century, was soon to be superseded by women's emancipation and more positive and assertive roles for women, such as Ibsen's Nora, in theatre it subsequently engendered.

Tony Mitchell