

Stephen Ridgwell

# City Women: Managers and Leading Ladies at the City of London Theatre, 1837–1848

In the 1830s and 1840s, the female management of London theatres, conducted singly or in partnership, was surprisingly common. Charismatic actress-managers such as Madame Vestris and Mrs Keeley have long been familiar to students of British theatre, as too the establishments they managed. Much less well known is the City of London Theatre in Norton Folgate, one of several minor playhouses then active in the East End. Opened in the year that Victoria came to the throne (1837), during its first decade the City was unrivalled as a home for the so-called ‘wo-manager’. Although largely forgotten today, Lucy Honey, Eliza Vincent, Harriett Lacy, and Maria Honner added much to the cultural vibrancy of an important theatre district at a moment of significant social change. Stephen Ridgwell here explores an under-researched world of theatre enterprise, and argues that the marginality subsequently conferred upon these women in no way reflects their contemporary visibility and standing. The article also highlights the importance of Eliza Vincent’s collaborations with George Dibdin Pitt, a dramatist of growing interest to scholars across a range of fields, and proposes that further consideration of this partnership might usefully be undertaken.

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HALLOWEEN, 1842. Clad in a black velvet shawl and sable boa, an attractive young woman stood in the dock of the Old Bailey. In the kind of plot that drove countless domestic melodramas, the nineteen-year-old Alice Lowe was charged with stealing jewellery from Lord Frankfort, a married viscount with whom she had been living in Paddington. With the jury quickly returning a verdict of not guilty, Lowe exited the court to cheers from her mostly male supporters. Meanwhile, as a ballad commemorating the episode gleefully recorded, the viscount was ‘pelted with mud and dirt’.<sup>1</sup> Hoping to exploit Lowe’s instant celebrity, the City of London Theatre in Norton Folgate immediately engaged her in a series of one-act farces. Although well received by the City’s largely working-class audience, if not by an indignant company, Lowe’s moment in the spotlight was brief,

and by the end of November she had disappeared from the scene.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Alice Lowe brings nicely into view the subject of this article, namely the City of London Theatre and its unusually close links to a quartet of prominent, and in two cases publicly scandalous, actress-managers: Laura Honey (née Bell); Eliza Vincent; Harriett Lacy (née Taylor); and Maria Honner (née Macarthy). Running either side of the Lowe case, their respective relationships with the City formed a major part of its opening decade. From its launch in 1837 to its take-over by John Johnson and Nelson Lee in 1848, no other London theatre was so connected to so many women in so short a space of time.

If this made the City unique, it was not alone in alternating spells of male and female management, and in several cases joint management, as theatres negotiated the

era-defining move from Georgian to Victorian. As Tracy C. Davis and Jacky Bratton have shown, when it came to wo-management, or, alternatively, petticoat government, the 1830s and 1840s represented an especially crowded stage.<sup>3</sup> Men still dominated the profession, of course, but at the moment when patent-house monopoly finally gave way to free trade, as enshrined in the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act, upstart minors such as the City were busy presenting new opportunities for women.<sup>4</sup>

Paving the way was Madame Vestris's reign at the Olympic Theatre on Wych Street between 1831 and 1839. Instrumental in the making of the modern West End, the charismatic actress and singer inspired a host of managerially ambitious actresses.<sup>5</sup> These included Harriet Waylett at the Strand, first in 1832 and then in 1834–35, and Louisa Nisbett at the Queen's Theatre on Charlotte Street between 1834 and 1836. In the following decade, and in partnership with her actor-husband Robert Keeley, Mary Anne Keeley (née Goward) ran the Lyceum between 1844 and 1847. Completing the circle, Vestris then took over the theatre until 1855, albeit with her own husband, Charles Mathews.

The wo-manager was not just confined to Westminster. Between 1842 and 1848, the Surrey Theatre in Lambeth was held by Frances Davidge, while in 1851 the nearby Victoria Theatre came into the hands of Eliza Vincent, although she had been effectively joint-managing the theatre since 1841. In North London, Sadler's Wells hosted Fanny Fitzwilliam in 1832, and in 1844 it came under the influential management of Samuel Phelps and Mary Warner (née Huddart). Having ended their arrangement in 1846, Warner headed west to the Theatre Royal in Marylebone. Offering a sharp reminder of the commercial risks involved, the venture ended in heavy losses for Warner, and disgrace, and eventual suicide, for her stage-struck business partner.<sup>6</sup>

Turning eastwards, scholars have explored the distinctive theatre space carved out by entrepreneurs such as the Devon-born Samuel Lane and his actress-manager wife Sara, who was based at the Britannia Theatre in Hoxton for over fifty years. By the time of her arrival in

the 1840s, the area claimed no fewer than six full-fledged theatres and saloons. Each a short distance from the other, rivalry between the City and local competitors such as the Brit, the Standard, and the Pavilion was fierce.<sup>7</sup> Often subject to what Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow read as orientalised condescension, geography and lowly status did not mean that 'eastern' playgoers lacked discernment, and quality and novelty of attraction were essential.<sup>8</sup>

In tracing what audiences of the time liked to see, popular dramatists such as George Dibdin Pitt have been well documented, while the plays of Marianne Denvil are now known thanks to the work of Katherine Newey.<sup>9</sup> The author of over a dozen dramas, titles such as *Ela the Outcast* and *The Female Bluebeard* were produced by Denvil's actor-manager husband during his spells at the Pavilion (1840–43) and the City (1844–45).<sup>10</sup> In a similar act of recovery, Heidi Holder has considered Mrs Henry Young, who scored at least twenty-five plays across the East End. Holder links this record to the visible female workforce in the area, which, in occupational terms, undermined any notion of separate spheres. This, she argues, made neighbourhood establishments such as the City, itself situated between a draper's and a furrier's, relatively open to women.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, Janice Norwood has highlighted the mid-Victorian career of Alice Marriott, an actress who successfully transitioned into management at the Standard before going on to Sadler's Wells.<sup>12</sup> Framing this interest is a broader study of the 'mid-tier' actress: jobbing professionals who spent their working lives away from the West End's historically brighter lights and whose achievements in a difficult industry have been mostly consigned to the margins.

In writing on those I have termed 'City women', and charting their experiences at a single theatre, this article journeys into the heart of a dynamic theatre district. Not since the time of Burbage and Shakespeare had the East End been so alive theatrically speaking, and never before had it accommodated so many theatre women.<sup>13</sup> From a literal change of scene to some shared winter warmth, the

cultural and social work performed by the City and its kind were vital to the communities sustaining them. Further, as will be clear in what follows, it was work that placed women in a central role, demonstrating the extent to which, as David Francis Taylor notes, managers 'inflected every level of production'.<sup>14</sup>

### The Vestris of the East: Mrs Honey, 1837–38

Opened at Easter 1837, the City of London Theatre stood in the ancient Liberty of Norton Folgate, a part of Shoreditch known for its non-conformist attitudes and Huguenot-inspired silk-weaving. Corresponding to a rapidly expanding population, the City was typical of the sort of speculative minor playhouse that sprang up in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The brainchild of Christopher Cockerton, an oil and vinegar merchant who had previously had dealings with the Olympic, the 1,350-seat City was intended to meet more than just local demand. It was designed by Samuel Beazley, the architect responsible for the Lyceum and St James's theatres, and was meant to attract custom from the developing eastern suburbs, while also reaching westwards (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup> The City made this intention clear with its opening production, the satirical burletta titled *The Pickwick Club; or, The Times We Live In*. Starring the Adelphi's John Wilkins as the lovable cockney Sam Weller, it was the first of numerous adaptations of Dickens by Edward Stirling. Now best known for his work with the Keeleys, this consummate man of the stage played a key role at the City under Mrs Honey.<sup>17</sup>

Laura Honey was born in 1816 to a Sadler's Wells actress going by the name of Mrs Young. As Laura Bell, she appeared with her mother at the Olympic in the mid-1820s and, by 1829, was back at the Wells. She remained there until the summer of 1831, at which point she married a lawyer's clerk called William Honey. Now as Mrs Honey, she was recruited to the Strand Theatre by Harriet Waylett. Favourably compared to a young Madame Vestris (with whom she later appeared), she was subsequently engaged at the



Figure 1. The City of London Theatre, c. 1837. Author's collection.

Adelphi, where she achieved her West End breakthrough as Slykey/Psyche in the hit burlesque *Cupid!* in October 1832. She was, by this point, permanently estranged from her husband, although she continued to support him financially and astutely retained the name Honey, which would soon become synonymous with light comedy and fantasy-musical extravaganzas.<sup>18</sup>

Admired by Princess Victoria for her 'lovely' dresses,<sup>19</sup> Honey also developed a sideline in breeches parts such as Captain Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*. Honey traded on both her physical charms and increasingly racy reputation, and so followed in the path of Vestris, who had made such roles her own in the previous decade. By the time she arrived at the City, Honey was probably best known as Irma from the romantic operetta *The Spirit of the Rhine*, and for her liaison with the turf-loving (and married) Sixth Earl of Chesterfield.<sup>20</sup> Although partly the agent of her own celebrity, she occupied what has been termed the 'borderland territory between fame and

disgrace', and was frequently exposed to the sort of salacious gossip and innuendo that furnished the likes of the *Crim. Con. Gazette*. One especially obscene joke linked her to the Duke of Wellington.<sup>21</sup>

Exactly when Honey decided on the City is not known, but sometime in August 1837 an agreement was made with Cockerton to join him in partnership for the upcoming season. In the meantime, Stirling was hired as stage manager and writer. His short comedy, *Woman's the Devil*, had recently played at the Victoria, with Honey taking three of the roles.<sup>22</sup> This temporary move south of the river, and the brief regional tour that followed, show that she was not entirely bound to central London and, like many of her contemporaries, would happily follow the work.

The wish to be 'queen-bee of her own establishment'<sup>23</sup> is readily explicable, offering, as it did, a steady and fixed run of engagements, as well as kudos of title and the chance to follow role models such as Waylett and Nisbett. Indeed, another young actress, called Miss Desborough, made this move at precisely the same moment as Honey. Engaged by Cockerton for his opening season at the City, Desborough subsequently moved to the Theatre Royal in Richmond, and from there had launched herself into management at the Queen's. She began her new role on the same day as Honey.<sup>24</sup>

Despite being billed to give the opening-night address on 16 October, Honey did not appear at the City for another week owing to 'indisposition' (rumours had her at the races with Chesterfield).<sup>25</sup> Honey then issued her manifesto between a melodrama and a farce, the latter featuring the Surrey comedian Samuel Vale and the up-and-coming tragedian Charles Dillon. Predictably making play with her name – the City was now her 'little hive' – her address closed on a confident note: 'Tell them in the West this thing at least, / The drama's star is rising in the East.'<sup>26</sup> Of course, the City's star had to be seen more fully for this to have any chance of happening. The premiere of Stirling's adaptation of Byron's *Don Juan* at the end of the month was a carefully calibrated attempt to achieve this.

Hailed by the *Sunday Times* as the best piece of theatre 'eastward of Temple Bar', it successfully drew an audience from beyond the surrounding neighbourhood.<sup>27</sup> This was largely down to Stirling's lively production, complete with a guns-blazing English man-of-war, and Honey's striking performance. In a classic display of sexually ambiguous female cross-dressing, the hero-heroine was simultaneously 'a most dangerous lady-killer' while giving free rein to her 'natural and artistic beauties'.<sup>28</sup> Innocent enough for a respectable family audience – the removal of the action to Spain, Greece, and Turkey helped in this – it also had plenty of erotic charge for the local 'young bucks' as well as sensual pleasure-seekers from further afield (Figure 2).<sup>29</sup>

*Don Juan* became the mainstay of the City for the rest of the year, where it was paired with other Stirling creations such as *Woman's the Devil* (Honey played both Lady Brilliant and Captain Fitzbombshell), and such popular dramas as J. B. Buckstone's *Luke the*



Figure 2. 'Mrs Honey as *Don Juan*' (1837). Courtesy of the Museum of London.



*Labourer*. The company was also strengthened with the addition of Leonora Pincott. Better known as Mrs Alfred Wigan, she would later co-manage several West End theatres.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, Miss Desborough's management of the Queen's had lapsed into a series of shoddy equestrian dramas starring an 'unhappy quadruped' that was thought to be fitter for the knacker's yard than the stage. The venture folded just before Christmas, with the unpaid landlord seizing back the theatre.<sup>31</sup>

While Desborough's fate was being sealed, it was announced that the management of the City was to be Honey's alone. Stirling would continue in his current post and Cockerton remained the owner, but from Boxing Day onwards Honey would be the theatre's sole lessee.<sup>32</sup> The start of 1838 saw her in another breeches role with the operatic spectacle *The Page of Palermo* and Pincott playing in a farce by Stirling. Honey and Pincott also played together in the short comedy *Seventy and Seventeen*, with Honey playing the same character in both youth and old age.

Although some thought her management style 'judicious' and 'elegant', critics often complained about the theatre's distance from the centre of town and its past-midnight finishes.<sup>33</sup> Dissatisfaction was also expressed at the playing of 'cut and thrust melodramas' at the expense of more 'rational' entertainment.<sup>34</sup> Honey responded by pushing herself further to the front. In direct imitation of Vestris's Olympic, the City was advertised as 'Mrs Honey's City of London Theatre', while its programme incorporated various light comedies that were first performed at Wych Street.<sup>35</sup> Further seeking to bring the West End to the City, Honey also took on roles previously played by Harriett Taylor at the Haymarket and Mrs Nisbett at the Adelphi, and revived one of her own hits by playing Irma in *The Spirit of the Rhine*.

If statements such as 'too good for the knaves of Norton Folgate' should be taken with a pinch of orientalist salt, one senses a management struggling to find its mark as it headed into spring 1838.<sup>36</sup> By the time that Honey was billed in Thomas Dibdin's 1817 burlesque of *Don Giovanni*, an Easter move

to the St James's Theatre had already been confirmed. While this relocation appeared lucrative – Honey was reported to be on £40 a week – she was, nevertheless, exchanging the prestige of management for a return to the ordinary ranks.<sup>37</sup> Honey would remain an actress until her death in 1843. Her last engagement, ironically, was at the City.

Beyond jokes about the 'eccentric earl' longing for purer air, one explanation for Honey's departure from the City was that her lesseeship had not proved as profitable as anticipated, a point supported by reports of her losing £1,000.<sup>38</sup> But if Honey incurred such losses, she was not alone. From Desborough to Warner and Vestris herself, theatre management guaranteed no returns. Honey was also not alone when it came to the City. Easily outdoing both her and the Honners, the playwright and serial speculator Frederick Fox Cooper failed twice in the space of a single year in 1844.

It should also be stressed that Honey's time at the City was far from discreditable. With the help of Edward Stirling, and with a decent company behind her, some good-quality productions were staged. Through her management, Honey showed that, when it came to evenings at the City, being of the east did not occlude the west. The main problem with Honey's approach was an inability to play consistently to local demand while simultaneously drawing a wider audience. However broad the appeal of cross-dressed novelties such as *Don Juan*, they could only be sustained for so long. In increasingly difficult times, the average City playgoer would come to care less for an East End Vestris than for a more relatable type of heroine.

### **The Newsvendor's Daughter: Eliza Vincent, 1838–41**

In the spring of 1833, two promising young actresses appeared at the Haymarket for the first time. One was Honey and the other was Miss Eliza Vincent, who played twin sisters Fanny and Jane Matcher in the Buckstone comedy *Open House* (Figure 3). Although both had their supporters, it was generally felt that in displaying 'much of the archness and spirit



**Figure 3.** Honey and Vincent in *Open House* (1833). Dicks' Standard Plays. Courtesy of British Library Board.

of Vestris', the show belonged to Honey. In the suitably playful 'No I'll Not Have You', she had also been given the catchier song to perform.<sup>39</sup> While the piece was judged to be an agreeable entertainment, youthful rivalry turned to bitter feud, and within weeks of her arrival, Vincent left the Haymarket. Yet, if Honey got the better of Vincent on this occasion, it was Vincent who got to be queen in what Kerry Powell calls the 'Alice-in-Wonderland world of the stage'.<sup>40</sup>

The daughter of a South London news-vendor, Vincent was born in Lambeth in 1815. Although she appears to have lacked the familial links to the theatre that were often a determining factor for would-be actresses, she took the lead in the Drury Lane

fairy-drama *Oberon; or, The Charmed Horn* in 1826 and played with Macready in *William Tell*. By the end of the decade, Vincent was firmly established at the Surrey, and in 1831 joined three future managers of the City – Osbaldiston, Honner, and Nelson Lee – in a partially sung version of *Macbeth*, the musical parts of which were designed to circumvent existing patent-house restrictions. She also appeared as the dreamy maid, Sally Sigh-about, in Edward Fitzball's ingenious murder-drama *Jonathan Bradford*, one of the Surrey's greatest triumphs.

Returning to the Haymarket in 1836, she appeared with Harriett Taylor (Lacy) in *The Rivals*, and later that year was at Covent Garden as *Thalaba the Destroyer*, Fitzball's

adaptation of Robert Southey's epic poem complete with 'gigantic' bulls and a 'living' camel.<sup>41</sup> The theatre was then under Osbaldiston's controversially populist management and, having become his partner in more ways than one, his subsequent move to Sadler's Wells inevitably brought Vincent to Islington.<sup>42</sup> From here it was a short step to the City, to which they came in April 1838 to replace the outgoing Honey.

Although Osbaldiston was the official lessee and manager, and more than twice Vincent's age, there is little doubt that the direction of the theatre was shared. This was certainly the view of the *Crim. Con. Gazette*, which, as in the case of Honey and Chesterfield, had much to say about 'Ozzy' and the coquettishly demure 'poor Vincent' (Figure 4).<sup>43</sup> It is also clear that her influence grew over time as Osbaldiston-led pieces such as *Rob-Roy* gave way to the smaller-scale domestic dramas in which Vincent excelled.

In parts such as George Dibdin Pitt's *Susan Hopley* (produced at the Victoria, but rooted in their work at the City), Vincent was able to carry an audience's hopes and fears with her as the archetypal frail-but-spirited female in distress. If a play had been written about Alice Lowe, Vincent would likely have played the lead. Vital to her success with Dibdin Pitt was that in the inclusive presence of the news vendor's daughter, vicissitudes and victimization could be combined seamlessly with agency. Also, whereas Honey brought a sense of glittering archness to the stage, Vincent conveyed a passionate authenticity. One might compare the song she performed in *Open House*, 'True Love Lives Forever', to Honey's more flippant offering.<sup>44</sup>

The ability of hack dramatists such as Dibdin Pitt should not be underestimated. As well-versed in the ways of minor theatre as Vincent, with whom he had often played at the Surrey, he specialized in the sort of emotionally freighted work that required a highly externalized performance style. Effect, in this sense, was affect. Not so far removed from those he largely wrote for, Dibdin Pitt died in Shoreditch in 1855 in a lodging house



**Figure 4.** Vincent, the 'fallen angel'. *Crim. Con. Gazette* (23 March 1839). Courtesy of British Library Board.

frequented by weavers, an occupational group noted for their attendance at the City.

David Worrall's ideas on theatre as social assemblage are helpful in trying to understand the mix of writer, star performer, and local environment that resulted in powerful City dramas such as *Mary Clifford* and *Mabel Allison*, the latter of which also included Dibdin Pitt in the cast. Worrall argues that when 'chronological moment' is also factored in, 'the assemblage is the outcome of the interaction between the performer in the playhouse, the playhouse itself, and the playhouse audience'.<sup>45</sup> The City's occupation of a prominent public space in a densely populated commercial district, coupled with the



**CITY OF LONDON THEATRE**  
**BISHOPSGATE STREET.**

FOR THE  
**BENEFIT**  
 OF THE  
**BENEVOLENT SOCIETY,**  
 White Dog, Widegate Street, Bishopsgate.  
 For Distributing Bread and Coals to the Poor During the Severity of Winter.

ON  
**WEDNESDAY**  
**FEBRUARY 20<sup>th</sup> 1839,**

When will be presented an entirely New Domestic Drama, entitled  
**MARY CLIFFORD**

**THE**  
**Foundling Apprentice Girl!**

Mr. Brownrigg, (a House Painter) Mr. SMITH, John Brownrigg (his Son) Mr. DUNN,  
 Mr. Owen, (a Clerk) Mr. CAULFIELD, Mr. Deacon, (a Master Baker) Mr. RANSOM,  
 William Clifton, (his Apprentice, and afterwards) Mr. B. GREEN,  
 Mr. Dunbar, (a Grocer in Wantonness, a North Brother) Mr. JAMES, Wingrove, (a Constable) Mr. BOWDEN,  
 Lawyer Plumtree, (a Solicitor to the Foundling Hospital) Mr. GARDNER,  
 Dick Rowling, (after Richard Clifton) (Mary's Father) Mr. EDE,  
 Timms (Landlord of the Ship, Wharf) Mr. SCARBROW, (Mrs. Vincent's Mother) Mr. CAMPBELL,  
 Gilder, Mr. WILLIAMS, Tailor, Mr. LUFFKIN, (Mrs. Vincent's Mother) Mr. HENRY,  
 Mary Clifford, (The Foundling Apprentice Girl) (Mrs. Vincent's Mother) Miss VINCENT,  
 Mrs. Brownrigg, (a Friend in Human shape) MISS VINCENT,  
 Kitty Mitchell, (a fellow Pretence and fellow Sufferer) Mrs. G. LEE, Sarah, (Mary's Mother) Mrs. LOVEDAY,  
 Ellen (a Foundling Girl) Miss Young, Foundling Girls, Miss Sharpe, Miss Clifton, &c. &c.

**ACT First - The FOUNDLING.**  
 View of the **FOUNDLING HOSPITAL** and Lawn in Front.

**SONG - "Since then we part," - MISS VINCENT.**  
**SEABY APARTMENT IN MR. BROWNRIFFS HOUSE.**  
**INTERIOR OF BROWNRIFFS HOUSE IN FETTER LANE,**  
**and also of DEACON'S the Baker, - Now. - No. 12 & 13.**  
**INTERIOR OF BROWNRIFFS SHOP.**  
 THE COUNTER AND JOHN'S SLEEPING PLACE BENEATH.

Figure 5. Playbill for *Mary Clifford* (1839). Note its performance for a local benefit. Courtesy of Hackney Archives, ref. Y9733.

texts produced by Dibdin Pitt and the actors who performed them, saw it function in this way (Figure 5).

Further, in a crucial overlap of geography and timing, this was all beyond the reach of the Lord Chamberlain until 1843. As a writer who would suffer more than once at the hands of the censor, Dibdin Pitt thus enjoyed a welcome freedom from official control.<sup>46</sup> Whatever the politics of the City's principal creatives and management, and however radical, or not, the potential of domestic melodrama, at this particular moment in time the audience alone was the arbiter.

Between an interim version of *Nicholas Nickleby* in November 1838 and a full production of it in November 1840, Vincent and Dibdin Pitt collaborated on a remarkable series of dramas in an association that was so close it became the subject of spoof.<sup>47</sup> Vincent appeared in a range of parts, including as Dickensian

boys (Smike in *Nickleby* and Oliver in *Oliver Twist*) and as the criminal anti-heroes Jack Sheppard and Dick Turpin, both recently re-popularized in novels by William Ainsworth. She also represented her own sex, including the London apprentice-girl Mary Clifford, the Warwickshire poacher's wife Mabel Allison, and Agnes Primrose in *The Wreck of the Heart*, which was a reworking of Elizabeth Inchbald's socially critical 1796 novel *Nature and Art*.

In all of these plays, Dibdin Pitt was writing specifically for Vincent. Inviting the question as to how far City audiences were prepared to see their heroine suffer – whatever the gender of her role, she was always Miss Vincent – the stories upon which *Jack Sheppard* and *The Wreck of the Heart* were based were rewritten to ensure that her character survived. In Inchbald's novel, for example, the ruined Agnes Primrose is wrongly hanged as a felon, but in Dibdin Pitt's play she is not only pardoned but lives happily ever after.

Here one can see the kind of creative agency that influential actress-managers were able to exert, which, according to Jane Moody, render conventional notions of dramatic authorship a 'theatrical fiction'.<sup>48</sup> Moving well beyond the printed text, Vincent's all-singing, all-dancing Dick Turpin had a performative life of its own that was 'without the slightest trace of vulgarity'.<sup>49</sup> To further understand how Vincent's proxy co-authorship worked in practice, one might consider the drama of *Mary Clifford, the Foundling Apprentice Girl* and its immediate follow-up, *Mabel Allison; or, the Murder of Five Fields Copse*, later published by Dicks' as *Simon Lee*.<sup>50</sup>

The Newgate story of Mrs Brownrigg's torture and murder of Mary Clifford was a familiar one. The infamous figure of Mother Brownrigg, who was hanged in 1767, adorned a well-known display of curiosities in Holborn alongside an over-sized ostrich and models of Grimaldi and Cardinal Wolsey.<sup>51</sup> Yet, while drawing on the central details of the episode, Dibdin Pitt's 1839 version contains notable differences. In addition to a love interest and some long-lost parents, the drama makes significant use of Vincent's fresh-faced beauty



and attractive singing voice. Moreover, if Mary is doomed to suffer appalling abuse and cruelty, her fate is never passively accepted. 'Wretch, you forget yourself,' is her proud response to a coercive attempt at seduction by Brownrigg's son, a prelude to a daring attempt at escape. Later, she refuses to risk her sweetheart's life when he tries to save her own.<sup>52</sup> Forgiving Brownrigg's foul deeds, she dies in a state of empowered grace.

While the radical publisher Henry Hetherington thought the play 'morbid', the general view was that the City and Vincent scored a definite hit with *Mary Clifford*.<sup>53</sup> Taking Douglas Jerrold's 1829 tear-jerking *Black-Eyed Susan* as a referent, one reviewer reported an audience silently gripped by Mary's/Vincent's desperate plight, while another described how her 'natural and affecting style of acting' had 'much excited the tender bosoms of the Whitechapel auditors'.<sup>54</sup> The production was paired with *Mabel Allison* at the start of April, and by May it was being joked that, with the City so full every night, the notoriously stingy Osbaldiston could afford to pay off the national debt.

Needless to say, this prosperity was little felt by most of the City's patrons, people for whom low-paid casual labour and seasonal unemployment were a general fact of life. The playbill in Figure 5 above advertises a cold-weather benefit performance aimed at providing 'Bread and Coals' for the local poor. Produced shortly before the first Chartist petition, *Mabel Allison* combined a fierce attack on the game laws with the abuses of landed wealth and the dire effects of want on settled family life.<sup>55</sup> Central to the drama is the wife of a poacher sentenced to death for killing a keeper in self-defence, an act that brings the full force of class-based law into play.

Vincent was singled out for her telling performance as Mabel, and in delivering such lines as 'I come not now to beg for charity, but to demand justice', she expressed a key sentiment of those currently agitating for change.<sup>56</sup> As with other melodramas, the swooning collapses that punctuate the action were less the product of the character's inherent female weakness than the manifestation of

the actress as a 'site of extremity'.<sup>57</sup> Physically embodying the conflicts driving the narrative, Mabel's/Vincent's shocking act of self-destruction brings resolution at a terrible price. News of her husband's reprieve comes just as she takes a fatal dose of poison, providing a memorable *coup de théâtre*. Fifteen years later, Vincent was still playing the role at the Victoria Theatre, where she had become sole lessee and directress following Osbaldiston's demise in 1850, and where she remained until her own death in 1856. If Vincent helped to make the City, the City (and Dibdin Pitt) was also the making of Vincent.

### Bringing Sheridan to Shoreditch: Mrs Lacy, 1844

1844 was a vintage year for the wo-manager. With Keeley and Warner already established at the Lyceum and Sadler's Wells, respectively, it was reported in early autumn that Madame Céleste had taken joint-charge at the Adelphi with Benjamin Webster, and that Mrs Walter Lacy (Harriett Taylor) had entered into management at the City of London. Within this 'age of female regime', or what her opening address referred to as the end of the theatre's 'Salic law', Lacy's brief spell as directress at the City has passed largely unnoticed.<sup>58</sup>

The most socially elevated of the City women examined here, Harriett Taylor was born into a comfortable family of London wine merchants in 1807. From her first appearance at Covent Garden in 1830 to her marriage to the actor Walter Lacy in 1839, she was a fixture on the legitimate West End stage. She was part of the original cast of Sheridan Knowles's hugely successful *The Hunchback* in 1832 and played Nell Gwynne in Douglas Jerrold's eponymous comedy in 1833. Later that year, she played the lead role of Felicia in Jerrold's hit *The Housekeeper* at the Haymarket, where she was recognized for her ability to blend archness with depth of feeling (Figure 6). As such, she shared the bill with Laura Honey, who was then performing in *Open House* with Vincent's drafted-in replacement, Mrs Humby.



**Figure 6.** Harriett Taylor in Douglas Jerrold's *The Housekeeper* (1833).

In addition to playing with Vincent at the Haymarket in 1836, the future Mrs Lacy appeared as Sally Sighabout in Osbaldiston's 1835 revival of *Jonathan Bradford* at Covent Garden, thus highlighting the densely associational culture of theatreland and the small number of professionals populating it. When Macready replaced Osbaldiston in 1837, a move greeted with relief by much of the dramatic establishment, Taylor was recruited to his company. Here she joined the rising star and Macready protégée Helen Faucit, along with Anne Humby and Mary Warner. She was still at Covent Garden in the early 1840s, now managed by Vestris and Mathews, and appearing under the name Mrs Walter Lacy. In 1842, Vestris and Mathews's final season at the theatre, Lacy appeared with Mathews and her husband in Jerrold's *Bubbles of the Day* and as Titania to Vestris's Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Lacy's final spell at Covent Garden was in the autumn of 1843. Undermined by its loss of patent-house privilege and embroiled in controversy over its use by the Anti-Corn Law League, Henry Wallack's management of the theatre collapsed after just one month. From this point until her re-emergence at the City the following October, Lacy more or less vanishes from the record, although several reports linked her to the relaunch of Sadler's Wells.<sup>59</sup> While this scheme amounted to nothing, it is possible that it gave Lacy the seed of doing something for herself. What is clear, however, is that a new model for Lacy to follow and be judged against had emerged courtesy of Phelps and Warner's success at the Wells in 1844, where it seemed that Shakespeare had 'extinguished Ainsworth' overnight.<sup>60</sup>

While redemptive accounts of Phelps and Warner to the rescue are questionable, the nature of their experiment was, at the very least, striking.<sup>61</sup> Taking full advantage of the 1843 legislation, the theatre presented the full range of the English dramatic canon, and plays like *Macbeth* (the opening Phelps/Warner production) could be played straight, free from singing witches or other monopoly-subverting devices. It could also be played to a non-West End audience, a fact that did not escape the notice of the City's owner, Christopher Cockerton.

Following the departure of Osbaldiston and Vincent in 1841, the City had undergone numerous changes of management, and by the summer of 1844, Cockerton was back in charge. Always more comfortable in a back-seat role, he recruited a Haymarket actor called Wilson to become the new lessee at the beginning of September, who, in turn, secured the services of Lacy as directress. The revival of the nation's drama would thus continue at the suitably renamed City of London National Theatre, where 'fustian and rubbish' would go and, with an emphasis on classic comedy and farce, it would offer the best of old and new.<sup>62</sup>

The City re-opened on 7 October 1844 with *The School for Scandal*, plus Gilbert A Beckett's *Aladdin*, a topical burlesque recently staged at

the Lyceum.<sup>63</sup> With Lacy playing the part of Lady Teazle, the new enterprise initially drew comparison with Sadler's Wells. The following week Lacy presented Thomas Holcroft's *The Road to Ruin*, and for the third week of the season, Lacy and Wilson shared the stage in Hannah Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem*, which was first seen at Drury Lane in 1780. Once again, *Aladdin* served as the afterpiece. The Wilson/Lacy partnership was, however, already in trouble. Going into this week, the company was on half-salaries and, by its end, the curtain had fallen for the final time. The attempt to bring Sheridan to Shoreditch had lasted less than a month.<sup>64</sup>

Several points present themselves when considering why Lacy's foray into theatre management failed so quickly. First, the social and demographic conditions at Sadler's Wells were not present at the City. Whatever the personal qualities that Phelps and Warner brought to leafy North-East London, they were met with a self-consciously respectable audience already predisposed to their project.<sup>65</sup> The attraction of *Aladdin* at the City owed as much to the celebrated low-comedian George Wild as it did to clever writing. Coming as the afterpiece, it was also charged at half-price.

Second, as would-be supportive reviewers observed, the actors and resources required to produce engagingly delivered eighteenth-century comedy were largely absent. Even if audiences wanted a change from the 'flash, swindling, or blue fire school' – and there is no evidence that they did – they were not getting the best of Sheridan and Holcroft in production terms.<sup>66</sup> With 'inferior classes' substituting for 'knaves', the criticism that the programmes lacked the necessary grip and excitement was not altogether unfair.<sup>67</sup>

Without the glamour of Laura Honey or the relatability of Vincent, and with a partner about whom nothing much is known, it seems that Lacy had little chance of succeeding. Talented but not a star, Lacy was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Back in the West End, she played out her career in Sheridan, Knowles, and Shakespeare. But did Lacy fail entirely? In what might be read as a piece of reverse-Orientalism, an 1855 account of

theatre in the 'Great Far East' recalled a night at the City eleven years earlier. 'On that night Sheridan's *School for Scandal* was played, and right well played too; but the fun upon the stage was nothing to the fun that danced in the people's eyes and roared out in boisterous music from their lips.'<sup>68</sup> If Sheridan's stay in Shoreditch was brief, it was not altogether forgettable.

### A Host in Herself: Mrs Honner, 1845–48

In the autumn of 1839, theatres in London were full of the outlaw Jack Sheppard. But while some presented cross-dressed Sheppards, and others played it straight, under the overlooked management of the Honners, Sadler's Wells took a different course. Exemplifying their collaborative approach to drama, Maria Honner played Sheppard as the young apprentice and her husband Robert played the jail-breaking adult. Boasting advice from George Cruikshank on sets and costume (he had provided the illustrations for Ainsworth's novel), the Honners' five-act rendering of the story combined artistic intent with full-blooded action. Married in 1836, Maria and Robert Honner conscientiously served audiences across the capital for almost two decades. In committing to classy but entertaining theatre in the manner of their upscale analogues the Keeleys, the 'verve' and dramatic spirit found at the Lyceum between 1844 and 1847 were also to be found at the City, which the Honners managed between 1845 and 1848.<sup>69</sup>

Maria Macarthy was born in Enniskillen in 1808 and was the daughter of the actor-managing campaigner against theatre monopoly, Eugene Macarthy. After making her name in Dublin, she arrived in England in 1831. From the Pavilion, she moved to Sadler's Wells in 1833, and it was here that she met Robert Honner. Still as Maria Macarthy, she moved with Honner (and her father) to the Surrey in 1835, and in 1838, as Mrs Honner, was back at Sadler's Wells, where her husband had succeeded Osbaldiston as lessee. Mixing carefully curated revivals with popular new works such as Greenwood's *Paul the Pilot*, the Honners gained a reputation for





**Figure 7.** Honner as Mary in *Paul the Pilot* (1839). Cumberland's Minor Theatre. Courtesy of British Library Board.

consistently good acting and staging during the four years that they ran the Wells. Possessed of both 'soul and mind', Honner's performances were routinely given special notice, with reviewers puzzling as to why she had not migrated to one of the patents (Figure 7).<sup>70</sup>

Brought to the Surrey as an acting-managing pair by Frances Davidge in 1842, the Honners continued to promote well-made entertainment over the next three years. Showing her full dramatic range, Honner played opposite the great T. P. Cooke in *Black-Eyed Susan*, was Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and performed as Lady Teazle in a benefit performance for Davidge.<sup>71</sup> Yet, as prominent as the Honners were at the Surrey, it still remained Davidge's theatre. However, in the wake of Fox Cooper's second disastrous attempt at running the City, in the autumn of 1845 its lease was again up for grabs. Intriguingly, at this point, not only was Cockerton reported to be in negotiations with Honner, but also with Walter Lacy. Whatever the truth of this, at the end of October it was Maria

Honner who gave the opening address at a theatre that was now held in the family name.<sup>72</sup>

Written by the composer and playwright C. Z. Barnett, the address centred largely on the sorry state into which the City had fallen. In July, an investigation by the police had found it to be a dirty and disorderly establishment, apparently frequented by prostitutes and various known criminals.<sup>73</sup> Pledging that through 'our strong endeavour' the City's fortunes would be restored, the Honners promised responsible management, thoughtful programming, and attention to detail. Or, as the Honner-supporting *Theatrical Journal* put it, the pistols would 'go off' and the lanterns would be real.<sup>74</sup>

Fondly recalled as 'a host in herself', the new regime relied heavily on its leading lady. In a fortnight in December 1845, she could be seen in *The Hunchback*, *Othello*, *Venice Preserved* (then a great favourite at minor theatres), a Scottish melodrama called *The Whistler*, and *Jane Shore*.<sup>75</sup> Offering a touch of light relief, and some much needed respite for Honner, the American novelty act General Tom Thumb also appeared on the bill. Featuring the characters Starve, Wantcoat, and Nogrub, alongside references to the Andover workhouse scandal, the year concluded with the satirical pantomime *Harlequin King Lud of Ludgate*.<sup>76</sup> Bearing out their intention to raise the City's tone, it also ended with reports of a more engaged and respectable audience.

Going into the new year, the Honners looked to build on this improving situation. Capitalizing on the popularity of Dickens's *The Cricket on the Hearth*, which had been a Christmas hit at the Lyceum, Maria Honner took the role of Dot Peerybingle, and Robert that of Caleb Plummer, which were characters now firmly associated with the Keeleys. On this occasion, the Honners were excused of crude imitation and saw their own performances warmly commended. Of Honner's Dot, 'a more happy, cordial, kind, loving, bustling little body it would be impossible to conceive', while her husband made 'a most judicious representative of Caleb'.<sup>77</sup>

With seasonal Dickens now all the rage, the Honners sought to replicate their success

the following year with *The Battle for Life*, a staging of which the author had personally overseen at the Lyceum a month earlier. Yet, while Douglas Jerrold deemed the City's effort 'skilful', including well-painted winter scenery and an excellent performance from Honner as Clemency Newcombe, others were less impressed.<sup>78</sup> Placing the cast-lists side by side, the *Sunday Times* drily observed that they were not, in fact, Mr and Mrs Keeley, and advised them to stick to their own line.<sup>79</sup>

Whether Dickens was their line or not, the irony here is that immediately prior to *The Battle for Life*, the Honners had staged one of the most striking and original dramas yet seen at the City, *Le Docteur Noir*, which was a production of the show then 'electrifying all Paris'.<sup>80</sup> Adapted from the French by Thomas Archer, whose previous work included *A Night at the Bastille*, the play was unusually liberal in its heroizing of the central character, Fabien, and his doomed but reciprocated love for the aristocratic Pauline de la Reynerie. In what became a signature role for Ira Aldridge, the part of Fabien was taken by Thomas Lyon, and that of Pauline by Maria Honner.

The part provided Honner with a large and sympathetic part, and 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?' At the end of the drama, Fabien dies in the arms of his wife, her clandestine marriage the means of her own salvation.<sup>81</sup> The piece was well reviewed in *The Era*, which described both admirable playing and a 'crowded and exceedingly respectable audience', and was taken up by local Chartists, who booked it for a benefit performance in November 1846.<sup>82</sup> Running across the month, it also inspired several imitations, not least at the Victoria, where Eliza Vincent played Pauline.

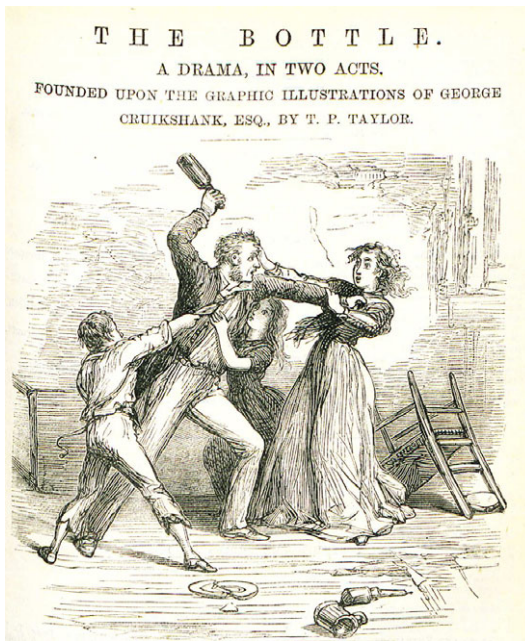
One reason for Chartism's renewed growth in London in the mid-1840s was the sharp decline in average real wages, a development that guaranteed to put pressure on East End theatre managements.<sup>83</sup> Compelled to match an initiative launched by the nearby Standard

Theatre, the Honners announced the halving of the City's prices shortly before the opening of *The Black Doctor*: a box could now be had for a shilling and a seat in the gallery for just threepence. However, in adopting this painful expedient, the Honners insisted that in terms of costume, scenery, and appointments, 'authority would still mark the production of every piece', a determination fully evident in their painstaking presentation of George Cruikshank's *The Bottle*.<sup>84</sup>

Published in the summer of 1847, *The Bottle* was Cruikshank's most sustained attempt at a stand-alone narrative. A Hogarthian study of 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, *The Bottle* cried out to be dramatized.<sup>85</sup> Not alone in seeing its potential (Dibdin Pitt and Mrs Denvil also produced versions), the Honners again claimed the creative support of Cruikshank in using T. P. Taylor's adaptation. Thus, with the 'whole of the tableau under [his] personal superintendence', what effectively became the official version of *The Bottle* opened at the City in the first week of October.<sup>86</sup>

As Ruth, a woman dragged down by her husband's addiction, Honner confronted a different Richard Thornley each night.<sup>87</sup> In a piece of staging designed to flatter egos as much as to add variety, Lyon and E. F. Saville shared the part of the good husband, turned drunkard, turned wife-killer (Figure 8).

With its finely detailed realizations of Cruikshank and the novelty of the alternating Thornleys, *The Bottle* was still drawing crowded houses the following month. But success came at an unaffordable price. Known for their generous liberality with actors and set design, squaring the circle of 'authority' with lower-price admission ultimately became impossible. In June 1848, the Honners were declared insolvent with debts approaching £2,000.<sup>88</sup> Ever the theatre couple, their final performance at the City was in the nautical drama *My Poll and My Partner Joe*. At its conclusion, they danced a double hornpipe. The pair continued to perform at the Standard until Robert Honner's death in 1852. Maria



**Figure 8.** Tableau Six in T. P. Taylor's *The Bottle*. Dicks' Standard Plays [c. 1880]. Courtesy of British Library Board.

Honner was rarely seen on the stage again before her own death in 1870.

## Conclusion

Responding to the sudden death of Laura Honey in April 1843, the Wapping-born poet and activist James Elmslie Duncan put his feelings of loss into verse. He was not alone in doing so. A week after her passing, the twopenny *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* carried the following anonymous lines: 'She falls, she passes to the tomb, / Not in the course of slow decay, / But in the glory of her bloom, / And in the zenith of her day.'<sup>89</sup> Much can be gleaned from this poem, written by an unknown hand and about a largely forgotten actress. Chiefly, it reveals that figures such as Honey, along with the other City women discussed here, had a public to whom their personalities and performances mattered greatly. For a largely disenfranchised audience, the cultural work of these women combined sympathy and recognition with distraction and empowerment. 'Bray-vo, Vincent! Got it, my tulip!' was the

gallery's cry to their beloved heroine later recorded by Henry Mayhew.<sup>90</sup>

Traceable through press reports and playbills, biographical sketches and printed illustrations, the presence of these women was considerable. The marginality conferred on them by history in no way reflects their visibility and standing. Moreover, in what Honner's father called a 'vast and enlightened metropolis', they were active at a time when the chances of turning a reputation for performing into theatre management were unusually high.<sup>91</sup> While talk of male managers being 'evidently at a discount' was a conscious exaggeration, the 'fair speculatrix' was given a good run for her and/or her partner's money, as has been shown at the City.<sup>92</sup> In this sense, and anticipating the likes of Alice Marriot and Sara Lane, it was not just female writers in the East End who were 'remarkably visible', but actress-managers too.<sup>93</sup>

Vincent was the only one of the quartet to fully succeed at the City, and to do so she relied not only on Osbaldiston's hard-headed business sense, but also on Dibdin Pitt's gifts as a writer. It is just these kind of 'interdependencies' that need to be mapped if the record of female management is to be understood fully.<sup>94</sup> Also, with theatre failures being especially high in London in the 1830s and 1840s, the losses sustained by Honey and the Honners, as well as Lacy's swift withdrawal from the City, need to be placed in context. This was certainly a time of opportunity, but it was also one of increased exposure to risk. Although the City's management stabilized with the arrival of Johnson and Lee in 1848, the key question for Cockerton during its early years of business was who could make a go of it. For the oil and vinegar merchant turned theatre impresario, basic economics trumped gender.

Whether these City women succeeded commercially or not, the chief beneficiaries were the playgoers who shared in the nightly dramas that they created. Simultaneously embodying the wider drama of social change, they and the period's other wo-managers are not just important to the understanding of nineteenth-century British theatre, but to the very nature of the times that they lived and worked in.



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