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Disrupting the Quotidian: Hoaxes, Fires, and Non-theatrical Performance in Nineteenth-century London

In this essay Jim Davis considers two examples of everyday non-theatrical performance in nineteenth-century London: hoaxes and fires. Whereas an element of hoaxing can be perceived in some contemporary performance events and in the practice of 'invisible theatre', usually with some ethical intention, hoaxes in early nineteenth-century London were perpetrated for the sake of creating disruption and making dupes of unsuspecting witnesses. A more visible form of disruption and spectacle was created by fires and fire-fighting itself, which, at least after Captain Eyre Massie Shaw took control of the London fire brigade, became a form of public performance. Although hoaxes were common in pantomime and farce, and conflagrations often strengthened the impact of sensation melodramas, the disruptive effects of extra-theatrical hoaxes and fires on everyday life created a less reassuring and more dystopian sense of the metropolis. An earlier version of this paper was originally delivered at 'The Audience through Time' conference at Queen Mary College, University of London, in December 2011. Jim Davis is Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Warwick. His his most recent books are *Victorian Pantomime: a Collection of Critical Essays* (2010) and *Lives of the Great Shakespearian Actors: Edmund Kean* (2009). He is also joint author of *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatre-going 1840–1880* (2001).

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TRACY C. DAVIS has usefully called the nineteenth century 'the performing century'.[1] Not only were a wide range of theatrical performances available, but outside of the theatre there was also much that could be described as theatrical and performative, whether with reference to the itinerant street performers interviewed by Henry Mayhew, characters in novels (and not only those created by Dickens), the quasi-theatricality of nineteenth-century genre and narrative painting, or the everyday urban experience of spectators, whose way of looking at the world around them had been formed, in many instances, by their experiences as theatrical spectators.

In this article I propose to review and discuss two very specific cases of non-theatrical spectatorship during the nineteenth century, both of which raise interesting, if contrasting, ethical issues – first, hoaxes, and second, fires. The hoax is not a new phenomenon, although, insofar as it succeeds, it is because its spectators are not even aware it is taking place. It is, essentially, a form of invisible theatre, although not in the very specific and politically loaded sense, say of Boal's concept of invisible theatre – although all manifestations of invisible theatre perpetrated by Boal and his followers might possibly be described as hoaxes. The hoax has become a recurrent feature of contemporary performance and performance art, although the word 'hoax' is not often applied – famous examples would be Guillermo Gomez Pena's and Coco Fusco's 'Couple in the Cage' or the *Foreigners Out! Schlingensief's Container* installation in Vienna – both of which, like Boal's invisible theatre, have serious underlying political and/or social intentions.[2] As such one may justify them, perhaps, because they are underscored by a serious ethical purpose.

So what about hoaxes that are not ethical in intent and which cause massive disrup-

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Theodore Hook. Portrait from *The Life and Remains of Theodore Hook*, Volume I, ed. R. H. Dalton Barham, 1877.

tion and/or make fools of their unwitting participants? I wish to consider two such instances: the Berners Street Hoax, as perpetrated by Theodore Hook in 1809, and Charles Mathews the elder's assumption of the role of the Spanish Ambassador just a few years earlier.

Theodore Hook and the Berners Street Hoax

Theodore Hook was a playwright, novelist, and practical joker (and later a Governor of Mauritius, a post from which he returned to England in disgrace because of alleged financial improprieties). In 1809, at the age of twenty-one, he was responsible for the Berners Street hoax, aided and abetted by two anonymous friends, one of whom reputedly became quite a celebrated actress. In his life of Hook, Barham describes how:

A quarter of the town was disturbed – a whole street was thrown into a state of uproar, which lasted from morning till night – hundreds of individuals, servants, artisans, tradesmen, great and small, from all parts of London, professional men from every class, not to speak of princes, potentates, and nobles of high degree, swelled the catalogue of the victims; the police were employed to trace out the delinquents; rewards were offered for their apprehension.[3]

Six weeks were spent on the preparation of the hoax and around four thousand letters were dispatched, all inviting the recipients to call at the house of a Mrs Tottenham, who resided at 54 Berners Street, at various times on the same day.

On the morning in question the house was beset by chimney sweeps, coal wagons (which quickly blocked the thoroughfare), pastry chefs bearing wedding cakes, tailors, boot makers, undertakers with coffins, draymen with beer barrels, doctors with instruments for the amputation of limbs, lawyers, clergymen, tooth-drawers, and portrait painters. Carts bearing upholsterers' goods, organs, pianos, linen, and jewellery also arrived, as well as wine-porters, barbers with wigs, mantua-makers with band-boxes, and eye-doctors with spectacles.

By noon the numbers had been increased by forty fishmongers bearing cod and lobsters and forty butchers with legs of mutton. Even the Lord Mayor arrived in his carriage, garbed in the full regalia of his office, as well as the Governor of the Bank of England, the Chairman of the East India Company, and the Duke of Gloucester. Police from the Marlborough Street police station were summoned to disperse the crowds and to keep any further tradesmen from entering Berners

Below and opposite page: contemporary views of the Berners Street Hoax.

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Street. The street was not cleared until late in the day, as servants in want of places had been encouraged to assemble at Berners Street in the late afternoon.

Although Hook was suspected to be perpetrator of the hoax, he had taken so many precautions that nobody was able to prove his involvement. He and his accomplices watched the events of the day from a rented apartment just across the road. One newspaper described the hoax as 'a very malignant species of wit'.[4] As well as its unwitting participants, it drew large crowds of spectators, who made the street and its surroundings even more impassable.

Spectators were apparently highly amused by the spectacle of so many duped tradesmen, although, apart from the time and earnings lost by a good many merchants and professionals, not to mention the chaos created in a then somewhat inaccessible area of London, there was much material damage. According to one account,

> there had been an awful smashing of glass, china, harpsichords, and coach panels. Many a horse fell, never to rise again. Beer-barrels and wine-barrels had been overturned and exhausted with impunity amidst the press of countless multitudes. It had been a fine field-day for the pickpockets.[5]

Perhaps the least savoury aspects of the hoax was the arrival of a coffin at the victim's house, made exactly to her measurements (above).

However invisible in its beginnings, the hoax, to which Hook covertly refers in his novel *Gilbert Gurney*, clearly became more and more visible as the day wore on and more and more victims and spectators amassed.[6] It

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was, in many ways, irresponsible, disruptive of public order, and perhaps cruel in the way it targeted its principal victim, who became increasingly disturbed by the events of the day. Apparently the hoax arose out of Hook's bet to a friend as they walked down Berners Street, that a particularly neat and quiet house of modest appearance, perhaps the domicile of a shopkeeper's widow, could be made the most famous dwelling in London. It also turned Berners Street into a public spectacle, full of unwitting performers and impromptu audiences.[7]

The Spanish Ambassador Hoax

At the time Hook was a close friend of the actor Charles Mathews the elder, who appeared in Hook's play *Killing No Murder* the same year as Buskin, an actor, who himself commits a series of hoaxes through the use of disguise. Mathews himself was no stranger to hoaxing, both in Hook's company, with others, or alone. As an actor Mathews was frequently described as Protean and sometimes compared to a chameleon, for, without resorting to costume or make-up, he could change his appearance and manner to such an extent that audiences and friends allegedly failed to recognize him.

Ann Mathews, his wife and biographer, describes one instance of this in her husband's extra-theatrical assumption of the garrulous Mr Pennyman, who fooled a number of their friends and acquaintances in the course of his unexpected visits. Indeed, Mathews was sometimes told that he had missed the chance of meeting a really extraordinary eccentric through being absent when Pennyman was in the room. After one occasion when the putative Pennyman had departed, Mathews returned, and after addressing his wife,

> turned round upon the rest of the party as the identical person they had been describing! The effect upon everyone was of unutterable surprise and it was several minutes before they could believe the evidence of their senses.[8]

The Spanish Ambassador hoax took place a few years before the Berners Street hoax and involved Mathews, Thomas Hill, proprietor of the *Monthly Mirror,* and some other, unspecified participants. Around this time there was much excitement about Ferdinand of Spain, and Mathews was persuaded to visit Woolwich in the guise of the Spanish Ambassador. They proceeded in two carriages, the 'Ambassador' in the first, until they arrived at an inn in Woolwich. Hill acted as interpreter and quickly informed the landlord of the rank of the person he was about to entertain. Mathews himself was dressed very conspicuously in a bright-green frock-coat, with orders and ribbons pinned across his chest, while on his head he wore a large cocked hat, with labels affixed proclaiming 'Viva Ferdinand', and a pair of green spectacles. He was followed along the streets of Woolwich by a cheering crowd of small boys. The local authorities, having got wind of his visit, informed him he was free to inspect whatever he liked and, on returning to the inn, he found:

> Every bit of plate that could be got together, not only belonging to the house, but as they afterwards learned, from the neighbourhood, was displayed in gorgeous array, to grace the visit of so distinguished a guest. The landlord and his family, and his servants, were all tricked out in their best attire, to wait upon the great man, whom they were all drawn out to greet upon his return, curtseying and bobbing to him.[9]

All of this was acknowledged by Mathews with grace and condescension, while talking in gobbledygook, which Hill translated, and occasionally in broken English. It was also made known to the innkeeper that the Ambassador required every article used in great quantities, whether they were forks, spoons, napkins, plates, or towels, while at the same time insisting on an exceptionally small room and bed in which to sleep, and on the next morning insisting on stale bread for breakfast.

The hoax continued with a river excursion, when a simple waterman was persuaded that he had on board the Spanish Ambassador, who partook of what purported to be lamp oil as refreshment during the journey. After the party had landed, Mathews decided that he had had enough of the hoax and under-

took the return journey as himself, encouraging the waterman to describe to him the Spanish Ambassador who had previously been aboard, whom, he learnt, was a 'werry personable man – not what in Hengland we should call 'ansome, but *werry personable*, and the *haffablest* cretor I ever seed in my life!' – although the Ambassador apparently made the waterman quite sick 'with his dirty Spanish ways'.[10] The hoax concluded without further incident and Thomas Hill subsequently commissioned a picture of Mathews in the guise of the Ambassador (right).

Ann Mathews, who recounts this occasion in her memoir of her husband, justifies such hoaxes, while acknowledging the problems they caused:

> In apology, if it need one, for Mr Mathews's early love of practical joking, hoaxing, etc. (a species of amusement very justly placed in the lowest scale of humour), I think it fair to urge, that at the period these scenes took place he had no other opportunity of exercising his inherent and irrepressible powers of representation! In his profession there had been no scope for their display: he performed only in the regular routine of plays and farces. The drama's laws, then rigid, forbade any mode by which his unique talents could posibly be exhibited; and his spirits were so exuberant, that it seemed a necessity rather than a choice that they should find egress by any mode that presented itself to his imagination. The extravagant acts . . . were, in fact, like so many safety valves.[11]

Charles Mathews as the Spanish Ambassador. From Ann Mathews, *Memoirs of Charles Mathews, Comedian*, II (1839), p. 76.

Such justification is quite difficult to countenance insofar as such hoaxes showed an absolute contempt for ordinary citizens and tradesmen going about their everyday business; and they were largely made possible because of the privilege, class, leisure, or affluence of the perpetrators. While Mathews may have fulfilled some thwarted thespian need through such hoaxing, the advantage taken of his victims may seem less than acceptable.

In this case the hoax's spectators were Mathews's companions, while its unwitting performers were merely the butts of a practical joke dependent on their credulity and good nature. Behind the spectacle of both of the hoaxes described here one can see operating a total contempt for their victims and a power relationship based on class hierarchies. Both the Berners Street and Spanish Ambassador hoaxes created a form of invisible spectacle, while also deriving a rather superior amusement for those in the know from the behaviour of victims who are being unwittingly duped.

Fires as Spectacle

Yet if Hook and Mathews raise issues for us around the invisibility of actors and/or spectators and the ethics and definition of 'invisible' performance and spectatorship, the nature of fires as spectacle, especially when Eyre Massie Shaw was chief of the London fire brigade, raise substantially

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different issues around a much more public and visible form of spectatorship.

> They're coming, hurrying, rushing swift along,
> The wild tumultuous throng;
> For men still feel a breathless, fierce delight,
> In witnessing some dreadful sight.
> In torrents down each neighbouring street,
> They rush, and plunge, till in one spot they meet;
> And there, a close-wedged mass,
> Through which no more can pass,
> They gaze upon the fire:
> Oh, spectacle exciting,
> Their upraised faces lighting!
> Eager they watch the fire . . .
> Nicholas Michell, 'A London Fire'[12]

Fires were a frequent public spectacle in nineteenth-century London and throughout Britain, a hardly surprising state of affairs given the prominence of fire as a public spectacle throughout history and up to our own times. Destructive of human life and property, accidentally or deliberately caused, fires are disasters that elicit numerous and conflicting reactions from their spectators. There is something both ghoulish and hypnotizing in the human need to witness fire, from the English bonfire-night burning of human effigies to the 9/11 media saturation with the image of the two World Trade Center towers on fire.

There are also ethical lessons to be drawn, not only from the human impulse to 'spectate' fire, an impulse discussed in detail by Gaston Bachelard,[13] but also from notions of fire as a form of punishment (hell fire, the burning of Guy Fawkes, 'only the good surviving' as in the film *Towering Inferno*)[14] or the confronting and/or quenching of fire as performed public heroism. Alongside a fascination with fire is a fascination with light. Lynda Nead in *Victorian Babylon* argues that the coming of gaslight to nineteenth-century London turned urban streets into a stage set[15] and

> gave a new vitality to leisure after dark. The spectacle of brightly illuminated shop windows, dance-halls, and supper rooms was a distinctive feature of the metropolis during Victoria's reign and attracted large mixed audiences into the city through the night hours.[16]

The illumination of the streets themselves created a magnetic spectacle, as effective as fire itself in drawing spectators towards it. Yet fires still retained their own specific attraction as spectacle. A description of the Houses of Parliament on fire in 1834, as reported in *The Times*, provides a typical example. The conflagration

> attracted the attention not only of the passengers in the street, but, if we can judge from the thousands of persons who in a few minutes were seen hurrying to Westminster, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the metropolis. We scarcely ever recollect to have seen the large thoroughfare of the town so thronged before. Within less than half an hour after the fire broke out, it became impossible to approach nearer than the foot of Westminster bridge on the Surrey-side of the river, or the end of Parliament Street on the other, except by means of a boat or the assistance of a guide.[17]

Fire as Aesthetic Subject

We learn not only that multitudes of people flocked to the sight, but also that crowded boats floated on the Thames immediately in front of the fire and that countless numbers swarmed not only on the bridges but also on the roofs of houses. The spectacle, says *The Times*, was one of 'surpassing though terrific splendour', adding that the illumination of Westminster Abbey by the flames – it was night-time – would have attracted spectators in its own right.

The description often verges on the aesthetic, a frequent tendency in such accounts: 'Westminster-bridge, covered as it was with individuals, standing on its balustrades, was a curious spectacle, as the dark mass of individuals formed a striking contrast with the clean white stone of which it is built, and which stood out well and boldly, in the clear moonlight.'[18] Through the arches of the bridge spectators assembled in the strand before the Speaker's garden could also be discerned.

This event is memorialized in a series of prints, many of which provide a clear sense of the spectators gathered, and famously in a painting by Turner, who experienced the event from a boat on the Thames and who uses the densely packed crowd to frame his picture. Fires, especially on a large scale, continued to draw crowds, as prints of the burning of the Surrey Theatre in 1865 and of

the Exeter Theatre in 1887 attest. Police usually cordoned off a space in front of the fire, so the firemen could work uninterrupted by the spectators and, as in the case of the Surrey Theatre, the crowds could also be protected from red hot showers of burning materials.[19]

While far more is written about fire prevention, statistics concerning fires and the property damage they cause, the spectators are occasionally the subject of journalistic interest. A writer in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* describes how

> we have often, during our residence in the great capital [London], left our books and our comfortable chimney corner to observe not merely the fire, and the sublime spectacle which a huge one invariably offers, but the behaviour of the crowd, and to listen to the conversation of those whose curiosity was excited.[20]

Even on a cold December night people gathered at their doors and looked out of windows and ragged urchins rushed towards the supposed site of the fire. As fire engines sped past, they were followed by a crowd of pedestrians, chiefly 'young men and women eager to see this sight':

> Hundreds of thousands of people were astir in every quarter of the metropolis, many of them expressing the regret so common to the Londoners, that the conflagration was not in the immediate vicinity, that they might enjoy the excitement and the luxury of looking at it. Meantime the sky grew redder and redder. . . . Spiral shoots, as of immense volumes of sparks, were projected on the azure forehead of the sky; and at each deepening of the colour a shudder ran through the multitude.[21]

Given that this account is a prelude to a historical account of those who attempt to quench the light of heaven, it is probably fictitious, yet nevertheless grounded in fact.

The Fireman as Hero

The public act of fire-fighting was also a public performance of heroism. A description of the destruction by fire of the Windsor Hotel in New York in March 1899 exemplifies this perception, stating that:

> the annals of the New York fire brigade are full of a heroism which is unsurpassed in the history of chivalry. . . . New York is doubtless surfeited with their heroic daring. A great fire is a spectacle in which firemen are counted upon to distinguish themselves like soldiers in the presence of the enemy.[22]

This was exactly the language used of James Braidwood, the predecessor of Captain Eyre Massie Shaw as Head of the London Fire Service, when he died in action fighting a massive warehouse fire on Cotton's Wharf, Tooley Street, in 1861:

> The people have proclaimed that he who has just departed was as surely a great warrior and great general; that his whole life was as truly a great campaign as if, with a field marshal's baton in his hand, he had witnessed the shock of hostile armies and hurled his columns on advancing legions; that after a whole life spent in his dreadful elemental warfare, he fell as fitly and as nobly as any captain ever did when leading his men on to victory.[23]

Fire was a visible and regular spectacle in nineteenth-century London, often a performance event in its own right,[24] especially when Captain Shaw was chief of the London Fire

Captain Shaw: 'He has had a Busy Season'. Alfred Bryan, *The Entr'Acte Annual*, 1882–3.

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Shaw by Lionel Sambourne. *Punch*, 22 January 1881.

Service. Shaw, who moved from Belfast to take up his London position in 1861, was a phenomenally forceful man who single-handedly oversaw the reform and modernization of the London brigade, argued for greater precautions to be taken against fire in public buildings, wrote a treatise on fires in theatres, and was also something of a contemporary celebrity and heart-throb. Titled ladies often accompanied him on inspections of fire stations and he was cited, but found not complicit, in a notorious 1886 divorce case involving Lady Colin Campbell.

Four years earlier, in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*, the first night of which he attended, he was addressed directly by the Fairy Queen who, bemoaning her physical attraction to the mortal Private Willis, sings of her need to turn the hose of common sense on this fire that glows with heat intense, adding:

> Oh, Captain Shaw!
> Type of true love kept under!
> Could thy Brigade
> With cold cascade
> Quench my great love, I wonder![25]

The plea is then repeated by an entire chorus of fairies.

When Shaw took control of the London Fire Service fires also drew, as fire-fighters rather than spectators, members from the upper echelons of British society such as the Earl of Caithness, the Duke of Sutherland (the largest landowner in Britain), and even the Prince of Wales, for the entertainment of whose guests elaborate displays were often put on by the fire service. Shaw himself regularly attended all large and serious fires in full regalia, took life-threatening risks, was seriously injured on several occasions, was regularly drenched for his pains, and in some ways became the director of the spectacle, ensuring publicity for his brigades and a touch of glamour for himself.

While staying at Exeter, in the aftermath of the Exeter Theatre fire (opposite), Shaw was sent for when two fires broke out in houses opposite the theatre's ruins. We learn that:

> the activity shown by Captain Shaw was remarkable. He was here, there and everywhere, up ladders and down again in a moment. Nothing escaped his eye and the smartness with which he put the firemen through their duties was the subject of warm admiration on the part of the bystanders.[26]

Whereas Braidwood was genuinely heroic, Shaw arguably performed heroism with an eye to the impact he was making.

Unlike the heroic depiction of New York firemen in nineteenth-century American melodrama (a role reprised in real life in the immediate aftermath of 9/11), English melodrama seemed less susceptible to this particular sub-genre, although Dion Boucicault's reworking of *The Poor of New York* (1867) as *The Streets of London* (1874) is a potent reminder of how effective conflagration (and the on-stage arrival of an actual fire engine) was as a vehicle for sensation in numerous melodramas. As journalist and author Percy Fitzgerald wrote,

> now the glaring embers are seen, the walls crack with the heat, the charred rafters tumble down with a crash, the flames roar and blaze, the air is charged with a crimson glow; in fact it is impos-

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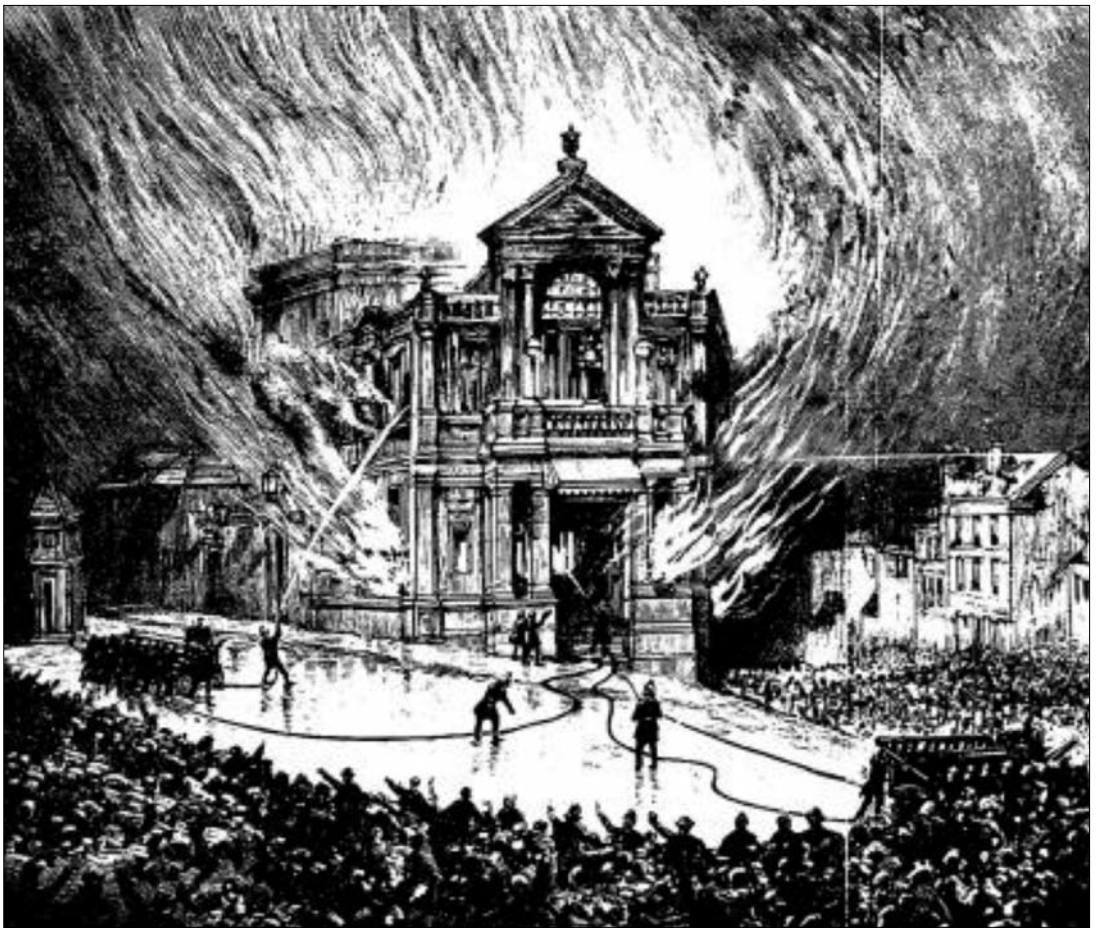

The Exeter Theatre fire from *The Graphic*, 10 September 1887, p. 294.

sible to distinguish the mimic from the real conflagration, so perfect is the imitation.[27]

Yet Shaw himself, as the heroic leader of his brigade, attending blazes across London, turned himself into something of a matinee idol or even melodramatic hero and fires and their extinguishing into a carefully managed public spectacle. He was no doubt canny in doing this, insofar as he was courting public approval for his reforms and innovations. Yet there is also something not just voyeuristic but perhaps even ghoulish in the need to be spectators at such events, a view reflected in some reactions to public fixation on the spectacle of the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers in 2001. So here, in the spectacle of actual nineteenth-century fires, the ethics of spectatorship inevitably emerges.

Interventions in the Ordinary

While we might wish to misappropriate the phrase 'disrupting the spectacle' as a way of describing what was happening here, I would argue that nineteenth-century hoaxes, fires and fire-fighting are more a matter of disrupting the quotidian, that they are interventions in the ordinary – unexpected spectacles and performances, accidental in the case of fires, often meticulously planned in the case of hoaxes, but soon turned into spectacle and quasi-performative events.

They raise interesting questions around non-theatrical spectatorship during the 'performing century' and the interaction between how people were trained to look in the theatre and how they looked at the world around them outside. Clowning in early nineteenth-century pantomime often depended for its

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comic humour on hoaxing, as did a great deal of nineteenth-century farce; sensation melodrama alerted its spectators to the pleasures of the spectacular, including fire. Life seems to be as much a continuation of theatre as theatre itself seems a continuation and distillation of life.

Yet hoaxes, when perceived as such, indicated to their spectators that nothing was necessarily as it seemed; fires reminded spectators of the instability of city life and that the apocalyptic spectacle of destruction was never far away. The containment of threat and the disruption and sense of reassurance offered in much of the fare available to London playgoers in the nineteenth century was not replicated in the streets. There, continuities became discontinuities and the challenges and deceptions of the quotidian emerged, visibly or invisibly, in unsettling and sometimes uncontrollable ways within the dystopian and ethically ambivalent environment of nineteenth-century London.

Notes and References

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3. R. H. Dalton Barham, *The Life and Remains of Theodore Edward Hook* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1877), p. 52.
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7. Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens's London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), p. 19–20, refers to the possibility, raised by Ann Mathews, that the Berners Street hoax was not the work of Theodore Hook, who should instead be associated with a quite different hoax which took place in Bedford Street.
8. Ann Mathews, *Memoirs of Charles Mathews, Comedian* (London: Richard Bentley, 1839), II, p. 8–20.
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