Jim Davis, *Comic Acting and Portraiture in Late-Georgian and Regency England.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 287; 76 b/w illus. £64.99. ISBN 9781107098855.

The Matthew-orama for 1827, which adorns the cover of Jim Davis's new book, encapsulates the reciprocity of low comedy and theatrical portraiture in the late-Georgian and Regency period and the melding of close observation and invention that drives comic genius. Despite the popularity of comic performers, the representation of comic actors has received surprisingly little attention, with the notable exception of Shearer West's *Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual Representation in the Age of Garrick and Kemble* (1991), which focuses on Garrick. Davis's meticulously researched study helps fill that gap and makes a compelling case for the broad cultural impact of low comedy, its close ties with the visual arts, and its key role in defining national and regional identity. Low comedy, featuring everyman characters such as farmers, sailors, and tradesmen, was dominated by male actors, who specialized in particular types, creating distinctive stage personae that were widely disseminated through portraits and theatrical prints. In turn, leading comic actors collected paintings and used painterly techniques to enrich their performances. The inclusion of portraits and caricatures, many from the author's own collection, speaks to the close connections between the visual and performing arts and the celebrity of comic actors.

Organized into four broadly thematic sections and sixteen chapters, the book reaches its climax with Mathews's 'At Homes' and Davis's insightful analysis of the debates about imitation and the creation of original characters. The author's in-depth knowledge of theatrical history and interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon archival materials such as letters and journals, as well as contemporary theatrical criticism and visual images, are particular strengths. In the first section, Davis establishes the central role of Hogarth and Zoffany in defining comic genius and setting the pattern for comic depictions. Although comic acting relied heavily on traditions and conventions, Davis makes a compelling case for the artistry and invention of a generation of comic actors, who increasingly relied on real-life observation and thematized their individuality and originality, much as contemporary artists like David Wilkie did. Portraits of comic actors surged in nineteenth-century periodicals, which often commissioned likenesses, as well as in graphic satire. Comedy, which had frequently been dismissed as inconsequential, was foregrounded in the writings of Thomas Wilkes and William Cooke and taken up by literary critics including Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt.

The second section examines individual comic performers, focusing on John Liston, whose face itself was comic. Celebrated for caricaturing preachers and cockneys, he was often criticized for descending into caricature, revealing the tensions between the comic ideal and caricatural exaggeration, which also played out in personal satires such as Cruikshank's *A New fArse* (1818). Liston's most famous character, the country busybody Paul Pry, was widely disseminated and marketed through prints and caricatures, as well as porcelain and Staffordshire figurines, attesting to the commodification of the actor and broader cultural impact and extra-theatrical dimension of low comedy. For Davis, Joseph Munden and Liston are emblematic of a sort of comic ideal and the close ties between caricature and the theatre (96). He also notes the frequent conflation between comic actors' theatrical personae and their private character (101).

The third section focuses on nature and close observation as touchstones for comic acting and the parallels with Wilkie's naturalistic representation of daily life in his genre paintings. William Parsons, John Emery, and John Bannister, were all trained artists, and Parsons painted

and exhibited. Bannister, who was a close friend of the caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson, collected paintings and was part of a wide artistic circle including George Morland and Constable. These actors, who were fully versed in the visual arts, proved particularly adept at applying painterly techniques and emphasizing physical detail in their comic performances.

The final section examines the wide-ranging influence of Charles Mathews, whose collection of theatrical portraits was the basis for the Garrick Club. Mathews's particular genius was imitating other actors and celebrities, and he was famous for his protean ability at rapid transformations. In his 'At Homes,' which became a fixture of the theatrical calendar, he arguably transcended the limitations of comic acting and helped forge a sense of national and local identity (202-3). A savvy self-promoter, he used prints for publicity and as gifts. For Mathews, imitation went beyond mere appearance, morphing into a form of critical analysis. Mathews's career, which encapsulates the analogies between art and comic acting, disrupted the paradigms of theatrical portraiture by creating living portraits (242, 245). In George Harlow's portrait (1814), we see Mathews surrounded by four characters he is studying and preparing to imitate. Davis's timely and insightful book brings into sharper focus a rich field of enquiry that has been largely ignored in performance studies.

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