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Staging *The Frozen Deep* as Practice-led Research: "Illusion can only be perfected through the feelings."¹

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Rapturous tributes to performances of *The Frozen Deep* by Wilke Collins in 1857 may be hard to understand when we read the drama today; indeed, they even provoked skepticism at the time. Writing in the *Examiner* in 1857, for example, a reviewer worried that audiences familiar with the sentimental language and stock characters of melodrama, but "who have not seen and judged" Collins's play for themselves, "may not unreasonably suspect us of exaggerated eulogy," when he recorded "the silent tribute of irrepressible tears" recently observed at a private production ("Tavistock House Theatricals" 38). This article suggests that we likewise receive only a partial impression of the play's effect when reading the script in isolation. Emotion is writ large in melodrama and direct verbal articulation is only one device through which nineteenth-century actors communicated heightened feelings. Practitioners also utilized a combination of gesture, music and staging to create affective action and arouse sympathy.² Such effects are now lost because, like many Victorian melodramas, the play is rarely performed. However, in response to a recent research production of *The Frozen Deep*, viewers reacted warmly, noting surprise at the play's "emotional intensity" and "emotional power." Although the dialog is stagy and overblown by current standards, the drama retains the potential to communicate and elicit emotion when words are contextualized in performance.

A practice-led methodology that decenters Dickens's involvement and [End Page 329] ignores questions about collaborative authorship, biography, and managerial methods has several advantages.³ First, it enables us to conduct a "theatrical close reading" (Whipday and Cox Jensen 292) which illuminates interactions between the ensemble of players, and dialog and movement, that are not accessible when reading the playscript alone. Attention to the cooperation required for any performance by an ensemble of players, musicians and auxiliary personnel also helps us understand the play's emotional effects and intensity. I make this claim based on a research production James Phillips and I co-directed in October 2016, when we staged selected scenes

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from *The Frozen Deep* at the annual Dickens Day conference held in Senate House Library, London.⁴ Drawing on this production, I explore how nineteenth-century performance techniques (including attitudes, realization and *tableaux*) shape the actor-audience dynamic and the emotional impact of the play.

Practice-led research, I should explain, uses "creative performance as a method of inquiry" (Kershaw qtd in Fleishman 28) to examine what can be gathered from "specialised embodied knowledge" (Walton 123).⁵ The methodology is particularly apt for enquiries led by scholar-practitioners (Peters), theater historians (Bush-Bailey), and musicologists (Hibberd and Nielsen), as each expert investigates bodies of work that are activated by the "experiential and tacit knowledge" of performers (Symonds 212). It is also appropriate to studies of Dickensian dramaturgy.⁶ The findings presented here are the outcome of a collaborative and interdisciplinary practice which echoes the characteristic intertheatricality of Victorian theatrical cultures **[End Page 330]** (Robinson, Cox Jensen and Whipday 163).⁷ Our production would have been impossible without the contributions and advice of musicologists, theater historians, site managers and performers. In addition, by taking advantage of an audience broadly familiar with the play, we were able to position delegates as "co-researcher[s]", rather than "test subject[s]" when we examined their reactions and written responses to post-show questionnaires (Walton 132). Naturally, I do not claim that contemporary audience reaction can be mapped on to those of the original spectators. Affective responses are ephemeral and cannot be empirically measured, particularly at a historical distance. Instead, analysis of actor and audience experiences contribute to a theatrical close reading by offering multiple perspectives on the production. Accordingly, I use the term "practice-led research"—as opposed to "practice-as-research" or "practice-based-research"—to describe "the process of staging Dickens's play[s] as a mode of exploration, rather than as a means of testing a pre-existing hypothesis" (Robinson, Cox Jensen and Whipday 162). My emphasis, therefore, is not on "what is *intended* but what is *learnt*" (Symonds 222; italics in original).

Practice-led research prompts us to put aside attention to Dickens's managerial methods and self-representation⁸ because it forces us to confront moments when Dickens had to surrender control, and how necessary this surrender was to the drama's emotional power in performance.⁹ According to contemporary reviewers, Dickens's star turn as the anti-hero, Richard

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Wardour, was superb. However, though the part certainly requires a powerful lead performer, the actor who employs the pictorial dramaturgy common on the nineteenth-century stage is most effective when working collaboratively with a wide range of contributors simultaneously. Some of these demands for collaboration are embedded in the nineteenth-century performance theory and stage techniques that our production investigated. For example, in the intersections between dialog and music, or actors' stylized gestures and their imaginative engagement with their parts. Still other forms of collaboration are more widely applicable to theatrical experiences, such as interaction between the stage and the auditorium, or between the star and the ensemble. **[End Page 331]** In other words, practice-led research illuminates aspects of Dickensian dramaturgy which exist beyond what is written. This approach challenges the idea of a unifying authorial (or managerial) consciousness so dominant in existing textual studies of the play. It acknowledges contributions from other associates as well as extra-diegetic knowledge an audience might possess, such as familiarity with performance or genre conventions. As Lynn Voskuil argues, audiences are far from passive and uncritical. Indeed, the emotional affect frequently depends on a self-conscious complicity between the stage and the auditorium.

A practice-led method might be seen as antagonistic to text-based enquiries, as it posits branches of knowledge accessible only via embodied practice. It also raises questions about which cultural artefacts we should examine, and how. In our case, however, physical experiments complemented literary analysis because our practice was interdisciplinary. Beginning with archival and textual study, we examined the contemporary theatrical contexts of the play and its original score and musical cues. These investigations continued throughout the development of the production and informed our physical experimentation in rehearsals. Performance was thus only one point on a feedback loop of "cyclical re-search" (Symonds 219), as bodies brought new shape to our primary research, and prompted further questions.

One methodological problem I explored was the historical distance between the 1857 productions of *The Frozen Deep* in Tavistock House, Dickens's home, and a performance today by contemporary actors. To approximate the original experience in the school room, substantially altered for performance, would have required scenery, props, costumes and playbills as well as actors and musicians. Dickens's productions were lavishly choreographed, with scenery by Clarkson Stanfield and William Telbin and a new overture by Francesco Berger, together with

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sound and lighting effects. Our inability to recreate these conditions, however, proved an advantage. Lacking an accurate reconstruction of the small theater Dickens designed, our bare *mise en scène* focused attention on the performance at hand, as is evidenced by the fact that none of the audience speculated on the fidelity of our production in their questionnaire responses. Our production never claimed to recreate "what it was like" to witness a performance either at Tavistock House or in a Victorian playhouse on the basis of archival evidence. Rather, our methodology allowed us to learn by doing, through sensory engagement with a work in the here-and-now. [End Page 332]

Star Turns

To argue that the emotional impact of melodrama depends on collaboration may appear counterintuitive. Particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, these plays often entered the repertoires of stock companies, which "had little chance to work together in rehearsal, [... meaning that actors] concentrate[d] on individual characterisation [rather] than on the relationship *between* characters" (Taylor 20–1; italics in original). A consequence of these conditions was the prominence of star performers, whose importance was further reinforced by key performance techniques, such as "points." Michael Booth defined this term as "a moment of intense physical or emotional action which was momentarily frozen in a powerful attitude or tableau—a kind of individualising of the group 'picture' that frequently concluded an act" (125).

The Frozen Deep features moments when points are appropriate. For example, as means of marking the sudden reversal of circumstances when Captain Holding announces: "I have a casualty to report, which diminishes our numbers by one (*Wardour starts, and listens anxiously.*) My second Lieutenant, who was to have joined the Exploring Party, has had a fall on the Ice, and, I fear, has broken his leg" (139).¹⁰

The stage directions in this instance give the actor playing Wardour clear instructions. The "start" was popularized by David Garrick as an expression of shock or alarm. It involves the actor "stagger[ing] back two or three paces with his knees giving way under him" while stretching his arms forward with his "fingers apart; his mouth is open: thus he stands rooted to the spot, with legs apart, but no loss of dignity" (Georg Christoph Lichtenberg qtd in Taylor 31). The start demands

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both movement and the extension of the actor's body. If the actor follows Wardour's entire direction, however, this large and demonstrative gesture concludes in a static and contrasting attitude. Leman Thomas Rede's 1827 guide for aspiring actors tells us that anxiety "draws all parts of the body together" (84). The rapid, dramatic shift in Wardour's gestures externalizes his agitation, and hints that he is mentally unstable.

The utility of a point at this moment is clear. First, it marks "a transition" (Taylor 34). The intensity of Wardour's reaction reinforces the highly-wrought emotional tension of the preceding dialog, in which he discovers that Frank is Clara's betrothed. A pause at this moment, taken before Holding's line continues with "My second Lieutenant," emphasizes the narrative significance of his announcement and heightens audience suspense by making them wait for confirmation of an event which the preceding **[End Page 333]** action darkly foretells: that Wardour will join Frank in the exploring party. Second, the point elicits a felt reaction from the audience. It allows the actor to display Wardour's agitation without words. Audience excitement is thus maintained; there is no need for an explanatory soliloquy and the action remains brisk.¹¹ Moreover, the instability implied by Wardour's erratic gestures can provoke feelings of anxiety, as the audience recognize how the point foreshadows Frank's danger.

The extreme gestures that we see in this scene are typical of a style of performance in which actors used a highly stylized gestural vocabulary. These "iconic gestures" (Karim-Cooper 82) originated in classical oratory and were further refined by systematized representations of the passions, most influentially by Charles Le Brun in his *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière* (1668). Consequently, as Martin Meisel and Gail Marshall have argued, the ability of spectators to recognize meaning encoded in the physical expressions of actors was reinforced by a long-standing continuity of representation cutting across theater, sculpture, high and popular art. Nevertheless, the abstract passions honed and ordered by Le Brun, and others, assumed an important narrative role in the nineteenth century because these were "realized finally in character," and passed "from quasi-allegorical embodiments to the stereotypes of melodrama" (Meisel 8). Although the dramaturgy of points focuses audience attention on the star performer, therefore, the genre demands that her or his climactic gestural moments and character were always contextualized in relation to the other *dramatis personæ*. Oskar Cox Jensen, who played John Want in our production, commented that: "My character seemed to be all surface existence: defined

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by stock responses and signature gestures that were part of an interconnected whole. I really was playing *a part*, not a discrete individual."

We should not expect complex interiority from the stock figures of melodrama. Characters are symbols of virtue or vice, each of which is necessary to the representation of melodrama's polarized moral world. Indeed, for Rede writing in 1827, "[t]he modern system of acting by making *points* [...] has been very injurious to the best interests of the drama" because exhibitionist performers sacrifice the unities of character and effect in order to show off (94; italics in original). Our audience likewise reported that iconic gestures and presentational attitudes work best in context: "They were alienating at first, especially when they were isolated, but when (a) I got used to them and (b) they were linked into sequences, they were more effective," one member observed. Points can be dramatic *tours de force*, but, [End Page 334] particularly in a genre which relies on stark contrasts, the technique can also unbalance the performance and spoil the effect.

The strong emotional responses that melodrama aims to elicit depend on movement and interaction or contrast between performers. Wardour's start is more striking, for example, if the other characters remain still. However, the emphasis that contemporary acting handbooks placed on learning "*elegant actions*" means that this conclusion can be elusive when studying these texts in isolation as focus remains locked on how an individual should perform given attitudes (Siddons 3; italics in original). Certainly, the first hurdle we faced in rehearsals was to learn the now unfamiliar poses described in manuals such as Henry Siddons's *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* (1822), Rede's *The Road to the Stage* (1827), and Gustave Garcia's *The Actors' Art* (1882). As indicated above, Rede gives detailed written instructions for the aspirant to follow:

Joy, when sudden and violent, is expressed by clapping of hands and exulting looks; the eyes are opened wide, and on some occasions raised to heaven; the countenance is smiling, not composedly, but with features aggravated; the voice rises, from time to time, to very high tones. (77–78)

There are corollaries between Rede's description and an engraving in Siddons's book. It represents a woman who, as Rede suggests, looks disturbed, almost fearful, as she gazes with wide eyes at

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the object of her joy. Their representations are not a precise match. Unlike Rede's instructions, the model given by Siddons does not smile, and Garcia likewise warns us that the "sentiment of joy, as well as its expression, is susceptible of great modification" (129).

We worked through these aids in the first rehearsal, and the cast tried out different recommendations for expressing a range of emotions. The results revealed only minor differences between Garcia's, Rede's and Siddons's representations. Rather, these variations indicate dynamic movement in performance. Each draws on Charles Le Brun, proving the longevity and widespread dissemination of his models of embodied representation. Produced, published, and republished over the course of the nineteenth century,¹² these advisory texts document the endurance of what Benjamin McArthur has called "an approach to acting at once inflexible and unambiguous" (171). Conversely, these guides were written to support, rather than to replace, practical training. The step-by-step instructions and exercises provided were simply meant to enable would-be actors to learn **[End Page 335]** certain techniques correctly before performing in an ensemble.

It is unlikely that Victorian actors would have accepted that their acting was simply repetition by rote, and this is not what the handbooks recommend. Siddons decries "frigid eloquence" and "manikin, dull, formal precision" (28). Instead, all of the guides encourage practitioners to combine these techniques with an imaginative engagement with their character, and to mix suitable iconic gestures with those drawn from everyday life. Melodramatic playwrights understood that contrasting gestural styles were effective dramaturgical dynamics to facilitate and emphasize climactic moments. The competency of Collins and Dickens with such gestural techniques is evident from the mix of cues embedded in their script. For example, Wardour adopts a formal gesture from everyday life to feign comradeship with Frank: "I didn't speak civilly to you when you were casting the dice. I apologize. Shake hands" (137). This mundane, disposable gesture is almost immediately followed by a direction instructing Wardour to "[press his hand] convulsively over his heart" (138). The handshake heightens the audience's feelings of suspense and dread, as the apparently friendly gesture emphasizes the dramatic irony—and danger—of Wardour's apology. By contrast, as Cox Jensen noted, "it seems very hard to 'lie' or dissemble through [an iconic] repertoire of 'moves'—they come across as unfiltered emotional responses."¹³ Wardour's second, iconic gesture in this exchange thus explicitly confirms and

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reinforces the foreboding tenor of the handshake, while simultaneously escalating the heightened stage tension by signifying Wardour's loss of self-control.

A mix of gestural styles can also aid characterization, and we were attentive to how Collins and Dickens used gestural cues to shape character and narrative action.¹⁴ Aside from moments when the dialog describes "a gesture that has taken place" or annotates "a gesture while it is occurring" (Karim-Cooper 79), as above, it also contains guidance for actors in characters' verbalized emotions. For instance, an attitude of "fixed despair" is suggested by Clara's line: "We have no cause for cheerfulness" (108). Stage directions also served as a resource when we blocked and analyzed our scenes. In the dialog prior to Wardour's start, the actor playing Frank is instructed to answer Wardour's enquiries "*Haughtily*" (138). An actor might convey an appropriate attitude, according to Siddons, by "thrusting one hand in [End Page 336] his bosom" as high as possible, and placing "the elbow of the other arm akimbo," with his head "thrown a little backwards; his turned-out feet at a distance from each other," while resting on one leg with "the other [...] thrown before it with extended dignity" (51).

This posture is a non-diegetic way for the performer to make the audience feel unsettled at this point in the play. Pride is not necessarily a positive attribute, and its physical expression—as described by Siddons—indicates a worldliness at odds with the typical melodramatic hero's spotless purity. For an audience fluent in stage attitudes and familiar with the genre, this pose may undermine their sympathetic response to Frank, and challenge their expectations about Wardour as antagonist. The script thereby enables actors to draw on an established repertoire of gestures and expressions as an aid to narrative development and characterization, and to communicate and heighten stage effect by underscoring and passionately embodying the emotional tensions of a scene.

Natural Acting

In the nineteenth century as now, actors were conscious of paradoxical demands for "technique and inspiration" (Roach 26). Among Victorians, these contrasting mandates were explored in debates about the concept of "natural acting."¹⁵ We should not be misled into thinking that "natural" character signifies psychological naturalism, which was not popularized on stage until

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much later in the century, and which—even then—coexisted with, rather than replaced, the older acting style.¹⁶ The *Saturday Review* saw no oxymoron when it praised Dickens's excellent "melodramatic performance" as Wardour, because it was "quiet, strong, natural, and effective" (106). For George Henry Lewes, who acted in Dickens's amateur companies in the 1840s (Voskuil 40), natural acting can never be achieved without studied technique, of the kind detailed in contemporary acting handbooks. Writing in 1875, Lewes argued that it "is the actor's art to express in well-known symbols what an individual man may be supposed to feel, and we, the spectators, recognising these expressions, are thrown into a state of sympathy" (124).

In this view of performance, the accomplished actor is paradoxically [End Page 337] able to make her or his performance more "real" or engaging by aspiring to represent an ideal, rather than an ordinary human being with whom spectators directly identify. "Spectators are enabled to participate precisely because the action on stage is typical and not idiosyncratic, general and not specific" (Voskuil 48). At the same time, vivid characterization remains important. As Siddons noted several decades earlier, "nature is the very *soul* of a player [... though] nature differs much in different men" (28; italics in original). Nevertheless, for Lewes, differences of character and situation should not preclude the creation of a community of feeling between the stage and the auditorium, because ideal, truthful representation responds authentically to universal human experiences.

Of course, melodramatic actors were often mocked because they failed to reach this ideal, even though their ranting performances drew on similar training. Still, certain practical considerations convinced actors to continue to use established repertoires of expression. In 1827 Rede had warned that "[a] straining after originality, has been the ruin of many actors and however ineffective the system of treading only on a beaten track may be, it will be found less annoying than a sacrifice of sense to novelty" (94). Siddons endorsed this view, citing the portrayal of death on stage as an instance. The actor, he argued,

should give such an idea of death as every man would wish to feel at that crisis; though, perhaps, no one ever will have the good fortune to find that wish accomplished. [...] I have myself seen a *Macbeth* die in convulsions, which were certainly very naturally imitated,

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but at the same time have thrown the spectators into convulsions of laughter, equally natural with his own. (16)

Siddons suggests that copying life realistically appears ridiculous on stage, and so breaks the illusion and unity of the performance. Instead, an actor's physical expression should be conceived as "the exterior and visible signs [...] by which the interior modifications of the soul are manifested and made known" (27). Performance theory thus aligns the actor's mind/soul and body, as inner truth and sensibility is exteriorized in the physical expression of emotion. Therefore, we see the importance of collaboration to emotive melodramatic action in both the interaction of the stock figures on stage and also in how the performer's art is conceived.

Natural acting depends on dialog between the practitioner's trained body and her or his soul/imagination. Aspiring to the ideal described by Lewes is a tall order, but our cast was also challenged by their unfamiliarity with those nineteenth-century techniques that required physical dexterity. Iconic gestures oblige actors to be conscious of their entire body, and at **[End Page 338]** first members of our cast found it difficult to remember every aspect of any one position. We played warm up games based on iconic gestures at the start of each rehearsal to reinforce each posture's specific characteristics and found—as Siddons predicts—that "habit becomes a kind of nature;" repetition made the actors "more sure, more free, and more unembarrassed" (3). Nevertheless, Emma Whipday as Clara Burnham remarked that the experience "resembled rehearsing musical theater more than working on a text-based play." The process of learning appropriate technique meant that we built the characters from the outside in and opportunities for improvisation (inspiration) were curtailed.

The concept of natural acting supposes that technique and inspiration must work together to achieve a representation that "the audience will recognise as truth" (Lewes 124). The actor's ability to elicit "sympathy" from the audience therefore depends not only on communication between soul and body but also between stage and auditorium. We can find textual evidence which suggests how this affective dialog worked in practice. One example is recorded in the licensing script for Collins's play *The New Magdalen*, which was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain in 1873. Annotations bracket large sections of dialog in parentheses, with the instruction that "If it is

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desired to shorten the Act, or if the actress who plays 'Lady Janet' fails to amuse the audience, this scene can be abridged as follows. The parts to be omitted are distinguished thus []" (f.77).

Such annotations introduce a degree of flexibility available to actors responsive to audiences who, when fully engaged, achieved a collaborative dialog less easily replicated today with spectators unfamiliar with nineteenth-century acting techniques. One of our respondents commented self-consciously that "the exaggerated gestures sometimes slid a bit into farce (probably because I'm used to different theatrical conventions)." But even though the effect of an overdrawn gesture is not necessarily alienating—another delegate observed that "these plays are ruined by being thought of as realist"—awareness of a historical distance between the past and the present is clearly a barrier to the suspension of disbelief. We found this problematic when testing the extent to which nineteenth-century performance techniques shape the emotional impact of the drama; the challenge, however, does reaffirm the importance of memory and extra-theatrical contexts to the intertheatrical experience. Emotional affect is not only a stage property.

Playing as an Ensemble

We were conscious of a two-fold demand when blocking our scenes. We had learnt that practicing iconic gestures in isolation reduced their impact; nevertheless, star turns clearly do much to direct the emotional currents [**End Page 339**] of the drama. W. J. Sorrell's *The Amateur's Hand-Book* ([1871]) likewise stresses that "the manager [must] impress on supernumeraries that they are not to interfere with the main action of the play, but to regard themselves as the background of a living picture" (11). The "principal characters" must remain "the chief point for the eye to rest on" (Sorrell 10–11). For our scenes to work appropriately while also retaining their dramatic effectiveness, we had to foreground the emotional center of the situation, and simultaneously contextualize the star's movements by making the ensemble active contributors to the picture. *Tableaux* turned out to be the best way to accomplish this. In melodramas, these living pictures usually summarize the preceding action at the Act drop or symbolize the relationships between the actors at key moments in the play. *The Frozen Deep* concludes with a *tableau* that serves both of these ends, which we choreographed as a "realization" of the engraving of the Tavistock House production (Figures 1 and 2).¹⁷

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Framing was one technique used to focus audience attention on a particular moment or gesture. There are two framed focal points in the final *tableau*: Frank and Clara's reunion, and Wardour's self-sacrifice. On the right, the eye is drawn towards the center of a tightly clustered group by following the minor characters' line of vision. The climactic visual point is provided by Clara, who has thrown herself on Frank's chest, as in Garcia's description of reunited friends (135). Her action is demonstrative in its own right, but the surrounding group emphasizes its power to communicate "the relief and joy of the discovery" Dickens saw in the play's final act with the rescue of Frank Aldersley (*Letters* 8: 184). Clara's attitude appears even more pronounced in contrast with the quiet solemnity of the other figures, with their hands clasped close to their bodies, as though in prayer. The supernumeraries stand close to the couple, in a position expressive of comradeship and support, and so reinforce the scene's high sentiment by modeling sympathetic engagement with the romantic conclusion.

Meanwhile, on the left, Wardour and Crayford reverse the tightness of the right-hand grouping in elongated postures which fill the rest of the stage space. Wardour's line of sight is also directed at Clara. The framing group to the right thus have a secondary function. The actors have their backs to Wardour, and so enable Wardour to perform the part of observer on the outside looking in. The effect is to convey the pathos of Wardour's emotional isolation, as the relative positions and contrasting attitudes of the characters exteriorize, and summarize, character dynamics: Wardour remains separate at the same time as he ghosts the couple's happy reunion. [End Page 340]

Fig. 1.

Private Theatricals at Tavistock House—Scene from "The Frozen Deep": with Charles Dickens at center in the role of Richard Wadour. *Illustrated London News* for 17 January 1857.

[End Page 341]

Fig. 2.

The 2016 cast realize the engraving from the *Illustrated London News* in rehearsal.

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The staging emphasizes Wardour's plight and invites the audience to engage with him emotionally. Unlike Clara and Frank—enclosed within the tight, inward-facing postures of the right-hand group—Wardour is alone, his body open to the audience. Nevertheless, Crayford is also instrumental in activating audience interest in Wardour. By leaning down, Crayford points to Wardour as both an object of pity and the central figure. As a secondary observer, moreover, Crayford serves as a stand in for the audience, whose sympathy he directs towards Wardour's heroism. For, just as the group around Clara and Frank concentrates audience attention on their reunion, Crayford's position frames Wardour's exteriority and emphasizes his self-abnegation. As the audience's proxy, Crayford's position invites the audience to reflect on their response to the action, but his demonstrative posture also helps to elicit their emotional engagement by highlighting Wardour's exclusion from the group his actions have benefitted. Crayford's gestures thereby facilitate an imaginative exchange between stage-space and auditorium, performed and felt reactions to the drama. In so doing, he foregrounds the relational construction of embodied meaning.

The version of the *tableau* we constructed satisfied two demands. By employing iconic gestures we kept the focus on the star performers while simultaneously shifting attention to the whole ensemble in order to portray an overall sentimental picture, one our audience found effective. "[T]he *tableau* worked *brilliantly*, to my astonishment," one observer wrote, despite the fact that others found the stock gestures of melodrama "alienating," "mannered," or "unnecessary" at other points in the play. Thus we see how on-stage collaboration is fundamental to both the emotional impact of a scene and the prominence of the star performer, because of how the ensemble gestures to the lead actor's performance of high emotion.

Martin Meisel's *Realizations* (1983) long-since proved that "what is striking and characteristic in the nineteenth-century theatre is that its *dramaturgy* was pictorial, not just its *mise en scène*" (39). Our production suggests that this often derided acting style can still speak to audiences in spite of differences in expectations and training, and, indeed, that it can promote affective responses to melodramatic dialog which fails to rouse emotions on the page. One member of the audience reported that: "I was surprised to find this production so moving. I felt really invested in the plot & characters" and that the performance techniques we investigated "were most effective when the acting was most heightened, as in Richard W[ardour]'s final speeches." Our experience on Dickens Day and the response of delegates encourages us to treat iconic gestures

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earnestly as expressions of feeling, and to rehabilitate their critical reception as a vital dimension of melodramatic affect. However, our practice was most illuminating for what it reveals about how melodramatic performance techniques rely on the ensemble [End Page 343] to communicate sentiment, even if this is achieved through the group's elevation of the star performer. In this sense, we conceive practice-led research as an opportunity to see what Dickens meant when, responding to praise for *The Frozen Deep* from a friend who had seen the play, he replied: "As to the Play itself; when it is made as good as my care can make it, I derive a strange feeling out of it, like writing a book in company" (*Letters* 8: 256).

Nineteenth-century performance theory suggests that actors should aim to involve the audience in a community of feeling, and that artistic "truth" cannot be achieved without the endorsement of the spectators. The success or failure of a production rests, then, on this appeal to "company." The artistic project, and the "strange feeling[s]" it elicits, are fundamentally collaborative. The author must surrender control, because he acknowledges that the affect of the piece depends on the contributions of others.¹⁸ [End Page 344]

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Notes

¹ Edward Mayhew (1840), 69.

² Audiences' consciousness of the roles played by multi-media technical and performance techniques is recorded in contemporary reviews. In June 1857, the *Examiner* commented that "it would be difficult to convey an adequate idea" of "the effect" of Dickens's *The Frozen Deep*, because its impact derived from the accumulation of sterling "performance[s]; the sweet sad melody sung by the two young ladies [...]; the deep yet melancholy sympathy of the evening light and the solemn stealing in of the white moonrise" (qtd in Purton 86)

³ Responses to *The Frozen Deep* have focussed mainly on these issues and Dickens's involvement in the play's production. See Brannan (1996), Nayder (2002) and Bowen (2018).

⁴ I would like to thank the cast, Oskar Cox Jensen, Peter Orford, James Phillips, Jonathan Sanders, Anna Sowerbutts, Camilla Vernon, and Emma Whipday; the musical directors, Oskar Cox Jensen, Jonathan Hicks, and pianist, John Paul Muir; the organizers of Dickens Day, Bethan Carney, Holly Furneaux, and Ben Winyard; and Ed Parker, for filming the production.

⁵ The past two decades have seen practice-led research become a "well-established approach [...] in universities in the UK, Australia, Canada, Scandinavia, South Africa and elsewhere" (Kershaw qtd in Fleishman 28). Critical surveys often cite the Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP) project at the University of Bristol (2001–6), directed by Baz Kershaw, as the pioneering study in the field. (See, for instance: Symonds 211; Fleishman 28.)

⁶ In 2015, I produced a historically-informed production of Dickens's burletta *Is She His Wife? or, Something Singular!* (1837), directed by Emma Whipday. A recording is available on *YouTube*. Other practice-led projects include Caroline Radcliffe's work on "The Song of the Wreck" (2014) and Katherine Astbury's Staging Napoleonic Theatre project.

⁷ Jacky Bratton coined the term "intertheatricality" to emphasize that the play text is no more important as a means of constructing meaning on stage than "systems of the stage—scenery, costume, lighting and so forth—but also genres, conventions and, very importantly, memory" (*New Readings in Theatre History* 38).

⁸ See, for example, Andrews (2012) and John (2010).

⁹ Bratton extends her emphasis on reciprocity and collaboration to argue that Dickens collaborated with the playwrights who adapted his work, both directly (by consulting with select stage managers

or providing advance copies of proofs) and indirectly (through processes of cultural exchange and mutual economic benefit) (2017). For reservations with this position, see Brattin (2018).

¹⁰ Quotations from *The Frozen Deep* are from Dickens's 1857 prompt copy, reprinted in Brannan.

¹¹ Responding to the questionnaire, one member of the audience commented that gestures were "a useful way for others on stage to express simple reactions and emotions without interrupting someone else's speech" throughout.

¹² Rede's guide was reprinted in 1836; updated editions with advice for American actors appeared in 1861, 1868 and 1872.

¹³ Cox Jensen's observation echoes W. J. Sorrell's advice in *The Amateur's Hand-Book*: "paint it in your brain in letters of gold, when you attempt Private Theatricals, it is the sure signal to success—nothing can be done well without it—it is all in all to the Amateur—it is EARNESTNESS. Again and again I say to one and all, be in earnest and you must succeed. 'Ring, dong, ding'" (44).

¹⁴ Low comedy roles would not typically use iconic gestures, for example, and the attitudes set down in handbooks carry clear gender and racial prejudices.

¹⁵ Nineteenth century performance treatises argued about whether an actor's representation should begin with accomplished technique or imagination. Does the actor use his repertoire of moves as a pathway to ideal representation and imaginative engagement with his character? Or should she start by drawing on personal imaginative resources to express the passions and embody attitudes authentically? Jed Wentz summarizes this as either working from the outside in, or the inside out.

¹⁶ See Marcus's analysis of Sarah Bernhardt's "exteriority effects."

¹⁷ Realization "had a precise technical sense when applied to certain theatrical *tableaux* based on well-known pictures, [...] where it meant both literal re-creation and translation into a more real, that is more vivid, visual, physically present medium" (Meisel 30).

¹⁸ One contributor omitted yet deserving recognition is John Paul Muir, our pianist. The music that accompanies *The Frozen Deep* is a mixture of original score, popular song, and incidental music, which provides variegated backdrop to the drama and moments for pause and reflection between scenes. Largely sentimental yet melodic and peaceful on occasions, noted one commentator, the music added a further intertheatrical layer capable of having an impact on plot development and characterization. For example, the song "River, River," which is repeatedly cued by Wardour's entrance and speeches, signals a rich stream of musical allusion that may have been more familiar

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to the original audiences, but which is less available now. The lyrics summarize Wardour's progress from rural beginnings before "dash[ing]" "headlong [... to] Eternity," while its simple melody in a major key frustrates our ability to see Wardour as a villain from the outset, even while he offers verbal proofs of his murderous intent.