If we take Dion Boucicault’s own word for it, 2022 marks the bicentenary of his birth. Characteristically, Boucicault may have ornamented the truth about this: his biographer Richard Fawkes thought 1820 was a more likely arrival date. So let us call 2022 the authorised anniversary or the official commemoration year for the subject of this special issue on Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film. This influential, colourful, often unscrupulous man of the theatre worked for over forty years in six countries, earning (and losing) vast sums as a writer, adaptor, and actor-manager. At the height of his career, between the late 1850s and the tail of the 1870s, Dion Boucicault was an inescapable, ubiquitous figure in his industry.

Although Boucicault’s work no longer enjoys those levels of fame, it has remained a draw, into the twenty-first century. A list of productions for the last twenty years alone, and just in Britain and Ireland, could include productions at two grand national venues, and also small experimental ones – Boucicault’s spectacular visions translated to theatre-in-the-round and a tiny room above a pub. The list could boast in Dublin the Abbey Theatre’s revivals of The Shaughraun in 2004 and Arrah-na-Pogue in 2011; London Assurance at Newbury’s Watermill Theatre in 2008 and London’s National Theatre in 2010; The Colleen Bawn at Galway’s Druid Theatre in 2013; The School for Scheming at Richmond’s Orange Tree in 2014; Smock Alley Theatre’s The Shaughraun in Dublin in 2018; and After Dark at London’s Finborough Theatre in 2019.

Less directly, Boucicault’s marks have made their way into the work of many others, including outside the theatre. Critics have long recognised echoes or influence in Irish and American playwrights (Wilde, Shaw, Synge, and O’Casey; Daly and Belasco), not to mention the allusions in Joyce, one possible source for Bram Stoker’s vampire classic, and the memorial painting by Jack Yeats. But Boucicault is also still fascinating his successors. In 2013, Mark Ravenhill adapted The Octoroon for the radio: the British playwright curated a small series for the BBC Drama on three slots, pairing Boucicault’s 1859 piece with Bertolt Brecht’s Jungle of Cities, and Light Shining in Buckinghamshire by Caryl Churchill. At the same time, An Octoroon, the 2010 rewriting of the same work by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, has had a stunning career in its own right, winning the 2014 Obie Award for a best new American play, with productions
in multiple American cities, including several in New York; as well as at the Orange Tree and the National in London. In Dublin, it is running at the Abbey Theatre as I write.

In *The Octoroon*, Boucicault takes ‘race’ as his central subject, reflecting a moment in which ideas of human difference were a feverish obsession; he also embeds the play in a major source and motive for those racial themes, American slavery. Boucicault makes Zoe’s ‘race’ – her legal, familial, and embodied identity – the pretext for dramatic conflict, peril, suffering, and, for the audience, the location of sympathy and horror. Boucicault insisted that the play preached abolition, but his play also naturalised ‘race’, sexualised it, and read blackness as a tragedy. It was not, therefore, an obvious move for Jacobs-Jenkins to invoke and incorporate the play into his own work a century later. Jacobs-Jenkins radically transforms Boucicault by making the nineteenth-century playwright address the question from which the new drama springs, that is, what it means to be a ‘black playwright’, operating in a historically racist tradition, afflicted by limiting expectations and ironic constraints, such as the anti-racist sensitivities of actors who identify as white. *An Octoroon* has been hailed as an important reading – of the theatre, of the United States, and of its own times. In offering the priming for that project, Boucicault has enjoyed a new incarnation.

It is not the first time that Boucicault has supplied the material for such a wide-reaching and ambitious analysis, but he served a very different purpose for the Irish playwright Stewart Parker. Parker became fascinated by Boucicault in the 1970s, after borrowing an edition of his plays from the library; in 1976, he pitched a six-programme series to Thames Television and was even invited to submit a treatment. Parker envisaged a series of biographical plays, set in a surviving Victorian theatre, and alternating scenes from the life of the dramatist and his plays in rehearsal or performance. Sadly, it came to naught, but ten years later Parker returned to Boucicault to develop a major drama. Parker’s *Heavenly Bodies*, written for Birmingham Repertory Theatre and first produced in 1986, draws on the Faust legend to examine Boucicault’s career. In his last days, the nineteenth-century playwright is challenged to review his life by a circus clown, another historical figure, a sentimental singer called Johnny Patterson. Patterson voices Parker’s own charges, that in producing sensational melodramas in England and America, the showman betrayed his country and his art, sacrificing his talent to pander to his commercial age. Parker’s Boucicault play is also like *An Octoroon* in that it reflects on the present in the light of the past: the playwright recognised in the world of his predecessor the cynical materialism of his own ‘Thatcherite eighties’. Marilyn Richtarik contends that Parker was indirectly meditating on his own career, in which his commitment to Northern Irish subjects and his resistance to commercial compromise cost him a great deal. With a terrible poignancy, too, Parker himself was nearing the end of his short life: as he was revising the play for Oberon Press in 1988, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and died that November.

In his introduction to the Oberon Press edition, Parker presents *Heavenly Bodies* as part of a ‘triptych’, three linked but self-contained plays set, respectively, in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The book’s subtitle is ‘Three Plays for Ireland’: Parker calls them ‘hinged together in a continuing comedy of terrors’. Like *An Octoroon*, then, Parker’s Boucicault play reads his own theatre and his nation, or
perhaps nations – and Parker, like Boucicault, had plays staged in both Ireland and England, and for a brief period, he too emigrated to the United States.

The first and third plays of the triptych are set at historically significant crises: *Northern Star* at the end of the United Irishman’s rebellion in 1798; *Pentecost* during the Ulster Worker’s Council Strike of 1974. In *Northern Star*, the idealism of the rebel leader Henry Joy McCracken is fatally undermined by the sectarian reflexes of his comrades; *Pentecost* searches for glimmers of hope in a broken city, amid rioting and deadly barricades: what seems like the apocalyptic culmination of those earlier sectarian divides. The middle play, *Heavenly Bodies*, might seem more like light relief (and indeed Parker shows that Boucicault’s own life could supply excellent material for comedy and farce). But the three plays share a sense of oppressive history, and this is underlined by the fact that all three feature ghosts, a bereaved bride in *Northern Star*, an elderly widow in *Pentecost*, and in *Heavenly Bodies* a ‘phantom fiddler’ obscurely connected to a lost father. Moreover, *Northern Star* preforges *Heavenly Bodies* in the intensity of its awareness of the Irish dramatic legacy. Parker asserted that ‘pastiche’ was this play’s mode, while *Heavenly Bodies* used ‘collage’, and *Pentecost* deployed ‘heightened realism’. At different points in *Northern Star*, the style shifts to mimic Farquhar, Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, Synge, O’Casey, Beckett, Behan, and yes, Boucicault. As Nicholas Grene has remarked, the play is distinguished by a ‘self-conscious awareness not only of the burden of Irish history, but of the weight of Irish dramatic self-expression’. The structure of the triptych insists that the two legacies are linked: each play is haunted by the tragic freight of Irish mythologies. There is a Shavian exchange in *Northern Star* in which McCracken’s lover Mary Bodle wails, ‘They forget nothing in this country, not ever’, and the rebel leader replies: ‘It’s far worse than that. They misremember everything’. That is one of the reasons that Parker finds Boucicault fascinating: he too was a mythologiser and engineered misremembering. Though Boucicault was proud of the new prominence he gave Irish themes on the stage, Parker insists that they were sugar-coated. He has Queen Victoria tell Boucicault, ‘You show us our Irish subjects in the manner that renders them the most beloved to us’.

For both Parker and Jacobs-Jenkins, Boucicault was partly made available through the investigations of others: that is, academic work mediated his transformation into new drama. Parker’s understanding of Boucicault was built on the 1979 biography by Richard Fawkes, as well as on reading Boucicault’s essays and other materials in the London Library and visiting the Special Collections held at the University of Kent. Parker also had personal conversations with Fawkes, and with Boucicault’s descendant, Christopher Calthrop, himself a dedicated collector, whose treasures eventually joined the Kent holdings. Not surprisingly, Parker’s Boucicault is a creature of common academic attitudes at the time of his author’s research: *Heavenly Bodies* not only treats Boucicault as a meretricious hack – now rightfully obscure – but accepts the then common estimation of nineteenth-century theatre. Explaining that all the characters in his triptych ‘have been drawn from the marginalia of the historical record rather than its main plot’, Parker includes Boucicault: ‘unarguably a major force in the Victorian theatre, but then that is a period of drama which is in itself considered marginal nowadays; rather more than enough is known about him’. Many theatre historians, not least readers of this journal, would now beg to differ.
Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, on the other hand, treats Boucicault as significant, and if arcane, only in the way that all historical figures might appear to a layman. In a session with his therapist, the author’s alter ego, BJJ, is challenged to name a playwright he admires; the first name that comes to mind is ‘Dion Boucicault’. The character ‘Playwright’ then comes on and boasts about Boucicault’s record, in a young, slangy, contemporary voice, with a touch of stage-Irish:

The King of the Theater.

Everybody hated on me and they were sooo jealous

Just like they were hating on and being jealous of Jaysus

But nobody could mess with me!

I had the World Theater at my feet!

Hits everywhere! International hits!

Hits in London!

And America!

And London!

I invented things! I pioneered things!

Like copyrights! Yeah, that’s right!

I brought you people copyrights!

And matinees! I invented matinees, bitches!

Look it up!16

In contrast to Heavenly Bodies, An Octoroon emits a sneaking admiration for Boucicault’s record, despite the ironic and irreverent style of its characterisation. Compare the two playwrights on this tiny biographical detail: Boucicault’s 1850s investment in New York’s Winter Garden Theatre. Parker paints it as the commercial commitment which underlies the sensationalism of The Octoroon, closely following Boucicault’s explanation that ‘the theatres of the day were chock full of guano’:

BOUCICIAUL … Every cent I’d earned had been spent on the Winter Garden Theatre, I’d only opened it two months previously, if The Octoroon had failed I would have gone under.
PATTERSON So that was why you ended it with the paddle steamer on stage blowing up and burning away to blazes? 17

Jacobs-Jenkins is by contrast excited by the ambition of Boucicault’s commercial enterprises:

PLAYWRIGHT When I fecking managed the Winter Garden
Our fecking toilets were nicer than this place.
There’s not even a fecking petting zoo here.
Where’s your fecking petting zoo, huh? 18

Part of the difference in these two portraits of Boucicault might be attributed to the playwright’s shifting fortunes as an academic subject. In the United States, this was due to the inescapable significance of one issue, and therefore one play: Boucicault became important again because of his treatment of race in The Octoroon. The time came when Victorian race dramas could no longer be called a ‘marginal’ subject.

In interviews, Jacobs-Jenkins has been vague about how he first met The Octoroon. In one post-performance event at Soho Rep, later posted on YouTube, he says that he doesn’t remember his first encounter: ‘I feel like I’ve known about this play for as long as I’ve been writing plays … I think I probably came across it in an academic context … I probably read about it in a book by a guy named Werner Sollors … called Neither Black Nor White Yet Both’. 19 In another, Jacobs-Jenkins is being interviewed by the critic Daphne Brooks, who had taught him at Princeton. Brooks sweetly – and firmly – reminds him of her own role:

Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins: I’m obsessed with the original play, which I may have encountered in your class, but I can’t remember…

Daphne Brooks: Yes you did, dear… 20

The former pupil’s sense of the play’s ubiquity is telling. It reflects a huge wave of interest in The Octoroon in American literary and cultural studies in the 1990s and early 2000s, probably starting with Joseph Roach’s Cities of the Dead, certainly including Sollors’ book on the trope of the ‘tragic mulatto’, but also treatments by Saidiya Hartman, Jennifer Devere Brody, Brooks herself, and others. 21 In turn, the success of An Octoroon has prompted a new wave of comparative readings of Boucicault’s play with that of his successor. 22 There is some irony in the fact that it was Boucicault’s troubling articulation of pernicious race theory that made him such an important academic subject – or at least made one of his plays so well known. The Octoroon’s academic significance was assured because the play became a key documentary witness to a long and violent history.
As these critical and creative interactions suggest, it is essential to recognise Boucicault’s dynamic relationship with contingency and circumstance. His academic reputation, like his reception, has reflected wider cultural trends, and also determined them. Although critics have often treated Boucicault as singular, his significance has always emerged in relation to others, however much he upstaged those others in the record. That is reflected in this special issue, in which the unifying theme could be called, loosely, reuniting Boucicault with some significant others.

**What Follows**

The first half of this issue is devoted to new essays. They attend variously to Boucicault’s relations with theatrical peers and descendants, to his influence on the visual imagination, and to his adaptations of others’ work.

Nicholas Daly investigates John Brougham, an actor and frequent collaborator in Boucicault’s own productions, and a closely parallel case, as Brougham was not only another Irish emigré in the United States, but a popular dramatist in his own right, equally famed in his time for creating and inhabiting Irish roles. Examining Brougham’s work, Daly shows, helps establish the ways in which both men generated a distinctively American theatrical vocabulary, while drawing on an international bedrock of repertoire and experience. Daly lays out an intricate web of influence and connection, tying Boucicault’s *The Poor of New York* to a long and spreading tradition of city plays. The line extends from William Thomas Moncrieff’s *Tom and Jerry* (1821), through Benjamin Baker’s *A Glance at New York* (1848), and Tom Taylor’s *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1863), and on into the cinematic cities of film noir.

In her article, Clare Walker-Gore is concerned with novelistic adaptation and representations of disability. She asserts that two Boucicault reworkings – of Charles Dickens’ *Cricket on the Hearth* (1845) and Gerald Griffin’s *The Collegians* (1829) – involve a significant reimagining of disabled characters. In *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), she argues, Danny Mann’s broken body becomes a figure for the Irish nation, expressing proto-nationalist ideas in the play which directly contradict the implications of Griffin’s novel. Meanwhile, *Dot* (1859) reinvents both Dickens’ blind character Bertha, and Tilly Slowboys, according to both a kind of dignity and importance on stage that is absent in the fiction. In effect, she shows, Boucicault’s staged bodies contribute to a vision of a less hierarchical and more inclusive social body than either fiction can offer.

In theatrical history, the water cave scene in *The Colleen Bawn* is often taken to epitomise mid-century sensation theatre, indeed to have inspired the term ‘sensation scene’. Patricia Smyth places it within a specific tradition in the wider visual culture, showing that Eily’s ordeal in the Devil’s Pool would have recalled a complex iconography of drowning, involving earlier plays and a number of paintings, including Paul Delaroche’s *Young Christian Martyr* (1855), John Millais’s *Ophelia* (1853), and George Watts’ *Found Drowned* (1848–50). This reading confounds the many slighting judgments of the water cave as merely a technical achievement: Smyth demonstrates that the scene’s meanings, viewed in a wider visual economy, could
escape, or even contradict, its narrative role. This visual history challenges critical assumptions about audiences’ passive response to the spectacular theatre, and also forestalls the too-ready equation of images of submerged women with powerlessness and passivity.

James Moran’s essay also suggests how valuable it can be to pursue connections into the second degree: he establishes a line of influence from Boucicault, through Sean O’Casey to Lorraine Hansberry, offering a startling trajectory in which The Octoroon contributes, via Juno and the Paycock (1924), to the familial structures of A Raisin in the Sun (1959). This unremarked channel between Irish and African American drama draws attention to the ways in which playwrights find their way to the theatre. O’Casey’s boyhood passion for the popular excitements of Dublin’s Queen’s Theatre and Mechanics’ Institute; Hansberry’s formative attendance at a production of Juno and the Paycock at the University of Wisconsin: these quite different encounters with theatre both led back to Boucicault. By establishing this link, Moran invites us to consider whether there are structural debts in the later plays and whether Hansberry’s lovingly realist depiction of black tenement life is also, like Juno, a reworking of old-fashioned inheritance melodrama.

The second half of the issue continues this journal’s tradition of offering Documents of Performance. The section makes two new sources available, from both ends of Boucicault’s career. There is a new modern edition of Andy Blake; or, the Irish Diamond (1854), with notes by Nathaniel Zetter. In the introduction I explore the claim of this forgotten comedy to be considered Boucicault’s first Irish play, predating The Colleen Bawn by six years. It was a vehicle for Agnes Robertson, Boucicault’s ill-used second wife, and is notable for the generic resemblance between Andy, her role, and Boucicault’s later comic heroes Myles, Conn, and Sean. It opens the possibility that a breeches performance may have contributed to the development of these iconic Irish figures, regarded in some quarters as having paved the way for modern Irish drama. Andy Blake certainly confirms that Agnes deserves more attention.

There is also a new translation by Charles Stone of Émile Zola’s verdict on Boucicault, from his classic manifesto for theatrical Naturalism (1881). As I explain in the introduction, Zola describes – and dismisses – a French adaptation of Arrah-na-Pogue, one which Boucicault himself had a hand in staging. It is a reminder that significance can be measured in many ways – in reaction and change, as well as in influence and homage.

A final note: COVID-19 took its toll on this issue, as on everything else, and some planned essays have had to be diverted to later publications. On the plus side, the issue benefited as it was prepared from the events arranged for the postponed AHRC Research Network, Boucicault 2020: Circuits of Skill, headed by Aoife Monks and Nicholas Daly. No doubt the Network will generate more publications in due course, extending Boucicault’s anniversary still further. Meanwhile, this writer would like to record warm thanks to the following: the journal’s editors for suggesting and advising on this issue; all the contributors; Nathaniel Zetter additionally for copy-editing; Michael Tilby for advice about the Zola translation; and the friends, family, and Addenbrookes Hospital staff who saw her through 2021. Thanks, above all, to Richard Dance.
Notes

1. On Daly and Belasco, see Richard Fawkes, Dion Boucicault: A Biography (London: Quartet Books, 1979, 2011), pp. 189–90, 191–2; on Joyce and O’Casey, see Stephen Watt, Joyce, O’Casey, and the Irish Popular Theater (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), pp. 30–1, 37; on Shaw, see Martin Meisel, Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater (1963) (New York: Limelight, 1984), pp. 22, 27, 29–30, 141; on Yeats, see Deirdre McFeely, Dion Boucicault: Irish Identity on Stage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 1; on Wilde, see Sos Eltis, ‘Oscar Wilde, Dion Boucicault and the Pragmatics of Being Irish: Fashioning a New Brand of Modern Irish Celt’, Literature in Transition, 60:3 (2017), 267–93, 276; the possible source for Bram Stoker’s Dracula is Boucicault’s The Vampire (1852).

2. ‘The Octoroon, curated by Mark Ravenhill’, BBC Radio 3, May 2013, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01ryffy (accessed 27 June 2022); additionally, London Assurance was adapted for television by Gerald Savory and produced in the United States in 1967 by NET Playhouse and in Britain in 1963 and again in 1976 as a BBC Play of the Month: ‘Episode Guide: NET Playhouse’, in IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0439384/?ref_=fn_al_tt_3a (accessed 27 June 2022); ‘The Victorians, S1.E2: London Assurance’, in IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt01324806/?ref_=fn_al_tt_2 (accessed 27 June 2022); ‘BBC Play of the Month, S12.E2: London Assurance’, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0217626/?ref_=fn_al_tt_4 (accessed 27 June 2022).

3. Dion Boucicault, in Sarika Bose (ed.), The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana (1859) (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2014).

4. Jennifer Buckley judged that an Ontario performance was addressing its moment in both the United States and Canada: ‘An Octoroon’, Theatre Journal, 70:4 (2017); Michael Billington, ‘An Octoroon review – blackface meets whiteface in quicksilver drama’, Guardian, 26 May 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/may/26/an-octoroon-review-orange-tree-richmond-branden-jacobs-jenkins (accessed 27 June 2022).

5. He also saw The Shaughraun at the Abbey and watched London Assurance on television that year; Marilynn Richtarik, Stewart Parker: A Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 167, 172, 290, 362; Richtarik suggests that the text was David Krause, The Dolmen Boucicault (Dublin: Dolmen, 1964).

6. Richtarik, Stewart Parker, p. 290.

7. Ibid.

8. Stewart Parker, Northern Star, Heavenly Bodies, Pentecost: Three Plays for Ireland (Birmingham: Oberon Books, 1989), p. 9.

9. Parker, Three Plays, p. 10.

10. Richtarik suggests that seven playwrights are evoked at length (including Wilde, Shaw, Synge, O’Casey, and Beckett), Stewart Parker, pp. 256–7; Nicholas Grene also detects Farquhar, Sheridan, and Behan hovering in the wings, Nicholas Grene, The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 167.

11. Grene, Politics of Irish Drama, p. 167.

12. Parker, Three Plays (Northern Star, Act II), p. 64.

13. Parker, Three Plays (Heavenly Bodies, Act II), p. 124.

14. Richtarik, Stewart Parker, pp. 293–4.

15. Parker, Three Plays, p. 9.

16. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, ‘Prologue’, An Octoroon (2014) (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017), p. 19.
17. Parker, *Three Plays (Heavenly Bodies, Act II)*, pp. 120–1 [sic].
18. Jacobs-Jenkins, ‘Prologue’, p. 18.
19. ‘FEED – Writer & Director of An Octoroon’, *Soho Rep.*, 1 May 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psqmqqvIC88 (accessed 27 June 2022).
20. ‘FEED Ralph Lemon and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and Daphne Brooks’, *Soho Rep.*, online video recording, YouTube, 9 May 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGjXpuxrGs8 (accessed 27 June 2022).
21. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Jennifer DeVeré Brody, *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity and Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Kimberley Snyder Manganelli, *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race: The Tragic Mulatta and the Tragic Muse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
22. Comparative articles on the two playwrights include Verna Foster, ‘Meta-Melodrama: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins appropriates Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon*, *Modern Drama*, 59:3 (2016), 285–305; Rosa Schneider, “Anyway, the point of this was to make you feel something”: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and the Reconstruction of Melodrama*, *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, 31:1 (2018), 1–22; Jane Kathleen Curry, ‘Spectacle and Sensation in *The Octoroon*/An Octoroon’, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 46:1 (2019), 38–58; Lucy Sheehan, ‘Race, Slavery and the Time of Victorian Studies: *The Octoroon* and *An Octoroon*’, *Victorian Studies*, 63:3 (2021), 329–53.

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