From the first day of their publication, Dickens’s novels have been transformed into stage plays. Financial considerations have often been the main drive behind adaptations and this can well hold true for the 1980s, a decade of relentless cuts in public funding, when Dickens’s name on a playbill was reassuringly synonymous with a box-office hit. Political concerns also help explain the “Dickens boom” following the RSC’s landmark production of Nicholas Nickleby in 1980. In the eyes of a socialist playwright like David Edgar, Dickens was interpreted as an icon of Britishness, and one which, just like Shakespeare, was being turned into a prop to the status quo during the Thatcher era. What I would like to show, however, is that by accepting the challenge of adapting a Dickens novel, a number of contemporary writers engaged in a fascinating dialectic with, on the one hand, Dickens’s narrative voice and on the other, the pervasive theatricality of his writing. In works like Shared Experience’s pioneering project on Bleak House, the RSC’s epic enterprise with Nicholas Nickleby, and John Clifford’s Great Expectations, the pressure of adapting Dickens for the stage acted as a catalyst for stylistic innovation. The Dickens opus, that is, has provided today’s dramatists and directors with a play-ground, a space where new ways of play-making could be envisaged and tried out.

This paper focuses on a single significant instance, a version of Hard Times written in 1982 by British dramatist Stephen Jeffreys for a small-scale touring company, Pocket Theatre Cumbria. The play was also performed in London at the Orange Tree (Richmond) in 1984 and at Croydon’s Theatre Warehouse in 1990. The adaptation has proved very successful in the U.S. as well.

Jeffreys shares with other contemporary adapters a belief that the dramatic rendering of a novel should not do away with the narrative
principle altogether, according to the customary “scenes-from-the-novel” approach, but rather achieve a balanced interplay between mimesis and diegesis. Jeffreys actually identifies the distinctive quality about Dickens with his prose voice. It is in Dickens’s descriptions that his extraordinary ability to animate the inanimate, his capacity for a surreal bending of reality, comes to the fore. These passages must be preserved if the adaptation is to succeed in working on the audience’s imagination as much as the novel does. The idiosyncrasy of Dickens’s narrators, the intrusive moments of authorial comment, are also indispensable if the adapter is to try and retain the characteristic Dickens voice, in Jeffreys this conviction is coupled with a specific interest in storytelling in the theatre. In his adaptation, he plays with the idea of the performance as “fiction”, enhancing the metanarrative element already prominent in Hard Times and transposing it in metatheatrical terms. If Edgard’s Nicholas Nickleby has been credited with a redefinition of epic theatre, Jeffreys in a similar way uses Dickens as a testing ground where he can explore “a new theatrical way of telling a story”.

Jeffreys’s Hard Times re-writes Dickens’s novel as a hefty three-hour performance where two actors and two actresses double and treble to cover 15 different characters, using accent, posture, and only slight costume alterations to indicate the changes. Jeffreys has faithfully reproduced the plot but for one significant exception, namely the Stephen Blackpool episodes. The modern playwright was attracted to Hard Times, from Dickens’s opus, because of its immediate political relevance to the 1980s, with its relentless plumbing of the theme of life being crushed by a system, and its exposure of the destructiveness of so-called “Victorian” values. Writing in-between the “winter of discontent” of 1978/79 and the massive miners’ strikes of 1984, Jeffreys felt he had to give his audience a more convincing, and politically more consistent, motivation for Blackpool’s refusal to join the union, instead of Dickens’s rather muddled explanations. The novel’s portrait of the wicked union leader, Slackbridge, was also hard to accept in the explosive political situation of the Eighties – Jeffreys must be credited with foresight here, since Dickens’s characterization of Slackbridge comes very close to the way the tabloid press were to represent the union leader, Arthur Scargill during the strikes of 1984/85. For this reason, the Union Meeting scene was rewritten as a political debate, with the audience also involved and invited to participate. Blackpool, seen by

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Jeffreys as Dickens’s political alter-ego, motivates his refusal to join on the grounds of lack of trust in unions, and his political beliefs, a form of paternalistic corporativism prescribing co-operation between capital and labour, are contrasted with the position of Mary Stokes, a Coketown worker who delivers a speech revolving around the notion of class struggle.

From the point of view of structure, Jeffreys tried to follow as closely as possible the novel’s oscillations between diegesis and mimesis. Usually, scenes begin with a diegetic sequence, where an actor/actress narrates his/her story in the third person and using the past tense, as if telling the story at some time in the future. At the play’s beginning, actors use direct narration to introduce their character, or rather, one of their characters. Clearly, since actors are deliberately introducing themselves as characters in a novel or in a play, all illusion of dramatic immediacy is shattered. In keeping with the alternating motion of the original, it often happens that actors revert to narration in the course of an enacted scene: they do so in order to express their thoughts, to advance the plot, to connect episodes, or to voice an authorial comment. Sometimes responsibility for the narration is taken up by the whole company as a chorus; this especially happens with descriptive passages like the famous evocation of Coketown. What must also be pointed out is that the narration comes from an actor in character, and not from a presenter figure or an alienated stranger. Believing that the tense of the theatre, as opposed to that of the novel, is always the present, Jeffreys makes sure that the direct narration is always about the actor in front of the audience. Actors can glide without transition from their dialogue lines into Dickens’s narrative text, speaking of themselves in the third person out front, but the authorial words are invested with the personality and the tone of voice of the character who speaks them, and so they are always presentified.

By means of this doubling of perspectives, the audience receives the impression of a story which tells itself at the very same time it is

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4 See e.g. the passage at the beginning of scene 12, with Actor 1 relating to the audience his character’s thoughts in the past tense before acting out the scene as Mr Bounderby:

“Actor 1: Mr Bounderby’s first disquietude, on hearing of his happiness, was occasioned by the necessity of imparting it to Mrs Sparsit. He could not make up his mind how to do that, or what the consequences of the step might be. Whether she would instantly depart bag and baggage to Lady Scadgers, or would positively refuse to budge from the premises; whether she would be plaintive or abusive, tearful or tearing; whether she would break her heart or break the looking-glass; Mr Bounderby could not at all foresee. On his way home, on the evening he set aside for telling her this momentous news, he took the precaution of stepping into a chemist’s shop and buying a bottle of the very strongest smelling salts. ‘By George’, thought Mr Bounderby, ‘if she takes it in the fainting way, I’ll have the skin off her nose at all events.’ But in spite of being thus forewarned, he entered his own house with anything but a courageous air; and appeared before the objects of his misgivings like a dog who was conscious of coming directly from the pantry.” Stephen Jeffreys (1994: 24).
happening. The characters’ actions are both apprehended directly in their enacted form and filtered through narrative commentary. Jeffreys thus manages to reproduce not only the fluidity with which the novel guides its readers through time and space, but also, through the simultaneous staging of action and interpretation, its characteristic interplay of narrative and metanarrative. In its overlapping of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration, moreover, Jeffreys’s *Hard Times* reminds us of the “loose narrators” which are so frequent in the nineteenth-century novel, and in Dickens too – an apparently omniscient, objective narrator, who sometimes, just out of the blue, shifts his point of view and plunges into one of the characters with a displacing effect on the reader. This sense of bewilderment is enhanced in Jeffreys’s play because of the clash between the past tense of the narrative and the present of the narration, which results in a dramatic progression where each reality breaks and subverts previous realities. The most striking example of this breaking of texture is the death of Stephen Blackpool: with the audience almost moved to tears, the “dead” actor suddenly gets up again at lights change and delivers his bit of direct narration as the new scene is about to begin.

On the whole, the pressure of having to work out a procedure for tackling a Dickens adaptation seems to have prompted Jeffreys to re-think Brechtian techniques and to envisage a different kind of epic theatre which is, first and foremost, a meta-theatre where the subject is more than the final product, the process of dramatic storytelling. It is worth remembering that Jeffreys walked into the rehearsal room with just about one third of the novel adapted, and developed the script during a six week rehearsal period where he was able to feed from what the actors were doing. Compared with the workshop on *Nickleby* at the RSC, where David Edgar could rely on the collaboration of Trevor Nunn’s directorial team and on a cast of over forty actors, the experimental work done with *Hard Times* is rather smaller in scale, and revolves more on the notion of character – in this case the character becomes a mask that actors put on and take off at an incredible pace in their endeavour to contribute to the making of the play. The overall impression the spectator receives is that of fictional characters who are reading their story directly from Dickens’s volume – an impression which is heightened by the actors announcing, in a kind of spoken stage direction, that we are about to enter “*Hard Times* by Charles Dickens. Book the First: ‘Sowing’”. The transition to “Reaping” and “Garnering” is once again marked in this same way, as if the characters in *Hard Times* were playing at telling and enacting their own stories over and over again, appropriating the authorial voice once the book has been left unguarded in their hands. They are performers of a story that they already know and of which they become co-authors when they stage it for us.
This brings me to consider in more detail the metatheatrical discourse carried out by Jeffreys throughout the play. *Hard Times*, that is, is also a play about Dickens’s theatre and, reflexively, about the British theatre in the Eighties. The notion itself of the actor as a performer of multiple dramatis personae mirrors the inherent theatricality and the anti-illusory nature of Dickens’s prose – a prose where, according to Robert Garis, the “presence of the artificer” is made apparent, and both the authorial voice and the single characters are “performers of their identities” (Robert Garis 1965: 7, 68). This is a feature also shared by nineteenth-century acting styles, with actors pushing their performances to the point of self-conscious virtuosity (Gary Taylor 1989). On the Victorian stage, an actor’s personality usually remained visible behind the role, meaning that actors would not so much identify with a character as perform a stage identity. Moreover, in Dickens’s novels a number of dramatic genres of his time – melodrama, pantomime, farce, even the nineteenth-century “improved” Shakespeares are incorporated and played one against the other in order to show the limitations of each single worldview they embody. In Jeffreys’s adaptation, the theatricality of *Hard Times* is expanded, explored and implicitly commented upon from a modern perspective. The theatre scenes of the novel tend to be faithfully reproduced when already in Dickens they are played to debunking, ironic ends; when, instead, the melodramatic or spectacular elements are used for purely sensational purposes, Jeffreys tends to undercut them and to take a critical stance towards Dickens’s theatre.

Jeffreys, for instance, gives a thoroughly melodramatic rendering of the climactic scene which concludes book two of *Hard Times*: the scene of Louisa’s presumed fall into Harthouse’s hands. In Dickens, this is a stock scene from melodrama, or at least it becomes one since it is observed through Mrs Sparsit’s eyes, who misinterprets Louisa’s flight as a rapid descent down a mighty staircase “with a dark pit of shame and ruin at the bottom”. Dickens is here intent on recreating a theatrical frame in order to evoke a set of expectations in his readers which he then subverts when Louisa, instead of metaphorically falling into the depths of sin, literally throws herself at her father’s feet in a plea for understanding and protection. When high melodrama is suddenly twisted into a domestic tale, Dickens forces his readers to question preconceived ways of apprehending reality. Jeffreys reproduces the sequence as closely as possible. Since the scene has to be abridged, it acquires a hectic pace which very effectively

5 A good example thereof is the mock-reconciliation scene between Gradgrind and his son that takes place at Sleary’s circus (III, 7) – in this case the appropriated conventions are melodrama and pantomime. See Edwin M. Eigner (1989), and Catherine Gallagher (1995: 171-196).
conveys the impression of Louisa’s dizzy descent into the abysm of evil. The image of the “mighty staircase” is preserved and visually recreated (“Louisa glides past Mrs Sparsit, descending slowly”). Responsibility for the narration is taken by the two actresses in turns – a sort of stichomythic narration which reflects Mrs Sparsit’s breathless pursuit and builds up to the climax, or rather, to the anti-climax. Jeffreys goes so far as to stage nothing less than a nineteenth-century “floor scene,” with Louisa helplessly falling to the ground before her father.

The pre-requisite for a direct appropriation of Dickens’s melodrama seems to be that it has been deconstructed in the novel already. When this is not the case, Jeffreys takes upon himself the task of deflating and subverting stock dramatic conventions. This happens, for instance, with the scene where Stephen Blackpool is rescued from the Old Hell Shaft. What Dickens offers us in the novel is a typical Victorian “sensation scene.” That this was acknowledged as such by contemporaries is demonstrated by a dramatic adaptation in 1867, put on by W. H. C. Nation at Astley’s Amphitheatre, Nation Hard Times where into Under the Earth; or, Sons of Toil was turned, a sensational melodrama dealing with the danger of work in the mines (see Malcolm Morley 1954: 69-73). Jeffreys could have gone for the easy option, asking one of the actors to report the scene in direct narration, but he decided instead to stage it with a bare minimum of resources: four actors and a rope. In rehearsals he asked the company to work out themselves a way of doing the scene, thereby challenging the very theatricality of the actors. There is a certain amount of playfulness in the idea of four actors doing something that is impossible – at another point in the play they are asked to recreate a railway station! The writer is here pushing the stage to a limit in order to test its possibilities and stir both the actors’ and the audience’s imagination. I also feel that, by undercutting Dickens’s melodrama through this style of presentation, the contemporary dramatist is making a point about the financial pressures weighing upon the theatre in the 1980s, and at the same time he is indicating a way of turning this poverty of material resources into a strength. Relying on the actors’ skills and on the imagination of the spectators, Jeffreys manages to produce a different kind of “spectacular” scene, one which, in the amount of creative work involved, probably comes closer to the experience of reading a Dickens novel than a film or a TV version do.

The same questioning of the theatrical medium pervades the play’s Epilogue, where it becomes one with Dickens’s own metafictional

6 The rope was paid out sideways on the floor, with the actor at the end of it moving with difficulty “downwards”, i.e. across the stage towards Blackpool; the rescuer eventually reached him and fastened the rope around him. The rope was then pulled in and they reached the “safe” side of the stage.
concerns. After each of the four main characters have reported the future that Charles Dickens has in store for them, Louisa steps out of role to become Actress 1 again, and speaks in Dickens’s authorial voice his well-known address to the reader – but with a small, significant change:

It rests with you and us [in Dickens: “you and me”], whether in our different fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold.

Because of the metatheatrical structure of the play, spectators have been tricked throughout into accepting their role as contributors in the making of the tale; now the ending hands over to them the responsibility for the telling. The doubling of perspectives, the presence of modern-day actors telling and interpreting a nineteenth-century story, has simultaneously worked to give a critical perspective on the action and to heighten the emotional involvement of the audience. In its open-endedness, the play’s close, delivered to a fully lit auditorium, forces spectators to confront the implications of an active role not just in the story, but in history as well. With the characters now in possession of the tale – the author has changed from Dickens’s “me” to a collective “us” – there is of course the possibility that the next time round the narrative will work out differently, that a new version of the future might be told. In this way, Dickens’s characters are inviting the audience to become aware of the possibility that, in their “different fields of action” – the story and History – memory can act as an active, shaping force on the perception of reality. To writers like Stephen Jeffreys, Dickens has proved an ideal playground to explore the potential of story-telling and, consequently, the potential for a theatre where members of a community tell each other stories from the past while making History.

Works Cited


