

After Dickens World: Performing Victorians at the Chatham Docks

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Abstract:

Dickens World first opened in 2007 and has since been interpreted through the lenses of literary tourism, post-modernity, and adaptation theory. But in 2013 the attraction restructured and changed focus. This article draws on research in immersive theatre, heritage studies, and theme parks to compare the original concept to the new. I argue that Dickens World is best viewed as a performance, and that comparing the two versions helps us rethink the role of Dickens World and other immersive instructive entertainment in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: adaptation, Charles Dickens, Dickens World, immersive entertainment, literary tourism, performance, theme parks, heritage, TripAdvisor.

As visitors approach the Disneyland ticket counter, their view of the park's centrepiece, Sleeping Beauty's Castle, is obstructed by the train station. To enter, guests pass through tunnels running below the train and flanked on either side by coming attractions posters, which advertise the park's rides and shows. The train station functions as a curtain, the posters as previews. Even at park opening the smell of popcorn wafts through these tunnels, not because guests necessarily want popcorn for breakfast but because the smell adds to the sense that one is in a movie theatre. Characters are staged throughout the park, and even non-costumed Disney employees are 'cast members' trained to think in terms of 'on stage' and 'off stage'. Recent films based on park attractions like *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Tomorrowland* are a natural progression: Walt Disney involved his top storywriters and animators in constructing Disneyland, and since its opening in 1955 the architectural, metaphoric, and olfactory experience has been framed as a performance.

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Disneyland is the benchmark for themed entertainments – even those whose themes seem a far cry from Disney’s. In 2005, referring to the Charles Dickens theme park, then under construction in the dockyards of Chatham, Kent, a writer for the *Evening Standard* quipped, “Forget Disneyland, try Dickens World” (Lydall 2005: 19). By the time it opened two years later, comparisons to Disney were commonplace. Simon Swift called it “Disney gone to the dark side” (Swift 2007), while Brendan O’Neill compared it to “Disney World dipped in rust-coloured paint and starved of the Florida sunlight” (O’Neill 2007). An early visitor’s online review reads,

Disney in Florida and Paris. Now, Chatham! The difference though is the emotions I experienced at Dreamland and Disney were big WOW factor excitement emotions [...] nothing to do with the feelings generated by Dickens World. (adejames 2008)

While journalists feared Dickens World would be “a ‘Disneyfication’ of Dickens, an inauthentic ‘dumbing down’ of the author’s works and his age” (John 2011: 275-276), visitors lamented that it didn’t live up to the Disney standard. Both groups seem to agree that ‘theme park’ is at best an incomplete assessment of Dickens World. So what is it? An extension of the heritage industry? Immersive theatre? A crass attempt to commercialise the inimitable? A postmodern riff on Victorian culture?

Critics like Juliet John, Rebecca Mitchell, Marty Gould, and Alison Booth offer answers to these questions. But all visited before 2013, when Dickens World temporarily closed for refurbishment. The initial concept was an immersive environment themed around Dickens’s novels, supplemented by live actors but focused predominantly on visitors’ own experiences. The later Dickens World instead consisted of a tour of Dickensian London with a guide whose performance was the centre of attention. I contrast the two approaches, situating the conceptual difference in scholarship on heritage, performance, theme parks, and immersive theatre to argue that Dickens World’s failure to navigate a successful course between instruction and entertainment meant it achieved neither goal – perhaps contributing to the park’s permanent closure on 12 October 2016.

1. **Dickens World: The Two Scrooges**

In his famous essay ‘Dickens: The Two Scrooges’, Edmund Wilson sees Dickens’s novels as “organized according to a dualism which is based – in its artistic derivation – on the values of melodrama” (Wilson 1941: 61). Wilson links Dickens to a genre of Victorian theatre in which “there are bad people and there are good people, there are comics and there are characters played straight”, arguing that Dickens’s complexity is limited to transitioning between these two extremes. Wilson’s title distinguishes the curmudgeonly miser of the opening pages from the genial holiday celebrant Scrooge becomes at the end, but the dualism is present in all of Dickens.

We find a similar dualism in the history of Dickens World, which reads like a litany of puns and allusions growing progressively less optimistic. In an interview with the *Evening Standard*, managing director Kevin Christie called Dickens World “a ‘family attraction’ with theme park-style rides mixed with references to the Dickens novels” (Christie qtd. in Lydall 2005). The initial concept emphasised the humour and fun in Dickens, taking a light-hearted approach to Victorian life, “complete with soot, pickpockets, cobblestones, gas lamps, animatronic Dickens characters and strategically placed chemical ‘smell pots’ that would, when heated, emit odours of offal and rotting cabbage” (Anderson 2012). In 2008 the *Toronto Star* had “great expectations” for the site (Membery 2008), but the BBC printed that allusion with a question mark (Rohrer 2007), and by 2014 *Al Jazeera* put it in the past tense: “Launched to great expectations, Dickens theme park falls on hard times” (Vo 2014). The attraction temporarily closed in early 2013, dropping the price from £13 to £5.50; upon re-opening, it featured “a 90 minute interactive guided tour experience that [took] visitors back in time to Charles Dickens’ Victorian England” (Dickens World 2015). Though still meant to be entertaining, the tour, as one reviewer put it, emphasised both “facts and figures regarding Dickens’ books” and “what it was like to live in London in what was a pretty harsh period in history” (James B 2013). That the Victorian period was “pretty harsh” has long been a feature of the popular imagination, evidenced, for example, by the opening voiceover to Orson Welles’s 1944 adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, which sets the narrative in “a harsh time of change in England” (Wells qtd. in Clayton 2012: 718). The about-face from mirth to gloom reverses Scrooge’s transformation.

A few years ago, in this journal, Marty Gould and Rebecca N. Mitchell explored Dickens World's initial attractions, which included a *Great Expectations*-themed boat ride, billed as the highlight of the attraction; a haunted house, initially advertised as Scrooge's but changed, before opening, to "the haunted house of 1859"; a 4D biographical movie at Peggotty's boathouse; Dotheboys Schoolhouse, featuring a Dickens quiz; Fagin's Den, a play area for small children; a restaurant, The Six Jolly Fellowship Porters; and a gift shop, the Olde Curiosity Shoppe (whose spelling, true neither to Dickens's novel nor to Victorian orthography, drew the ire of the more pedantic reviewers). Gould and Mitchell "consider how adaptation theory might be applied beyond strictly literary or cinematic boundaries", as each of these attractions brings to life an element of Dickens's fictional world and reproduces the complex relationship between reader and text (Gould and Mitchell 2010b: 146).

The park that Gould and Mitchell visited, however, did not exist for much longer. In 2012, as Dickensians celebrated the bicentennial of Dickens's birth and Dickens World made *Time* magazine's list of the ten weirdest theme parks (Rawlings 2012), the attraction was already in decline. Dickens World never achieved its initial goal "to create 200 jobs and attract 500,000 visitors a year and help reignite the region's economy", and in 2012 was surviving "largely as a landlord, collecting rent from the Odeon movie theatre next door and the restaurants (Pizza Hut, Subway, Chimichanga) that surround[ed] it" (Anderson 2012). Even the landlord role proved unsustainable. Dickens World restructured in March of 2013 and made major changes. The 'new' Dickens World, sans boat ride, consisted solely of a 'Grand Tour' led by a performer who took on various roles and provided historical information about Victorian life. The original attractions functioned merely as backdrops. The apostrophe that (as many critics noted) was missing from Dickens World's title reasserted itself in a guided tour that transported visitors "back in time to Charles Dickens' Victorian England" (Dickens World 2015). The tonal shift from the mirth of Dickens's novels to the 'harshness' of his historical moment is mirrored by an ontological shift: the newly introduced guided tour took guests not *into* the fictional world of Dickens's novels but *back* to a moment in England's history.

The guided tour had its historical precedents. Dickens recognised the concept, and the parsimonious Jonas Chuzzlewit plays the role of London guide, showing Mercy and Charity Pecksniff "as many sights, in the way of

bridges, churches, streets, outsides of theatres, and other free spectacles, in that one forenoon, as most people see in a twelvemonth” (Dickens 2009: 152). Moreover during Dickens’s own lifetime, “the practice of visiting places associated with Anglophone authors in order to savour book, place, and their interrelations”, now known as literary tourism, became commercially viable (Watson 2009: 2). Joss Marsh dates the first London guidebook to 1845, and books like *A Ramble in Dickens-land* (1892) and *Bozland* (1895) figured London as a precursor to Disneyland, at least in name (Marsh 1993: 67). The ‘grand tour’ of Dickens World began in a façade of Camden Town, where the guide explained the hardships of Victorian poverty, describing (for example) how many families lived in a single room. It continued through Marshalsea Prison, where visitors learned about Dickens’s father and got to stand in a jail cell, and paused in Dotheboys Schoolhouse, where the guide turned things over to his or her ‘twin brother’ (or sister), a Gradgrindian schoolmaster who selected a ‘student’ to write out lines on a chalkboard. The tour concluded with a walk through what was formerly the haunted house, where the guide showed visitors the ‘Pepper’s Ghost’ illusion. Throughout the tour visitors learned facts about Dickens and the Victorians, and the guide related details in the façades to Dickens’s life.

The location of Dickens World in Chatham attempted to take advantage of nearby Dickensian events like the Rochester Dickens Festival and the proximity to Dickens’s house, Gad’s Hill (Huntley 2008). Dana Huntley, Ryan Fong, and Alison Booth all consider Dickens World in the context of other Dickensian tourist sites. As Booth writes, “[a]n appeal to authorial intention endorses the venture again and again: Dickens would have done this if he could” (Booth 2009: 159). Such marketing linked Dickens World with other heritage projects, and to John Gardiner’s concern about a “theme-park approach to the Victorians” that “foregrounds the interactive and the commercial, favours sensory input and atmosphere above the dryly factual” (Gardiner 2004: 167). As Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd have noted, “[v]isits to museums and heritage sites have in recent years become (not least in promotional rhetoric) less about the *object* and more about the *experience*: an ‘encounter’ with a past that is ‘brought to life’” (Jackson and Kidd 2011: 1, original emphasis).

During its second stage, Dickens World certainly followed that trend, exemplified by “[t]he increased use of performance”, a feature that has

made the heritage industry “subject to criticisms of ‘Disneyfication’ and ‘edutainment’” (Jackson and Kidd 2011: 1). The connection especially matters when one considers how architectural space relates to performances. As Alke Gröppel-Wegener argues, sites like the Victorian Street at the York Castle Museum are “not unlike theme parks such as Disneyland, only supported by accurate historical research”; indeed “under the right circumstances architectural spaces can take the place of live performance and give visitors an experience that is not led by performers” (Gröppel-Wegener 2011: 41, 39). At Dickens World that experience was aided by the Victorian sewer through which the Great Expectations Boat Ride formerly transported riders, and the facades of Victorian buildings like the Marshalsea Prison, into which guides led the tours. Considering the architectural space helps bring into focus the difference between the two Dickens Worlds: the boat ride made the presence of an actor unnecessary, while the tour shifted the focus onto the guide’s performance.

Whatever the role of live performers, Dickens World performed an interpretation of a Dickensian London that never existed. In their readings of Dickens World both Alison Booth and Alexis Easley draw on Jean Baudrillard, who, in *Simulations and Simulacra*, posits that postmodern simulations no longer refer to reality but are instead generated “by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1994: 1). Images that supposedly represent some basic reality come to mask the fact that that reality is illusory. While we might imagine that Dickens represented Victorian London, his image of the city is a distorted one, and Dickens World further masked that distortion by conflating Dickens’s London with the historical London. Alexis Easley finds “a simulacrum focused on Dickens’s works” to be a “logical extension” of “the discourse on literary tourism in the popular press of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Easley 2011: 46), while Booth distinguishes Dickens World from other heritage sites in that it played up its inauthenticity: tourists instead “value[d] the palpable artifice and conscious anachronism, signs of human manipulation of time and place” (Booth 2009: 159). The tour, with its purported goal of transporting visitors “back in time to Charles Dickens’ Victorian England” (Dickens World 2015), made the endeavour less consciously artificial, but the simulacrum was still the same.

The generation of simulacra is a feature of the theme park, which is itself a postmodern genre. Baudrillard cites Disneyland as “a perfect model

of all the entangled orders of simulation”, claiming that the park “is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (Baudrillard 1994: 12). Baudrillard refers to the “excessive number of gadgets used there to specifically maintain the multitudinous affect” (Baudrillard 1994: 12), and Kathryn Hughes correspondingly focuses on the technologies that create the Dickensian simulacra. “Rather than attempt to offer a direct path back to a stable and anterior world demonstrably inhabited by the novelist”, Hughes writes, the creators of Dickens World “dramatize[d] the impossibility of that project, the impotence of the desire that [drove] it, and in the process reveal[ed] alternative ways of representing his life and work” (Hughes 2010: 390). The 4-D theatre, for example, delivered a cartoon account of Dickens’s biography, “mediated by not one but two technological interventions, one of them deliberately anachronistic (the 4D glasses), another virtual (the pretend magic lantern)” (Hughes 2010: 391). Like the architecture, this technological mediation obviated the need for live actors. Or maybe even for books: one visitor reported wanting to “come home and fire up the Kindle to re-read Charles Dickens novels of the lives back in the 19th century!” (Pat H 2013). The irony of using a Kindle to conjure up life in the nineteenth century underscores the kind of technological mediation Hughes mentions, which spilled beyond the walls of Dickens World.

In Easley’s, Booth’s, and Hughes’s readings of Dickens World the immersive experience was deliberately interrupted, emphasising instead the Dickensian simulacra that the various rides created. That emphasis, as I have already noted, marked Dickens World as a theme park, a genre whose connotations are quite distant from the Victorian novel. Juliet John discusses Dickens World in the closing chapter of *Dickens and Mass Culture*, claiming that the park revealed how much “the gap between intellectual and commercial culture has widened since Dickens’s day” (John 2011: 288). On the one hand, the venture bridged that gap by introducing “a now respectable literary figure to a non-literary audience”, consistent with Dickens’s own refusal to accept the necessity of such a divide (John 2011: 288). But on the other hand, “Dickens World [was] predicated on an acceptance of this gulf, choosing simply to revivify the commercial, entertaining side of Dickens” (John 2011: 288). Managing director Kevin Christie resisted analogies with Disney, seemingly challenging John’s latter

point about crass commercialisation. But he also distinguished Dickens World from museums and similar historical attractions. “Excepting the school parties, we are not here to teach”, he told the *Telegraph*, “but we do want to stimulate people, hopefully by entertaining them” (Christie qtd. in Lusher 2007). And if the original concept favoured entertainment over instruction, the guided tour represented a change in operational strategy: “school parties” were no longer the exception, and the guided tour embraced an instructional role, even if still interactive and entertaining.

Dickens World originally privileged interactivity, drawing on the theme park genre to emphasise how fun Dickens and the Victorians could be. Actors playing pickpockets and rat-catchers roamed the Dickensian streets, supplementing guests’ experiences. In some ways the guided tour was even more theatrical. The tour shifted the focus from the visitor’s self-determined experience to a single guide’s performance, and in the first few months a star appeared: ‘Blushing Bonnie’ dominated the reviews. But the tour was also less immersive than the original, a fact that fundamentally changed the visitor experience. The two Dickens Worlds thus represented contrasting approaches to how to perform the Victorians in the twenty-first century. In the next two sections I further explore this contrast. One original attraction, Fagin’s Den, adapted Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) in a manner that offered an interpretation of the theme park experience itself. The new guided tour, as revealed by TripAdvisor reviews, focused attention on star performers like Blushing Bonnie, and most reviewers remained sceptical as to the supposed ‘improvements’ made to the park.

2. Performing Children in Fagin’s Den

Before opening, Dickens World received over a thousand applications for fifty jobs. They “narrowed the pool with ‘American Idol’-style auditions”, a manager reported: “We made the applicants demonstrate customer service [...]. What they’d do if somebody lost a child, or injured themselves. Or if there was a complaint, unfortunately [...]. The twist is, *you have to do it in a Victorian manner*” (qtd in Anderson 2012, original italics). A self-identified employee of Dickens World, reviewing the site on the website Ciao, noted that characters like “Ned the Rat Catcher, William Sykes, the town drunk and the beautiful wenches” helped to “create a lively atmosphere” (lawlore 2007). That these actors ‘created the atmosphere’ seems to indicate that they

only supplemented the experience: in its initial concept, Dickens World was only partly performance.

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon distinguishes among three forms: telling (verbal adaptations); showing (performances, whether stage or film); and participatory (e.g., video games) (Hutcheon 2012: 22-27). Gould and Mitchell apply these concepts to Dickens World, locating the “immersive literary entertainment” at “the nexus of adaptation and literary tourism” to develop nuanced interpretations of each attraction (Gould and Mitchell 2010b: 146). The Great Expectations Boat Ride, for example, fell somewhere between Dickens’s novel and Disney’s boat rides like *It’s a Small World* or *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The ride floated visitors through a mock sewer, ending with a jail scene including characters from several of Dickens’s novels. But unlike Dickens’s novel, the boat ride “[did] not offer a unified, cohesive narrative” (Gould and Mitchell 2010b: 159), nor did it, like Disney’s rides, depend on the pleasures of spectacle. The ride instead “reduce[d] the novel to a single icon — Magwitch in his criminal incarnation — and trie[d] to extrapolate from that image the theme of crime and punishment” (Gould and Mitchell 2010b: 161). Thus the boat ride not only enacted a rather reductive interpretation of Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, but also tested the limits of how such an interpretation could be presented. “By fragmenting narrative into its constituent components of plot, characters, and theme”, write Gould and Mitchell, the ride “perhaps unintentionally highlight[ed] the role a reader plays in making meaning” and “without a clear narrative authority, readers [had to] construct their own coherent experience” (Gould and Mitchell 2010b: 161).

Gould and Mitchell offer similarly insightful readings of Dotheboys Schoolhouse, the Haunted House of 1859, the courtyard, and the gift shop. The one attraction about which they have little to say is Fagin’s Den, the “McDonald’s-style playground” with a “wildly inappropriate title” (Gould and Mitchell 2010a: 292). Other writers have been similarly troubled by the notion that visitors to Dickens World “set their kids loose in a rainbow-colored play area called, ominously, Fagin’s Den” (Anderson 2012). The site seemed a less ominous and inappropriate space, however, when considered in Gröppel-Wegener’s architectural terms, allowing visitors to engage in a performance without the presence of actors. In this light, Fagin’s Den bridged the latter two of Hutcheon’s categories, performance and participation, and evoked a paradox at the heart of the theme park genre: the

appeal both to children and to adults. According to the mythology that runs through his biographies, Walt Disney's inspiration for Disneyland came when he took his daughter to a merry-go-round, and found himself bored. He envisioned a place where children and adults could enjoy themselves together. In fact, according to his daughter, Walt Disney "never [thought] of children as his primary audience" (qtd in Miller and Martin 1957: 82).

As a play area, Fagin's Den recalled Dickens's novel. The first morning after Oliver's arrival in Fagin's home, Fagin and the boys "played at a very curious and uncommon game" (Dickens 1992: 69), as Fagin pretends to be a wary old gentleman and the boys practice their pickpocketing. When Fagin catches them "the game began all over again", and Fagin later refers to being "at play" (Dickens 1992: 70, 71). Oliver makes sense of what he's seeing only by imagining it as a game. The narrator, however, introduces the game by saying it "was performed in this way" (Dickens 1992: 69), punning on "play" as Oliver becomes the audience for a performance. Readers are invited to make an association that Dickens himself often made, connecting childhood play with visits to the theatre, especially the pantomime.

In *Oliver Twist* Fagin's den is a theatrical space in which adults and children perform for each other. But at Dickens World only child visitors could participate in the performance. As one reviewer put it, "Fagin's Den I believe is only for very tiny children as you had to be 1 metre or less to enter, and even by walking on my knees they still wouldn't let me in" (Mildew82 2010). Another noted "our sons feeling that they were too old to enter Fagin's Den, the children's play area" (silverstreak 2007). When the area closed down and Dickens World introduced its guided tour, a TripAdvisor review lamented "closures of parts of the attraction including the children's play area" and concluded that Dickens World was "[n]o longer an attraction for people with young children" (Giles E 2013). A theme park, in Disney's tradition, is meant to be enjoyed by both children and adults, and Fagin's Den, by excluding adults, transgressed that element of the genre.

Such transgression may have been precisely the point, however, for Fagin's Den transgressed not only the theme park but also the source material. In *Oliver Twist*, Fagin is a terrifying figure, not just to those other criminals whom he sends to the gallows but also to the children he impresses into his gang – and ultimately to the image of childhood itself, as

in Nancy's reproach: "I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this! [...] you're the wretch that drove me to [the streets]" (Dickens 1992: 116). Fagin's protégé Jack Dawkins already has "all the airs and manners of a man", and though the other boys are no older than the Dodger, they all have "the air of middle aged men" (Dickens 1992: 62, 65). Read in the genre of the theme park as a space for both adults and children, Fagin's Den developed John Glavin's notion of performed adaptations, which aim to engender "from the source a new text, one that the adapter and the adapter's audience *feel* they must have" and that allow an audience familiar with the prior texts to "experience not their continuation but their transgression" (Glavin 1999: 5, 35, original emphasis). Such an interpretation makes sense once we consider the theme park as a genre of performance, and Dickens World as work in that genre (albeit no longer an extant one). Fagin's Den completed a process begun by Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* (1960) and Disney's *Oliver and Company* (1988), claiming Dickens's novel for children. But in doing so it violated a crucial term of the theme park, reclaiming Fagin at the expense of the genial relationship between adult and child that theme parks celebrate.

3. The Grand Tour, Starring Blushing Bonnie

Easley described Dickens World's façades as "a fake city designed to imitate a London that had, after all, always been a kind of fiction" (Easley 2011: 46). If the original Dickens World emerged from the discourse of literary tourism that turns heritage sites into simulacra, the newer Dickens World pushed the simulacrum into yet another order. Actors in the original Dickens World had played supporting roles, creating a space for guests to wander freely through attractions that brought Dickens's novels to life. The new "interactive guided tour experience", transporting "visitors back in time to Victorian/Dickensian England" (Dickens World 2015), shifted the focus from the guests' participation to the guides' performances, and from Dickens's fictions to the historical world that his novels re-created but which never existed in the first place. Thus the new Dickens World was an image of the fiction of the real world, changing not just who was performing but also what was performed.

An early visitor described the tour as "surreal" and was "really not sure if this [was] aimed at adults or children. Our guide was good [and provided] lots of information but you felt you could have just had a lecture

without wandering around in the very cold building” (lillyKent 2013). The theme park, as I argued above, is aimed at both adults *and* children, and this visitor’s inability to determine whether Dickens World was aimed at one or the other implied its failure to break down the binary. But despite ambivalence about the lecture and location, the comment about the performer was more positive. That reaction is typical of the TripAdvisor reviews posted in the two years following the reopening. Whether visitors came to praise Dickens World or to bury it, they lauded the guide while remaining sceptical about the tour’s content. The guide was the star of the show, but the performance was at odds with the purportedly educational lecture.

TripsAdvisor of course has its problems as a source for evidence, but the reviews provide a glimpse into the experience of visiting Dickens World and a plurality of anecdotes more typical than those from journalists or scholars.¹ True to the legacy of Victorian theatrics, Dickens World reviews were more telling than the mere overview of the tour I provided above. Rather than following a sacred text to the letter, “Victorian actors often improvised dialogue, invented their own stage business, and claimed generic roles (butler, soubrette, fop) as ‘lines’ whose distinctive points and costumes defined plays even more than the words penned by authors” (Marcus 2012: 439). Dickens World guides did the same, taking on the role of a Victorian schoolmaster, for example, while also interacting with the audience and catering to specific groups’ needs. Reviewers’ valorisation of the actor-guides in Dickens World can be read as an extension of “[t]he valorization of actors in Victorian theater” (Marcus 2012: 442), and from March through June 2013, the star of Dickens World was Blushing Bonnie. One reviewer found Blushing Bonnie “very entertaining and informative”, despite disappointment that parts of the attraction were closed (bmwsheilaz3 2013). “I had heard mixed reviews but I was really surprised”, wrote another reviewer, whose review title, “Blushing Bonnie guide made our day,” sums up the experience (sparkymarky79 2013), while a further reviewer reported that “the guide was truly superb and without such an enthusiastic guide the attraction would be lacklustre” (Giles E 2013).

These reviews make clear that Bonnie was the highlight of a visit to Dickens World, and by April 2013, only a few weeks after Dickens World’s reopening, her fame was secure: “after reading the reviews I wasn’t expecting much and when we didn’t get ‘blushing Bonnie’ I was prepared

for the worst” (polly88 2013), wrote one visitor, while another told of having “the lively ‘Blushing Bonnie’ as our guide [...]. Some of the experience was potentially scary for smaller children but the guide achieved the perfect balance of being reassuring but not backing away from getting the message across” (TarquinMousetrousers 2013). In these reviews we begin to get a picture both of the tour in general and what made ‘Blushing Bonnie’ stand out: she tailored her performance for specific audiences. Evidently “kids loved being volunteers” (polly88 2013), and the experience was “a real interactive tour and the actors encourage[d] you to get involved” (James B 2013). Some of the immersive interactivity that had characterised the original Dickens World remained, but Bonnie’s presence was critical: visitors needed encouragement to participate, and kids were Bonnie’s volunteers rather than performers in their own right, as they had been in Fagin’s Den.

The tour was performed “all in character – including a scary school teacher!” (James B 2013), as “Blushing Bonnie, dressed in costume, with voice to match” led guests “through the life and tales of Charles Dickens” (terror13 2013). The school lesson, “a real hoot” (sparkymarky79 2013), was a common favourite. The scene took place in Dotheboys Hall, a holdover from the original Dickens World. Consistent with the new emphasis on performance, the digital quiz that Kathryn Hughes mentions was replaced by the guide’s ‘twin sister’ performing the role of strict schoolmaster. Praising Bonnie as “brilliant, funny and so knowledgeable about Dickens history”, a grandparent explained how much her grandson loved the tour, “especially in the Schoolroom when we were tested about what we had learnt about Dickens and if you got it wrong they put the dunces hat on you!!” (Harleysuekent 2013).

The prominence of the schoolroom was fitting, since the performance was supplemented with (and perhaps justified by) informational content. The tour was “peppered with facts and figures regarding Dickens’ books, characters etc.” and provided “a great overview of what it was like to live in London” according to a reviewer who also offered a “big round of applause for the sheer amount of information that Bonnie regaled us with” (James B 2013). Another described how Bonnie “kept us engaged and enthused” with “facts about the 1800’s and indeed Charles Dickens himself!” (jkbulldog 2013). Both these comments reveal that Dickens was only part of the show, which extended to Victorian life

more generally. The latter reviewer's "indeed" expresses surprise at Dickensian facts, and the most common criticism of the tour was the lack of focus on Dickens himself and vague 'Victorian' content. Visitors wondered "where Jack the Ripper and Sweeny Todd [sic] relate to Dickens" (William J 2013) and complained about the guide "making up a variety of facts about 'the victorians' [sic]" (theshapeofthings 2013).

The accusation that a guide might be "making up a variety of facts" gets to the heart of the challenge Dickens World faced. Dickens World shifted its marketing from a "theme park style attraction" to an informational guided tour, but failed to live up to the promise. Gröppel-Wegener indicates that museums can veer into space typically occupied by theme parks because they are "supported by accurate historical research" (Gröppel-Wegener 2011: 41). At Dickens World, the focus remained on the performer at the expense of the research. Some visitors did not mind, noting that "the acting staff tr[ie]d very hard with difficult and lacklustre material" (TheAgedP 2013). Blushing Bonnie's performance tempered negative responses to the tour's suspect informational content, but the grand tour focused too much on that performance: guides may have been good enough actors to entertain, but they did not adequately perform their roles in conveying knowledge about Dickens or the Victorians.

4. Playing to an Empty House

Perhaps Bonnie's strength was something other than what I describe above: perhaps she was simply better than other guides at getting guests to positively review Dickens World on TripAdvisor. One review from July 2013 (which does not mention the guide's name) makes this plausible: "our guide sat down at the end of the tour, and held out a bag for a collection, and told us to go on to Trip Advisor to recommend Dickens World, otherwise they would be closed down, and she would be out of a job" (William J 2013). When I visited in December 2014, our guide also directed us to TripAdvisor. Such direction increases the number of reviews, but also skews them in a positive direction: of the roughly 750 reviews, over 80% rate Dickens World four stars or higher, with well over half giving it five stars (TripAdvisor 2015). The reviews at Christmas time, however, were nearly all negative. Christmas would seem a natural opportunity for Dickens World, and the failure to capitalise on the connection between Dickens and Christmas again revealed the limits of its performative imagination.

In its early years, Christmas at Dickens World featured a “little shack for hot chocolate, food and drinks in the Victorian square” and “little plays being put on and snow falling from above the large Christmas Tree” (Sue F 2013). Upon returning in 2013, a guest regretted the absence of these additions. Instead, Dickens World presented a Christmas tour as an add-on to their Aladdin pantomime; guests needed a ticket in order to take the tour. I visited Dickens World the next year, on Boxing Day 2014, during the ‘Christmas Mission’. Dickens World was transformed into Santa’s village, with the gimmick that child visitors are helping Santa get ready for Christmas: elves helped visitors colour in pictures, play a carnival game, and visit Santa. One reviewer described it as “[u]ninterested teenagers running a supermarket Santa’s grotto”, which “is hardly Dicken’s [sic] World” (BMcG1 2014). On our visit my wife, mother-in-law, and I were the only people there, and as it was after Christmas the ‘help Santa get ready’ theme made even less sense. We politely declined the colouring books and wandered somewhat aimlessly through the Dickensian facades until one of actors kindly agreed to put aside his elf costume and instead take us on the regular non-seasonal tour. We were grateful, and my experience was consistent with the reviews I would later read on TripAdvisor – the guide’s performance was fine, but the description of Dickensian London was clichéd and oversimplified.

In the book to which my title alludes, Glavin explains that “we come after Dickens in at least three ways. Most obviously, chronologically: he’s gone, we’re here. But we’re also after Dickens in the sense of seeking him out”, and in a stylistic sense “that echoes through so many second-level museums: an Epiphany ‘after Rubens’” (Glavin 1999: 2-3). Dickens World was not only after Dickens in all these ways but also extended the “nasty capitalist metaphor” implied in attempting “to make a profit from coming After Dickens (Glavin 1999: 7). The continued existence of Dickens tourism – though not, as of October 2016, Dickens World – not to mention the thriving heritage markets and Victorian reality shows, such as most recently BBC Two’s *The Victorian Slum* (2016), indicates a desire for an immersive, performed adaptation of Dickens and the Victorian age more generally, and a genuine interest in both his novels and the time period in which he lived. But unlike other literary theme parks like Universal Studios’ Wizarding World of Harry Potter (which seems in no danger of closing down all the rides to become a guided tour of Hogwarts), Dickens World had to balance

the fictional worlds of the novels with the historical world of the Victorians, or at least visitors' imaginings thereof. Its failure quite to strike that balance revealed the difficulty in meeting the competing desires of its neo-Victorian audiences.

Notes

1. While the London guidebook emerged in the 1830s, restaurant and hotel reviews emerged only at the end of the nineteenth century. Joseph Reagle traces the history of online reviews, noting that the "earliest significant review guides" such as "the *Hachette* in France and *Baedeker* in Germany" date from the end of the nineteenth century, but that the genre was firmly established by the Michelin guides, beginning in 1900 (Reagle, Jr. 2015: 27-28). The Michelin guide was based partly on public input, making it the true ancestor to sites like Yelp and TripAdvisor, but the Zagat guides, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, were the first to make such public input the entirety of the content (Reagle, Jr. 2015: 33). As Reagle notes, "[i]f something or someone can be applauded or pilloried in a comment – whether a hotel, gadget case, plumber, doctor, singer, or politician – there will be fakes" (Reagle, Jr. 2015: 53). Nevertheless, reviews provide a useful view into visitors' experience with the tour.

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