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Introduction: theatre, performance and social assemblage theory

The research questions analysed in this book are directly related to the size and complexity of eighteenth-century British theatre. *Celebrity, Performance, Reception*'s underlying assumption is that, at least as far as any robust empirical method of recovery is concerned when linked to figures for consumption, Georgian theatre was the nation's dominant culturally expressive form in the long eighteenth century. The book argues that social assemblage theory, a theory of social networks and social complexity principally developed by Manuel DeLanda, provides the most effective analytical and predictive bases for modelling how theatre functioned.[1] The theory of performance set out here is derived from a novel transposition of a theory of social structure into the discipline of theatre history.[2] The book is about the application of this theory to a particular set of materialized, fully historicized, empirical conditions rather than a study of its epistemological genesis or variants.[3] It should be emphasized that assemblage theory does not subsume or provide autonomous alternatives to other critical theories of inquiry. Methodologies based on gender, class, racial, political and other modalities of ideology can be – and should be – enlisted to analyse any or all of the components within the assemblage model; indeed, many of them are also employed in this book. Essentially, assemblage theory provides a predictive explanation of materialized social complexity. It does not particularly offer to explain the origins of those complexities.

Although the overall framework of assemblage theory will be outlined more extensively below, it can best be summarized by its insight that 'The identity of an assemblage is not only embodied in its materiality but also expressed by it.'[4] This enables *Celebrity, Performance, Reception*'s principal methodological proposition that all physical spaces, locations and embodiments of performance are expressive and comprise population components within a connected social network or assemblage of production and reception. DeLanda's subsidiary insight, integral with the first, is that

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assemblages are subject to 'defining processes in which specialized expressive media intervene, processes which consolidate and rigidify the identity of the assemblage or, on the contrary, allow the assemblage a certain latitude for more flexible operation while benefiting from genetic or linguistic resources (processes of coding and decoding)'.[5] In other words, 'specialized expressive media', such as theatrical performances, through processes of coding and decoding located at the performance and reception location, allow emergent differences to develop, permitting the overall assemblage to become more (or less) homogeneous or heterogeneous. This mechanism of difference operates throughout the assemblage's components. The overall cultural effect constitutes the assemblage's identity, where 'every social entity is shown to emerge from the interactions among entities operating at a smaller scale.'[6] The persistence of both private and public theatrical performances as a cultural practice means that this particular assemblage has always been in a state of activity in Britain since 1660.

The background to these new theoretical models derives from assemblage theories originating in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and subsequently adapted by Manuel DeLanda in *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (2006), the essays collected in DeLanda's *Deleuze: History and Science* (2010) and further redefined by him in *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* (2011).[7] These have then been adapted by me to apply them more coherently to theatrical performance in general and specifically to the circumstances of late Georgian London.[8] Although many other more philosophically oriented directions of performance theory are available or under inquiry, the principal benefit of applying these particular frameworks is that they help model Georgian theatre in the state of its contemporary activity; that is, as a working and materialized economy of performance.[9] *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* is particularly unusual in offering a theory of performance reception as well as performance production. Nevertheless, it is not intended that this book will particularly seek to articulate or discriminate between different epistemological incarnations of Deleuze, Guattari or DeLanda.

As an intriguing parallel strand situated in a complementary relationship to assemblage theory, Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory (ANT), as principally developed in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005), similarly proposes that social structures are always in process, determined by factors which particularly include interactions between non-human 'actors' (or agents) and the connected micro and macro movements of 'the social' (as Latour terms it) in combinations of both human and non-human agency. Latour's ANT provides an

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alternative, perhaps more foundational, account of assemblage theory, arguing that the social comprises networks (or assemblages) of connectivity (including non-human agents) rather than fixed or determined structures (see Appendix). What they have in common is that they describe the social as a series of interactive economies of culture which might also now be mapped as materialized networks or topographies of Georgian theatrical performance. ANT provides a minimal description of the structural preconditions for ways of thinking about the relationship between theatrical performance and the social, although it is not in itself, at least in its articulation by Latour, a sufficiently developed theory to be readily adaptable to the context of Georgian playhouses, performance texts and players.[10]

Social assemblage theory provides an essentially post-structuralist empirical method to model an economy of theatrical culture in which meanings are continuously created, modified and displaced within complex networks comprising hundreds of thousands of individual people and even more combinations of text connected to built playhouse environments.[11] At its most reductive, the majority of the research questions raised in *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* are connected with the outcome of the two intersecting dimensions basic to the idea of theatrical assemblage theory presented here. One dimension is materially quantitative and is concerned with plays, performances and actors. The other dimension, similarly mainly quantitative, is chronological and is concerned with the material location of performance venues (the latter of which includes the dates of performance). At the moment, a set of theoretical frameworks has yet to be evolved suitable for understanding what might be derived as a viable and comprehensive cultural history extrapolated from the magnitude of contemporary theatrical performances.[12]

Since *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* is a book broadly situated within the discipline of literary studies, there is also a crucial literary theoretical problem which needs to be resolved. This principally concerns the actuality (or material status) of dramas not performed. These issues also provoke significant – even profound – implications for the status of literary texts in general where they are not materialized at locations with specifiable population densities of reception or where they are imperfectly placed on uncertain population gradients within the assemblage.

Assemblage theory as developed in *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* proposes a relationship between 'real' texts (that is, those bordering on the virtual) and 'actual' texts (that is, those with a traceable material purchase on specific components of the assemblage population or on the gradients of difference operating within the assemblage) where relays and

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transpositions across both categories produce differences in exterior relations. My modelling of this relative distinction between real (or virtual) assemblages of reading and actual assemblages of performance (theatrical assemblages) develops DeLanda's adaptations of Deleuzian ontology. DeLanda indirectly initiates this major development for conceptualizing assemblages of readers of texts in contrast to theatrical assemblages where performance texts are materialized at the theatrical venue. According to DeLanda, 'the Deleuzian ontology is flat: the world of actual assemblages forming *a plane of reference*, that is, a world of individual singularities operating at different spatio-temporal scales, to which we can refer by giving them, for example, a proper name; and the world of diagrams defined by universal singularities forming *a plane of immanence*, a plane that does not exist above the other plane (like a genus that is ontologically "above" a species) but is like its reverse side. A single flat ontology with two sides, one side populated by virtual problems and the other by a divergent set of actual solutions to those problems.'[13] It is this idea of a plane of 'real' (or virtual) texts connected to an adjacent plane of actuality (the materialized exterior relations of the text) that allows us to model how play texts in performance can be linked to distinctive social assemblages actualized in density and located within knowable populations of the assemblage.[14]

When a further dimension of scale (meaning organizational complexity) is discussed later in this Introduction, the conceptual framework of Georgian theatrical assemblage will be complete. However, to return to the literary studies problem, the most readily accessible example of a late Georgian dramatic author who produced real or virtual plays is Joanna Baillie, someone whose dramatic works had a strong real or virtual presence yet whose play texts were seldom materialized at performance locations. Baillie's three-volume *Series of Plays: In Which it is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind – Each Passion Being the Subject of a Tragedy and a Comedy* (1798–1812) was widely read, but its dramas were infrequently performed. The American theatre manager William Dunlap's recollection of a rare 1801 Boston, Massachusetts, production of one of her plays referred to '"De Montfort," one of those grand and truly poetical, as well as philosophical dramas, written by Joanna Bailey [*sic*], to portray the progress of the passions, [which] was performed, but failed . . . It would not have done so in the time of Addison.'[15] While Dunlap helps us materialize an unusually elongated contemporary transatlantic reception environment for Baillie (the network he accessed had clearly stored along its links knowledge about both her plays and her reputation), this particular performed play has a very low density of population component because it had few materialized

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presences in theatrical assemblages. The single Boston performance 'failed' and there seem to have been no other performances thereafter, although, quite clearly, the overall Boston theatrical assemblage prospered. Of course, there would have been many contemporary readers of Baillie, but, unless some methodology can be devised to reassemble their material density, they remain highly diffused and disaggregated – that is, real but virtual. As DeLanda cautions, 'in assemblage theory expressivity cannot be reduced to language and symbols.'[16] This flat but materialized ontology is a general condition of text and not something exclusive to Baillie or to the closet drama genre in which she usually wrote.

Play texts performed at locatable venues have a higher actuality than those which remained read but unperformed unless their population densities can be precisely located – assuming date and venue records of reading exist with some degree of meaningful specificity. However, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* often discusses plays with few performances because such plays demonstrate important aspects of the materialized nature of the theatrical assemblage. Joanna Baillie would be a good example of a playwright whose dramas, in general, have a low level of actuality and comprise a highly molecular part of the overall assemblage. When Dunlap wrote that Baillie's *De Montfort* 'failed' at Boston, it is striking that he is primarily referring to its performance existence on the plane of the actual and that the high esteem in which he otherwise held what he describes as her 'grand and truly poetical . . . philosophical dramas' represents his individual sense of their real or virtual existence. It is these crucial processes of materialized performance reiteration (play texts repeated at physical performance locations with defined populations) which permit the development of difference within the assemblage.

The centrality of theatre in Georgian culture is precisely a function of the scale of its materialized presence and the complexity of its organization. Theatre had a pre-eminent cultural status. Unlike the general print culture of books, journals and newspapers or the circulation of painted or printed images, not only did theatre achieve massive cultural focus on account of the concentration of large audiences within the metropolitan playhouses (along with many other smaller audiences dispersed across provincial or regional theatres), but also the scale of its presence and economic impact can be quantified with greater levels of accuracy than is the case with other contemporary cultural forms. Following the traces of materialized performances necessarily reverses some expectations of literary value. To the example of Baillie could be added the dramas of the author of *Political Justice* (1793), the philosophical anarchist and novelist, William

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Godwin, whose lifelong interest in playwriting, despite his largely advantageous social connections, resulted in just two plays put into contemporary performance, *Antonio; or, The Soldier's Return* (1800) and *Faulkner* (1807), with the plays receiving, in total, four nights of performance.[17] However, as David O'Shaughnessy's monograph *William Godwin and the Theatre* (2010) notes, Godwin's extensive diary shows that he attended the theatre 'almost 2,000 times over half a century', seeing still identifiable plays, often in company with identifiable parties of friends (including the playwright Elizabeth Inchbald and the feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft).[18] As far as theatrical assemblage theory is concerned, Godwin's significance undoubtedly resides not in his standing as a playwright but in his extensive and well-documented participation in contemporary London's audience populations. In general, social assemblage theory provides a robust methodology for examining the cultural mechanisms of how theatrical texts were disseminated across a continuum of difference to audiences whose collective identities can be quantified at materialized locations, very often as recurrent multiples of theatre capacities and sometimes as absolutely quantified figures of attendance.[19]

One particular (and popular) literary methodological *cul-de-sac* needs to be discussed at this point. The seductive possibility of adapting to theatre history theories of generalized linguistic 'performativity', *pace* Judith Butler after J.L. Austin, a term understood as being adjacent to, or even subsuming, theatrical performance, has engaged much recent critical attention.[20] For example, Romantic period studies, an industrious subdiscipline within English literary scholarship, has found it particularly problematic to engage with performativity so as to be able to distinguish it from (or subsume it under) theatricality. Alexander Dick and Angela Esterhammer's judicious overview fronting their collection *Spheres of Action: Speech and Performance in Romantic Culture* (2009) remarks about this problem of conceptualizing performance with reference both to theatre and to poetics, 'that action can be defined neither in purely abstract nor in purely material terms; rather, agency always comprises a tension between material and abstract forces.'[21] By comparison, Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam's introduction to their promising collection, *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity* (2010), more ambivalently states that 'performativity' can sometimes be little more than Joanna Baillie developing 'a persuasive liberal rhetoric' for her plays while on other occasions it denotes 'the social habitus of the characters and the semiotics of the actors' "doing things" on stage'.[22] Dick and Esterhammer's analysis of the problem arguably helps prompt how social assemblage theory might be the critical

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paradigm best able to propose a robust methodology capable of harnessing such divergences while still retaining their original dynamics and permitting new spaces for interpretation.

Since just about anything can be performative (and nothing appears to be non-performative), the invocation of 'performativity' as a theoretical term to cover any kind of textual utterance, including that which takes place in theatres, has rendered it all but redundant.[23] Of course, the attractiveness of performativity to conventional literary studies is easy to see. Literary critics tend to concentrate on authors and their texts as the primary producers of meaning and have only afterwards surveyed readers (the reception environment) as the secondary agents engaging with the performativities alleged to be contained within the text's utterances. Overall, it is generally the case that in modern English literary studies focused on this period, a great deal is known about the production or supply side of literature, but considerably less quantitative information is available about literature's consumers (the demand side). With theatrical performance, however, and especially with respect to Georgian Britain, the reverse is true. The scale and complexity of Georgian theatre makes it essential to study the performance base, including the reception environment.

Although readers – as opposed to theatre-goers – are proposed as comprising the principal reception environment in William St Clair's magisterial *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004), his analysis is relevant as a point of empirical contrast. St Clair employs high-quality quantitative information about the balance between the production and consumption of poetry, novels and literary periodicals but, perhaps unexpectedly, makes the strategic decision to ignore almost entirely the production and consumption of printed plays (with the exception of Shakespeare). Perhaps this is a reasonable assumption (since plays are intended mainly for performance), yet some knowledge of the availability of printed play texts would help balance the picture St Clair so brilliantly presents. In the case of his single significant discussion of drama, concerning stage adaptations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the early 1820s, St Clair makes the point very forcibly that, as far as reception by the general population was concerned, theatricalized versions quickly swamped that fiction's original identity as a novel.[24] Otherwise, very little can be extrapolated from St Clair about reprintings of the standard performance repertoire in Britain or about the print fortunes of new writing for the stage. Nevertheless, the overarching conclusion of *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* is that much that was previously imagined as the voluminous contemporary readership for the major Romantic authors (with the notable exceptions of Byron and

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Scott) has now to be scaled back. The print runs of some of the major writers, often only between 500 and 1,000 copies, were sometimes financially sponsored by the authors themselves and, on occasion, as notoriously in the case of the quarto edition of Wordsworth's *Excursion*, often sold very slowly indeed.[25] In other words, reader densities, disaggregated as they were by publishers' increasing ability to reach markets on a national scale, are difficult to actualize as far as retrievable traces are concerned. H.J. Jackson's *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (2005) helps materialize and triangulate some types of knowledge about contemporary readers by tracing specific interactivity between books and readers in the same period – in this case as exemplified in the habit of annotating books with marginalia. As such, Jackson's study provides a slightly different avenue towards establishing quantitative (as well as qualitative) methods of assessing literary reception.[26]

Reception figures for drama do not combine in the same way as the reception characteristics of readers because audience numbers are the primary indicators of the scale of theatrical reception. However, plays were printed in abundance. In general, by the late eighteenth century, most plays produced by Covent Garden or Drury Lane – the principal venues for new writing for performance – found their way into print and also tended to be reprinted. For London's emergent playhouses, such as Sadler's Wells or The Royalty in Tower Hamlets, printings were more occasional but still persisted as a theatre practice. A revealing example is a single 1792 entry in a Drury Lane company ledger book which records a payment for printing '3500 Books of Cymon', David Garrick's successful farce of 1767. This made Drury Lane's 1792 printing the eighth reprint (and not a run-out of old stock). Moreover, as well as direct selling at the theatre, a single night's royal command performance of *Cymon* (billed with James Cobb's musical adaptation of Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf's, *The Doctor and the Apothecary*, 1788) brought the playhouse receipts of £552. 15*s*. 6*d*. (plus a further £1. 4*s*. 0*d*. not accounted until the next day, inexplicably handed over by a justice of the peace because of 'the Hurry last N$^{t.}$'), implying an audience full to bursting at around 2,500 people.[27] In other words, by whichever criteria one employs, whether measuring theatre audiences by their appetite for reading or by their theatre-going (*Cymon* was a shilling a book, the same price as entry to the playhouse gallery), the raw volume of contemporary theatre audiences' appetite for drama rapidly reaches multiples of thousands. *Cymon*'s successful Drury Lane revival in 1792 meant that the playhouse could schedule it for as long as it drew audiences, the playhouse carefully pairing Garrick's farce with different mainpieces or afterpieces so as to

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refresh and attract multiple audience segments while, at the same time, steadily reducing its stock of 3,500 texts.

The financial incentives for authors to write convincingly workable plays for performance were also considerable, acting as autonomous catalysts impelling the growth and success of the theatrical economy and propelling its status as a sustained and distinctive social assemblage with its own populations and arrays of performance locations. George Colman the Elder's moderately successful adaptation of a Voltaire comic original, *The English Merchant* (1767), apart from a customary pirated Dublin edition, was printed twice in 1767, again in 1774, and, after the author's death, was gathered by Elizabeth Inchbald for her 1811 edition of *Modern Theatre*. Whatever sum Colman received directly for the copyright of *The English Merchant* probably pales into insignificance against his earnings from its theatre performances. Around the same time that the publishing family of Lowndes – who printed the 1792 *Cymon* – customarily paid authors of novels between £5 and £10 for copyright, Colman received £341. 18*s*. 0*d*., net of the playhouse house charges, for his three *English Merchant* author benefit nights.[28] In other words, the reception characteristics of drama in performance were entirely different from those associated with the production of books for reading. Understanding the different economic forces encountered in this theatrical reception environment helps differentiate it from the production and reception context of most of the works of literary fiction or poetry produced at this time, particularly when estimating their places as virtual or actual texts in DeLanda's sense.

Despite the availability of a great deal of quantitative archival information about theatrical consumption, and despite some excellent studies of individual performers such as Garrick, Siddons and Kean, the dominant critical methodology has tended to focus on playwrights and their texts (closely followed by celebrity performers). This is a trend not noticeably countered by the excellence of late twentieth-century research comprehensively recovering the longitudinal extent of the generality of performers within the theatrical profession, notably in the sixteen volumes of Philip H. Highfill, Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans' *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800* (1973–93). Insofar as literary studies can be described as a branch of theatre studies (or vice versa), a situation of critical asymmetry has arisen, in which playwrights and play texts have provided the primary context for scholarly inquiry. The extensiveness of the theatrical personnel collated by Highfill *et al.*, and the many performances recorded as

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constituting their professional careers, is an absolute indicator of the complexity of the theatrical assemblage.

Having set out the production context, what happens at a performance can now be described, keeping in mind the point made earlier that the materialization of texts in performance constitutes a plane of the actual connected to a plane of the real (or virtual) and that this comprises the principal bases of the relationship between text and performance in the theatrical assemblage.

On the demand (or reception) side, performance meanings are always distributed at the location of the performance venue rather than residing principally in the fixed status of the authorial text. Within this structure, the performers are the primary producers of performance meaning although they have no connection to its reception characteristics, which, of course, are displaced towards the context of the audience. In the terminology of assemblage theory, texts are progressively decoded and deterritorialized of their authorial or original contextual meaning with each and every performance and then recoded and reterritorialized by the collectivity of the performers and the audience at every live performance. David Garrick's quelling of a near-riot at a performance of Edward Moore's *The Foundling* (1748), discussed in Chapter 3, would be one example – albeit a fairly reductive one – of the spontaneous reterritorializing of performance texts by one particular population component within a contemporary theatrical assemblage. In the Georgian period, in the overwhelming number of cases, performances can be located with great precision with respect to the identities of actors, texts performed, and the date and location of the performances. This potential for quantitative specificity is why the particular emergence in the eighteenth century of celebrity performers as a palpable cultural force, dependent upon the reception side of cultural production, has been interrogated so frequently in this book. Indeed, the role of celebrity performers provides particularly useful sets of information for understanding the social structures involved with performance reception.

As we have emphasized that performance meaning depends upon performance location, the principal structure of the theatrical assemblage can now be described. All theatrical performances take place along two axes. One axis is spatial and is defined by location; the other axis is temporal and is defined by chronological moment. These two axes are the basic components generating the meanings and values resulting from theatrical difference. They are what Latour calls '*translations between mediators that . . . generate traceable associations*' and on which ANT is built.[29] DeLanda,

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