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978-0-521-49570-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography

Thomas Postlewait

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Theatre Historiography*

This *Introduction* – an indispensable “how to” guide for students and teachers alike – investigates the methods and aims of historical study in the performing arts, from archival research to historical writing. Beginning with case studies on Shakespearean theatre and avant-garde theatre, this study examines fundamental procedures and problems in documentary history and cultural history. It demonstrates how historians not only construct various kinds of performance events but also place them in relation to the historical agents, the political and social conditions, artistic traditions, audience responses, and historical periods. Drawing upon scholarship in classics, literary studies, art history, performance studies, and general history, Postlewait shows how to ask appropriate historical questions, construct evidence, use plays as historical documents, eliminate faulty sources, challenge unreliable witnesses, and develop historical arguments and narratives. The book concludes with a survey of the “twelve cruxes” of research, analysis, and writing in theatre history.

THOMAS POSTLEWAIT is Professor in the School of Drama,
University of Washington.

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Acknowledgements

This book, which unites several aspects of my scholarship in theatre history, began two decades ago with an appointment at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities at Edinburgh University. During those months in Scotland I was able to launch my studies on the problem of periodization. Three years later, when I received a Research Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, I continued my readings in historiography and wrote some initial sections of this book, including two published essays. Over several years, while working on this study – and taking on a number of other writing, editing, and administrative projects – I had to learn, rather slowly, that the task of composing an introduction to one's field of study is always a preliminary, not a final, project. After writing and rewriting various sections and publishing several articles, I completed a full draft of this book in 2004 during my sabbatical leave at Ohio State University. Then during a research leave in London in autumn 2006, thanks to an award I received from OSU, I was able to revise the manuscript (on the basis of the reader's report and suggestions from a few colleagues). Needless to say, I am deeply grateful for the research leaves and awards I have received over these years.

I published versions of my developing ideas in several journals: *Theatre Journal* (40.3: 299–318 and 43.2: 157–78), *Contemporary Theatre Review* (12.3: 9–35), *Nordic Theatre Studies* (Special Issue: 52–55), and *Assaph* (12: 1–31). I also published some ideas on theatre historiography in *Theatrical Events – Borders, Dynamics, Frames*, edited by Vicki Cremona, Willman Sauter, John Tulloch, and Hans van Maanen (Rodoophi, 2004: 33–52) and in the two editions of *Critical Theory and Performance*, edited by Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach (University of Michigan, 1992: 356–68 and 2007: 198–222). I thank the editors for their support and guidance. I am grateful to the publishers for permission to draw upon and reprint parts of these essays, which in revised form have contributed to this book.

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Garden, the British Library (in its old and new locations), and the Huntington Museum and Library. I also carried out research in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the National Library of Scotland, Harvard Theatre Collection, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, the Theatre Research Institute at Ohio State University, the Fales Collection at New York University, and the Billy Rose Collection at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center. As well, I have spent many productive hours in the main libraries at Edinburgh University, MIT, Harvard University, University of Georgia, Indiana University, Ohio State University, and the University of Washington. I thank the staffs of all of these archives and libraries.

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There are, of course, many different ways to write theatre history. No one has the final word. The continuing vitality of the field is most evident for me in my editorial work. Since 1991 I have edited a book series, "Studies in Theatre History and Culture," at the University of Iowa Press. I have been amazingly fortunate to have the support and guidance of the two Directors of the press – the wry Paul Zimmer, followed by the sagacious Holly Carver. Besides the invaluable opportunity to work closely with scholars from around the world, the editing has taught me much about not only the diversity and complexity of theatre history as a discipline but also the many possible methods and approaches that historians can apply successfully. This understanding has guided my editorial work at Iowa, beginning with *Interpreting the Theatrical Past* (1989), which I edited with Bruce McConachie. Two decades later the same commitment to multiple viewpoints has led to yet another Iowa book on theatre historiography, *Representing the Past* (2009), which I co-edited with Charlotte Canning. In between these two collections of essays on the historiography of performance, I have been able to publish thirty-five books in my series, written on an amazingly wide range of topics by theatre scholars from ten different countries. My debt to the Iowa writers, one and all, is profound. Many of their methods and ideas are woven into the texture of this introductory book.

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