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Introduction

> The active pursuit of truth is our proper business. We have no excuse for conducting it badly or unfittingly. But failure to capture our prey is another matter. For we are born to quest after it; to possess it belongs to a greater power . . . The world is but a school of inquiry.
>
> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book Three, Chapter 8 (1580)

> I adore the true, the possible.
>
> Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Émile Bernard (1889)

On some preliminary matters

Historical inquiry – the pursuit of truths about the past within the conditions and constraints of possible knowledge – is the subject of this study. Throughout this book, I examine the procedures and principles that historians, including theatre historians, follow in their research, analysis, interpretation, and writing. All historians, in the process of reconstructing past events, need to determine the authenticity of sources and the reliability of eyewitnesses. In turn, they must transform the artifacts into facts, develop supporting evidence for their hypotheses, place historical events in appropriate contexts, confront their own organizing assumptions and categorical ideas, and construct arguments based upon principles of possibility and plausibility. Certainty is often attained in matters of *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when*. But the answers for *how* and *why* usually remain open to debate among historians.

In the spirit of historical inquiry, I raise many questions, and, where appropriate, I attempt to provide some answers. Three key words in the title – *introduction*, *theatre*, and *historiography* – signal my primary aims and set the organizational parameters for meeting those aims. This book provides an *introduction* to the basic methods of historical scholarship. Introductory knowledge is primary; primary knowledge is essential. All historians, be they novices or old masters, should understand and be able to apply the basic procedures of historical inquiry. With each new research project, the fundamental requirements of these procedures reassert themselves.

All historians need to follow reliable research methods, which are the primary building blocks of historical description and interpretation. Unfortunately, some historians produce sloppy, flawed scholarship, either because they never learned the basic procedures of historical methodology or because they ignore or misapply the primary guidelines for research and analysis, as the historian A. M. Momigliano

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complained in 1954: "Too much historical research is being done by people who do not know why they are doing it and without regard to the limits imposed by the evidence. An improvement in this respect is both possible and desirable" (1966: 111). A half-century later the need for improvement remains paramount.

By *theatre* I mean the comprehensive field of the performing arts, including theatre, dance, opera, folk theatre, puppetry, parades, processions, spectacles, festivals, circuses, public conventions, and related performance events.[1] All kinds of theatrical activities in the past – no matter what their mode of delivery: stage performance, public arena, radio, television, film – may require historical investigation and understanding. This is the case for events that occurred three millennia ago, three centuries ago, or three days ago. For the purposes of this book, I will draw most of my examples and case studies from my own specific areas of historical research and classroom teaching in theatre history. Yet throughout this study I have attempted to identify research procedures and interpretive strategies that apply across all areas and types of performance history.

And by *historiography* I mean not only the methods that define and guide the practice of historical study and writing but also the self-reflexive mindset that leads us to investigate the processes and aims of historical understanding. Etymologically, the word *historiography* means *the writing of history*. In this sense, it usually refers to the study of how history has been written across the centuries, from Herodotus to Carlo Ginzburg. Sometimes we study history (i.e., what happened in the past), sometimes we study the historians and what they wrote (i.e., the methods and aims of the reports about what happened in the past). In the process of examining what historians do and how they do it, we can also consider some of the fundamental traits of historical thinking. In doing so, we are entering the realm of epistemology. I take up these basic matters of historical inquiry throughout this book because the traits of the inquiring mind, so crucial to historical understanding, underlie the procedural traits of effective research and good writing. The processes of inquiry serve both the historian and the historiographer. The quality of the historian's scholarship depends directly upon the quality of the questions being asked.

Although the word *historiography* evokes the writing methods of historians, it has come to mean much more, including the theory and philosophy of history. We thus need to keep in mind this warning provided by Peter Novick:

> The word *historiography* can be confusing. Running through the English language there is a distinction between "logys" and "graphys": *biology* (the science of life) and *biography* (the description of life); *geology* (the science of the earth) and *geography* (the description of the earth), etc. The once respectable word *historiology* has dropped out of just about everybody's vocabulary, and *historiography* has had to do double duty for both *historical science* and descriptive accounts of historical writing.[2]

So, like the word *history*, the word *historiography* takes its meanings from the way a writer uses it. Writers are not always clear.

Besides these three organizing concepts for this book, there is one other very familiar and crucial yet often ambiguous word, *history*, which needs clarification. The

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attentive reader has probably noticed already that I have used this word in several different ways. In its dozen or more meanings and applications, the word *history* can refer to or designate

(1) whatever happened in the past; the actual events that occurred; this aspect of history is sometimes called "history-as-actuality" or "history-as-event";
(2) the records we have for whatever happened in the past; these documents are usually located in some kind of archive, though they also exist in people's memories, stories, songs, and cultural practices; the familiar documents or sources that historians usually investigate are often called "history-as-record" or "archival documents";
(3) the process of carrying out research; the act of investigating the records of what happened; in this sense, one is researching history or, as some people say, "doing history";
(4) the report that a historian prepares; it is usually written but it can also be oral; and today it can also be delivered as a video, film, tape, disk, photo-montage, or web document; this report, which draws upon "history-as-record" in order to describe "history-as-event," attempts to be true to both of them; when historians present a report, they are providing an understanding – that is, a version – of what happened; this finished product is often called "history-as-written" or "history-as-account";
(5) the kind of historical report that attempts to list only the basic information for a specific time period; it may, in the manner of an account book, offer some names, dates, purchases, payments, and similar kinds of recordkeeping and transactions; it may even offer some descriptive information as part of the documentary record, but it does not provide a fully developed survey or causal narrative; because its interpretive aspects are brief or seemingly nonexistent, it is usually called an "annals," an "account," a "record," or a "chronicle";
(6) the kind of historical report that not only places events in a descriptive sequence but also explains and interprets them; that is, besides providing who, what, where, and when, the report covers how and why; it may attempt to explain the significance of the events and analyze their developmental causes; it is called an "interpretive history";
(7) an approach to historical study that focuses primarily on the sources; this approach gives priority to the gathering and maintaining of historical data and objects, which are valued for themselves; all libraries depend upon and benefit from the dedication and discipline of antiquarians; the collecting of manuscripts and material objects and the building of archives has no specific origin (for the attempts to compile and collect records can be traced from the earliest clay tablets and stone carvings), but systems of collecting – from cabinets of curiosities to national archives – gained momentum from the Renaissance forward as personal, then public, libraries multiplied; this impulse to gather historical data and objects is sometimes called "antiquarianism";

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(8) a genre, type, or kind of writing that is distinct from other kinds of prose writing, such as narrative fiction or the literary essay; today in libraries and bookstores this genre of prose writing usually has its own section, apart from the "fiction" section;

(9) a genre, type, or kind of writing that *is not* distinct from narrative or story; so understood, all forms of narrative are joined or collapsed together; for example, the same word, such as *histoire* in French, can mean both "history" and "story"; this double meaning also occurs in various languages, including English (e.g., Henry Fielding's most famous novel is titled *The History of Tom Jones*); in this sense both history and fiction are understood as narrative or storytelling forms; adding to this confusion over the meanings of *history* and *fiction*, some people argue that all historical writings partake of narrative techniques; a few people even go so far as to claim that history and fiction cannot be distinguished from one another;

(10) an academic discipline, which in modern times is usually located in departments of history within universities; during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially at German and French universities and institutes, historians developed "positivist," "scientific," or "objective" research procedures and source criticism for the historical discipline; in the process antiquarianism developed into a professional method of historical study; this discipline today attempts to deal systematically with the past; it is sometimes called a "branch of knowledge"; within the modern university system this discipline is usually located in either the humanities or the social sciences; the lack of agreement on the institutional home of the discipline is yet another sign of the confusion over not only how historical study should be constituted (e.g., is it an art or a science?) but also what kind(s) of methods it should use;

(11) a "discourse," one among several that operate in human society at any period; the discourse defines, articulates, and shapes knowledge; in recent years the concept of discourse, variously defined and applied, has been used in linguistics, cultural history, philosophy, and social theory to characterize the epistemological codes, rules, and conditions of language that organize and classify various fields of knowledge, including both *the practices* of the discipline and institution of history and *the meanings* of history that the discipline produces;

(12) the various branches of knowledge that apply a historical perspective to the study of human existence, culture, and thought; in this sense, the concept of history provides a foundational definition and method for a number of disciplines, including archeology, classics, paleography, architecture, numismatics, linguistics, language studies, religious studies, racial and gender studies, speech and rhetoric, psychology, sociology, political science, law, education, philosophy, art, music, and theatre; all of these disciplines organize their subject matter historically, though there are additional ways of organizing and pursuing knowledge in these fields; because each of these disciplines charts an aspect of human history (e.g., use of coins, etymology of words, political systems, philosophical concepts, etc.), it is possible to study the history of knowledge in many

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fields or disciplines; this expansive meaning of *history* guided R. G. Collingwood's argument in *The Idea of History*, where he claims that "history is what the science of human nature professed to be" because "historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past;"[3] from this perspective, history encompasses all of the disciplines of human activity and knowledge in the arts, humanities, and social sciences;

(13) the various branches of knowledge that study some aspect of science from a historical perspective; whatever their subject matter – biology, microbiology, genetics, botany, zoology, geology, ecology, astronomy, neuroscience, geography – all of these disciplines use history as one of the major ways to organize the subject matter; consequently, the sciences, excepting the abstract, logical, or "pure" fields such as mathematics, are historical in their basic procedures (and even mathematics is wedded to history when the development of the discipline is considered); and

(14) a comprehensive understanding that applies to all fields of knowledge, from archeology to zoology; each discipline has its own history. In this expansive meaning, history serves as both the mode and method of knowledge for all of these branches of knowledge; this grand claim for history is based upon the epistemological understanding that human knowledge depends upon "the discovery of time," as Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield insist.[4]

Because of our temporal consciousness, our historical understanding has become as crucial to the study of the natural world as to the study of the human world. Accordingly, numbers 12 and 13, and probably number 11 as well, collapse into number 14. Or, more ambitiously, history, in its application to all areas of human endeavor, "could sweep all other disciplines into its intellectual orbit and, from a certain point of view, subsume them," as Donald R. Kelley points out in his study of the idea and disciplines of history since the Enlightenment.[5] No doubt this grand perspective is quite satisfying to historians, who can then proudly assume that their field is the fundamental basis of all knowledge. From this perspective, historians are the keepers of the keys to the kingdom of knowledge.[6] History is the queen of all disciplines.

> Historiography (that is, *history* and *writing*) bears within its own name the paradox – almost an oxymoron – of a relation established between two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse. Its task is one of connecting them and, at the point where the link cannot be imagined, of working as if the two were being joined.
>
> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (1988: xxvii)

Although these various meanings of *history* are relevant, either explicitly or implicitly, to any study in historiography, including theatre historiography, I must insist that I have no intention of writing a study of all of these ideas and their possible implications. For the most part, I am interested in the basic procedures of historical

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scholarship, which means I will focus on numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4, with some attention also given to the problem of narrative (as both a trope and a genre) in the writing of history. Throughout this study I attempt to specify how I am using the word *history*. Often I will refer to number 1 as *history* (or just "the past" or "past events") whereas I will refer to number 2 as "historical records," "documents," "sources," or "the archive." I will refer to number 3 as "historical research" and to number 4 as "historical writing." I have also tried to avoid using the word *history* by itself to imply or signal any of the other possible meanings of the word. If, for example, I refer to the narrative genre, the disciplinary field, or the discourse of history, I will use these additional phrases in order to clarify what I am trying to say.[7]

Primarily, then, this book offers an introductory study of the operating procedures and shaping aims of theatre historians, as they practice their discipline today. In order to do justice to my task, I have imposed some serious restrictions and exclusions on the historiographical issues that will be considered. For example, this book does not present a survey or analysis of the major historians, from Herodotus and Thucydides to modern times. For the interested reader, there are already several worthy surveys that should be consulted.[8]

Although I draw upon the ideas of specific historians, especially Marc Bloch, Louis Gottschalk, M. I. Finley, and Carlo Ginzburg, I am not offering a survey of their historical methods. Also, I am not investigating historical theories and practices within specific eras, such as the Enlightenment. Nor do I consider historical ideas within intellectual movements, such as Romanticism. Here, too, there are several excellent studies to consult.[9] As for the wide range of approaches to historical study in modern times, such as the Annales history, Marxist history, women's history, intellectual history, cultural history, racial and ethnic history, and postmodernist history, both Georg G. Iggers and Michael Bentley have offered succinct interpretations of these various developments in historiography.[10] In addition, there are some excellent overviews and critiques of one or more of the modern approaches to historical study.[11]

Moreover, I am not writing a philosophy of history, though I have benefited from the writings of a number of philosophers, especially Raymond Aron and Paul Ricoeur.[12] Aron's measured critique of positivism and objectivity in *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* provides a solid foundation for my approach to historical methodology. While maintaining that the "proof of facts" and the "criticism of sources" are preliminary steps in historical research, Aron argues that historical inquiry is necessarily an interpretive procedure that limits the positivist principles of objectivity. "Thus we must admit the basic distinctions between *the establishment of historical facts* and *the explanation of changes*" (his italics).[13] These distinctions are necessary, Aron insists, not only because "any interpretation is a reconstruction" of the past events and their causes but also because "the plurality of interpretations is an incontestable fact, which the historian must accept."[14] Aron's analysis of several different interpretive approaches in historical scholarship anchors this argument. In the process of examining these approaches, he provides a basic consideration of the

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idea of historical change, one of the most important yet evasive concepts in historical study. He also provides a valuable analysis of the concepts of historical causality and historical determinism. Then, having assembled the results of this analysis, he navigates a course between the "limits of historical objectivity" and "the limits of relativism in history."[15] Like Aron, I am committed to this middle course between positivism and relativism. Though I will not recapitulate his philosophical analysis, which I cannot begin to match, I will attempt to demonstrate throughout this book how historical study may go forward within the limits that Aron designates. I intend to present issues and problems in methodology as clearly as possible, without recourse to philosophical terminology and debates. I do not assume that the reader has studied Aron's writings (or those of any other philosopher of history).

> No such thing as a *historical reality* exists ready made, so that science merely has to reproduce it faithfully. The historical reality, because it is human, is *ambiguous* and *inexhaustible*.
>
> Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1961: 118)

Paul Riceour's philosophical writings have been even more valuable for me. Riceour, who praised Aron's assessment of the problem of historical objectivity, presented his own critique of the ideas of objectivity and subjectivity in historical knowledge in his early book *History and Truth* (1965). Over a decade later, he returned to historiography in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (1981). His reflections on key issues in epistemology and hermeneutics, including the concepts of event and context in relation to "the question of the subject" and systems of discourse, have informed my own consideration of how to construct historical events. I have also benefited from his studies of the "narrative function" in historical interpretation that he presents in *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985, 1988). Because all historians must represent people and events from the past, the representative methods and assumptions that guide this task are a central concern in all phases of historical study, from initial research to concluding narrative.

Both Aron and Riceour provide an epistemological foundation and justification for historical practice, especially in terms of their analyses of *event*, *representation*, *objectivity*, *narrative*, *time*, *change*, and *causality*. I will feature these concepts when I take up the practical matters of historical scholarship: the construction of an event, the criteria for evidence, the narrative aspects of historical writing, the plurality of interpretive models in history, and the nature of the historian's judgements. Because historical practice, not philosophy, is my concern, I do not need to retrace the epistemological arguments of Aron and Ricoeur.[16] My usage of certain controversial terms and concepts should be clear within the practical context of my investigation of historical procedures. I am not writing a study in hermeneutics or epistemology, though I necessarily take up key issues in human understanding and knowledge as I probe the nature of theatre historiography.

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> Given the intermediate position in which hermeneutics operates, it follows that its work is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place.
>
> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1997: 295)

In theatre historiography there are several foundational studies that contributed to this book, including the one that Bruce McConachie and I compiled in 1989.[17] During the last couple of decades a number of important studies in theatre and performance studies have refined and expanded historical methods in the broad field of study.[18] Throughout this book, I draw upon the work of my colleagues. R. W. Vince, for example, has provided valuable surveys of the development of the field of theatre history.[19] He has also described the emergence of the academic discipline of theatre history in the universities since the nineteenth century.[20] In recent years the field of theatre studies has been greatly expanded and transformed by valuable studies on women's lives and careers, gender construction, feminist methodologies, ethnic and racial studies, and the concepts of diversity and difference.[21] This work informs my own ideas on historical issues and problems, but I have not tried to summarize these studies and related issues. Likewise, because major work has emerged on historiography and dance studies, I do not need to introduce this topic and work.[22] Nor do I need to offer a study of the various critical theories that get applied to theatre history and performance studies today (e.g., theatre semiotics, media studies, postcolonial studies, race theory, cultural studies, gender and sexualities, psychoanalysis). Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph Roach have done this admirably in *Critical Theory and Performance*.[23] Although I insist that the basic procedures of historical research are foundational for any and all of these specific critical approaches, I do not offer an evaluation of the historical strengths and weaknesses of the various critical methodologies in the study of cultural history. Likewise, I do not need to struggle with the meanings of certain widely used concepts in theatre studies, such as "performance." Marvin Carlson, for example, has done this task with his typical thoroughness and brilliance.[24] And the concept of "theatricality" has been investigated by several people, including Tracy C. Davis and myself.[25]

What, then, is there to consider in historical study? Despite these various exclusions, this introductory study still has a full agenda in the field of historical research and writing. My intention, accordingly, is to map out and analyze these fundamental features, as they operate in theatre history and performance studies. I will be concerned with various methodological matters, including the uses of primary and secondary evidence, the techniques for applying both internal and external criticism to evidence, the standards of credibility and authenticity that are applied in the examination of documents, the distinction between a source and a fact as well as the distinction between a fact and a piece of evidence, the nature of circumstantial evidence in historical argument, the problem of assigning motives to human actions that occurred in the past, and the relationship between historical events and their possible contexts.

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Given my focus on practical matters, this is a "how to" book. And, in some measure, it is also a "how not to" book. For example, the two case studies in Part One – on Shakespearean theatre and avant-garde theatre – provide an opportunity to examine the kinds of methodological procedures and problems that theatre historians confront on a regular basis. By means of these two case studies I illustrate some of the drawbacks that derive from our tendency to separate documentary scholarship from cultural history. Throughout the book I offer suggestions about historical practices and warnings about misapplied procedures, but I provide no single model for theatre historians to follow. Instead, I am interested in the basic methods and challenges in historical study that we all share, the fundamental features of historical inquiry. In this endeavor I share the aims expressed by Stephen E. Toulmin in his book *The Uses of Argument*: "to raise problems, not to solve them; to draw attention to a field of inquiry, rather than to survey it fully; and to provoke discussion rather than to serve as a systematic treatise."[26] This focus on the fundamental factors and questions of historical study serves as a sufficient and worthy aim, befitting the complexity of the issues. In this spirit, I also subscribe to the principle that Richard Kostelanetz voiced in an introductory book that he wrote on the avant-garde arts: "Every 'introduction,' I believe, has an obligation to direct its readers elsewhere."[27] Throughout this book I will refer readers to various resources that might be of interest and value, including the writings of other historians, theatre historians, and philosophers who have helped me to think about this enterprise. And in various notes I will identify publications on specific areas of study and on particular aspects of historical methodology and theory (e.g., recent scholarship on classical Greek theatre, the uses and problems of visual evidence, parallel developments in methods of art history). In this way, I offer a guide to further readings in historiographical scholarship, but each reader may decide what is useful.[28]

In order to launch this investigation into theatre historiography, I want to begin with a preliminary overview that will suggest the range of topics and issues that I take up in the following chapters. For heuristic purposes, let's consider some simple diagrams that suggest the basic categories that guide our historical assumptions:

EVENT   CONTEXT

This two-part separation illustrates our starting point for describing the historical task. Some historians, such as microhistorians, place primary emphasis upon individual events, which they investigate in great detail before moving outward to the conditions that may be contributing factors in the individual lives and actions. Other historians, such as those associated with the Annales group, place primary emphasis upon the large, abiding conditions and structures that direct historical conditions and development. Individual events – and individual lives – are described as consequences of the shaping context. In self-defining ways, then, the microhistorians *narrate* specific historical actions or events; the Annales historians *describe* the conditions that frame and explain the events. Both, however, are committed to cultural and social

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interpretation. Yet this division between microhistorians and structuralist historians seems to reinforce a basis and widespread understanding in historical scholarship: we study events by placing them within some kind of narrative; then we identify the large social, economic, religious, or political institutions, forces, or ideologies that contain and determine the meaning of the narrative. Throughout this book I address this fundamental division and understanding, which, I believe, hinders our historical research and methods of interpretation.

> . . . events can only be narrated, while structures can only be described.
> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (1985: 105)

Of course, there will always be some scholars, including a number of theatre historians, who attend almost exclusively to individual events. They describe the details of the event, then quickly conclude their investigation. They often fail to place events in relation to one another, either synchronically or diachronically. At best, the context is evoked as a familiar generalization (e.g., categories of racial, sexual, or national identity, a standard period concept). By contrast, there are other scholars who champion a reigning idea, derived from this or that theory. All events are illustrations of the theory, which defines the context and controls the interpretation.

Both types of scholars, the isolationist and the universalist, perpetuate a simplified idea of event and context because they are committed to a dualistic model of thinking. The isolationist gives us events that supposedly explain themselves; the universalist gives us events as formulaic illustrations of a system or theory. These two types of historians, though separated by their opposing ideas of historical procedure, are quite equal in their reductive approach to historical study. Because of their limitations, we are wise to distance ourselves from them. Yet despite our rejection of these overly neat polarities, we still tend to perceive the ideas of *event* and *context* in dualistic ways. We may refuse to isolate an event from its context, but our methods of joining them still may depend upon our own two-part formulas. Typically, instead of defining the relationship as an opposition (i.e., event versus context), we take up the idea of mimesis or representation, which suggests some kind of correspondence or interrelationship. The one equals the other.

Usually, this relational idea suggests that the event presents, portrays, reflects, or contains aspects of a representational world. The characters on stage bear comparison to people in the world. The Aristotelian principle of mimesis yokes the event to its context. This relationship suggests the mirror metaphor, which has often been tied to the idea of imitation, though the idea of representation is more appropriate. As we will see, various scholars, including Raymond Williams, prefer the metaphor of "embodying" for the relationship between theatrical events and the conditioning contexts. Because of the idea of structural enclosure, this relationship could be represented in this manner:

EVENT = CONTEXT

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