

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of
7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part 1: Methodology and context

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of
7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction: producing theatre histories

... by considering the theatre historian as the product of a particular time and place, conditioned by current assumptions and ideologies as well as by personal predilections, we keep before us the human face of history. We see it as the product of a human confrontation of data, as dynamic models that are as dependent upon the historian's perceptions as upon the amount and nature of the data that the historian identifies as historical evidence. (Vince 1989: 2)

It is by now a commonplace that histories and the documents upon which they are based must be seen as representative of different ideological interests. The destabilizing of concepts such as 'authority' and 'objectivity' in traditional literary and historical methodologies has had a profound impact on the discipline of theatre history. As Marvin Carlson suggests, historians can no longer 'continue simply "doing" theater history, under the assumption that a common audience exists for such work with a common theory of what history is or should be and a common methodological procedure' and argues instead that 'Like Schiller's sentimental poet, today's historian must wrestle more directly with issues of reflexivity and justification, seeking a voice and meaningful discourse in a world of many voices and discourses, and none of transparent authenticity' (1991: 275). This is of course no small feat and the demands and pressures which surround the task of writing 'history' (and positioning oneself in that process) can seem at times debilitating – even stifling. But the redefinition of disciplinary boundaries and methods has been crucial

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)

METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

to opening and legitimating new areas of inquiry. It is on this note that I would like to turn to the immediate concerns of this study.

Popular traditions and traditional methods

It was my first exposure to 7:84 (Scotland) in the mid eighties that motivated my examination of alternative theatre, eventually (like Raymond Williams' backward-moving escalator) taking me to the earlier part of this century. What became apparent to me at every stage was the rich theatre history to which I had never previously been exposed. These gaps forced me to consider the ideological and methodological biases of traditional forms of theatrical and dramatic criticism that account for why alternative and popular traditions in the theatre in this century have been neglected and undervalued in favour of high culture. Carlson outlines how selective the focus of more conventional approaches to theatre history has been:

one might consider the choice of what is to be examined, a concern deeply involved with ideology. Traditional theater history developed in the shadow of European high culture of the late nineteenth century and almost universally accepted the values of that culture. Theater history was by no means considered a study of the phenomenon of theater in all periods and cultures, but a study of the production conditions of the already acknowledged major periods and accepted canon of the European literary drama . . . the rich tradition of popular and/or spectacle theater, even in Europe, was ignored as undistinguished, decadent, or generally unworthy of critical attention. (1991: 276)

In twentieth-century theatre and drama, this avant-garde/popular split is complicated by the issue of politics. The alternative tradition informing the focus of this study was shaped by an overtly left-wing political agenda (expressed in terms ranging from the Communist based Workers' Theatre Movement to the more broadly Marxist/socialist tendencies of theatre companies in the post-war years). Given that 'high' art has traditionally divorced itself from the social and political realm, it is not surprising that politically oriented theatre practices have been ignored by the academy.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: producing theatre histories*

But the reasons for the blatant privileging of some traditions over others is methodological as well as ideological. Dramatic criticism in particular is text-based, so it has limited its attention to the published plays of dramatic authors deemed important enough to warrant inclusion in the canon. The need for a written 'text' as a basis for dramatic criticism not only privileges 'product' over 'process', but more importantly, it necessarily excludes theatrical activity which cannot be accessed by means of texts. In spite of attempts in recent years to recover and document some of the work of alternative theatre movements,¹ the plays or productions are rarely available in published form, and when they are, they cannot be treated as definitive texts because this kind of theatre is performance, not script, oriented. As I will illustrate in the case of 7:84 (Scotland), the strength of popular political theatre is in the bonds which are forged between performers and audiences through direct address, comedy, music and song, and a written text can never provide an accurate record of this fundamentally dynamic relationship. Often, if any records exist, they are in the memories of the performers and audiences themselves. But the evanescent nature of such theatre and the practical difficulties of trying to document it are not sufficient reasons to justify the lack of attention it has received.

Interdisciplinary approaches and 'contemporary' history

The lack of attention paid to the conditions and relations of production and consumption in theatre/drama studies has resulted in a narrow, and sometimes distorted, understanding of what constitutes 'theatre', including 'alternative theatre'. In order to account for alternative tendencies in all their complexity, it is necessary to shift to a more interdisciplinary analytical framework, and to consider social, political, and economic factors, in addition to conventionally

¹ I use the plural 'movements' here deliberately because I regard post-1968 alternative theatre as part of a tradition which stems back to at least the beginning of this century. Examples of the attempts I refer to here include Stourac and McCreery's *Theatre as a Weapon* (1986), Chambers' *The Story of Unity Theatre* (1989), and *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935* by Samuel, MacColl and Cosgrove (1985).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of
7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)

METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

artistic ones. Recent criticism has pointed to this need, but the extent to which it has been applied in practice remains limited. In *The Politics of Performance* (1992), a major contribution to the field, Baz Kershaw offers a series of case studies in which he contextualizes specific community-oriented theatre practices and tries to bridge the gap Raymond Williams points to between 'on the one hand, general history and the associated general history of particular arts, and, on the other hand, individual studies' (1992: 4–5). Kershaw argues:

we must move beyond formalist analysis – which treats theatre as if it were independent of its social and political environment – and consider performance as a cultural construct and as a means of cultural production. It also follows that particular performances, as far as possible, have to be seen in their full cultural milieu: in relation to the aesthetic movements of which they are a part; in relation to the cultural formations which they inhabit. (1992: 5–6)

This is not to dismiss the concerns of more traditional forms of theatre history and dramatic criticism, but to align them with those of social history, political economy, and sociology, in theory *and* in practice.

Focusing on *contemporary* theatre *companies* whose work is based in a popular political/community context, means that an interdisciplinary approach is not only useful, but unavoidable. This choice of focus is worth elaborating, since I am not suggesting that it is alternative or political theatre per se that has been neglected. In the case of contemporary political theatre, there is a clear bias, in the existing documentation and criticism, in favour of avant-garde tendencies and playwrights, whose work has been produced in mainstream houses and published (even anthologized). The same names come up – David Hare, Howard Brenton, Trevor Griffiths, Caryl Churchill – over and over again. While it is not unusual to find book-length studies of the work of playwrights (often an analysis of plays with a bit of socio-political context thrown in), alternative theatre *companies* in the same period have received comparatively little detailed coverage. Companies are generally treated in more cursory

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: producing theatre histories*

ways; they serve as a backdrop for the work of playwrights or they are featured in survey studies where accounts of their work are confined to article or chapter length. I will consider some of the existing histories below.

One of the main goals of this book is to stress and demonstrate the need to document, in a comprehensive way, the work of alternative theatre companies. If there is a note of urgency, it comes from a recognition of how much is actually lost as time passes, particularly in certain areas of work. Writing and documenting contemporary theatre history differs from theatre history about earlier periods. The relationship between the historian and subject matter is not any less problematic; in fact, the same problems of ideological positioning apply. But the task of gathering data and recording them differs for the contemporary historian. In some respects, having access to a wider variety of materials, as well as to the people who generated them, can make one almost long for the distance that a century or two seems to offer.

In his examination of the problems related to writing contemporary theatre history, Richard Paul Knowles uses the case of a Canadian theatre company to demonstrate the 'complex series of negotiations' that the historian faces as he or she confronts three 'sites of struggle': 'the discourse of the company (including its theatre productions); the reception and perception (reproduction) of its work in reviews and criticism; and ... the histories that have been and could be written of it [in this case the Mulgrave Road Co-op Theatre]' (1992: 108). Knowles points to the difficulties of reconciling the sometimes contradictory discourses of a company as it 'constructs itself' for professional associations, funding bodies and audiences:

Theatre history, of course, like other history, is always already written, and in the case of a theatre company the primary documents upon which the historian draws – that archival record of policies, minutes, grant applications, newsletters, correspondence, and press releases that together with its productions form the discourses of the company – are already shaped by the interests, investments, and narrative strategies of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)

METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

their particular authors writing for particular audiences for particular purposes. (1992: 108–9).

Implied in Knowles' analysis are two main points. First, the notion of constructed identity has particular relevance for the contemporary theatre historian. The advent of public subsidies to the arts in the post-war period, and more recently the increasing privatization of the arts, have had a direct impact on the administrative practices of theatre companies and the ways in which they are forced to 'market' themselves in the attempt to secure funding. The fact that these considerations must be taken into account in both the collection and analysis of a company's primary documents points, secondly, to the use of a methodology – in this case a 'cultural materialist perspective' (1992: 107) – that allows for such an analysis.

The need for interdisciplinary approaches becomes even more obvious when one shifts from an examination of documents to a study of the company as a working group or community. Some of this information is available in the primary sources, but the contemporary historian's access to the actual practitioners (those who are or were involved) and to the company's working and creative process (meetings, rehearsals, workshops) – and the productions themselves – opens up a different set of possibilities. It is here that the theatre historian can borrow the techniques of the ethnographer, participant observation and interviews, to supplement the documents. Inevitably, though, he or she still faces a range of methodological problems associated with these techniques.²

These often involve reconciling conflicting internal (company members) and external (critics and funding bodies) accounts of a company's work. It is not unusual to get different answers to similar questions from performers, stage management, and administration (sometimes in 'off the record' remarks), or, different explanations from the same people at different times, resulting from their changing

² There is a large body of work in this field but a useful starting point is *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1983) by Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson. Their more recent books on decoding ethnographic studies also have useful applications for analysing existing theatre histories.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: producing theatre histories*

positions in the organizational division of labour. A researcher may also find, by interviewing and observing the working process, discrepancies between the way the company purports to operate and how it *actually* operates. Conflicting accounts and assessments are not the sole domain of contemporary companies, but I would argue that the act of recording them is a more sensitive matter when dealing with the present, as opposed to the more distant past. It is, after all, easier to do an autopsy on a dead body.

In emphasizing the sensitive nature of the work I am concerned less with offending individuals and more with the implications of critical studies/histories for existing theatre companies. On one hand, they can have positive implications by raising the profile of a company, even lending the company's work authority or credibility (in the academic sphere). There is no doubt that once such histories are produced and published, they affect the status of companies and contribute (no matter how unwillingly) to canon formation. It is not unusual for companies to use positive assessments in their publicity and grant applications. On the other hand, negative accounts can be damaging to companies struggling to survive. Even in his preface to *The Joint Stock Book* in 1986, Rob Ritchie notes 'We live in an age of the sponsorship brochure and its secret companion the Arts Council hit list. Treading the line between flashy self-publicity and lethal self-criticism is not easy' (1987: 7). It is important to recognize a certain responsibility in the act of criticism.

Some existing 'histories'

These general methodological issues can be illustrated through examples of specific histories, profiles and case studies – all of these terms are applicable. I have already noted that, to date, there have been few full-length studies devoted to the work of British alternative theatre companies, and even fewer studies which include accounts of popular political companies. But the existing body of work serves to highlight a range of approaches.³

³ I am limiting the references for the purposes of this study to surveys and single-focus books dealing with British alternative theatre. There is a growing number of studies dealing with alternative theatre in national and international contexts.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)

METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

The published accounts of British alternative theatre companies take a variety of forms. In terms of scope, the article or chapter length study is the most frequent. In journal form *Theatre Quarterly* and *New Theatre Quarterly* have made the single most important contribution to this area of research, by offering profiles of companies, as well as providing a forum for more theoretical debates. Among the full-length studies that are survey-oriented (offering brief accounts of a variety of companies) are Peter Ansorge's *Disrupting the Spectacle*, Catherine Itzin's *Stages in the Revolution*, Sandy Craig's *Dreams and Deconstructions*, Andrew Davies' *Other Theatres*, Baz Kershaw's *The Politics of Performance*, and Lizbeth Goodman's *Contemporary Feminist Theatres*. These books, which appeared between 1975 and 1993, are organized around general themes (alternative, political, feminist theatre) and document different tendencies that fall within the broader categories each outlines (socialist, feminist, gay and lesbian, black, ethnic, community theatre, theatre-in-education). The time period varies, but each examines the work of specific practitioners and companies in the context of political events, professional organization and economic structures. Despite their importance, however, they are rarely able to offer more than an overview of the companies or a discussion of key productions by relevant groups. The same is true of the occasional chapter on a theatre company in collections such as *The Politics of Theatre and Drama*, edited by Graham Holderness, and *Contemporary British Theatre*, edited by Theodore Shank.

Some single-focus publications exist, but they take different forms. For instance, accounts of theatre companies are being produced as introductions to collections of plays. A good example is *Monstrous Regiment: Four Plays and a Collective Celebration*, selected and compiled by Gillian Hanna. She offers a lengthy introduction covering fifteen years of the company's history (written from her point of view and interpolated with quotations from other members) and includes a chronology of productions, a list of members and production photographs covering those years. The format brings together a chronological account of the company's life – dealing with issues of organization, working relations, creative process, surviving in the larger economic and political context – and examples of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55456-5 - The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)

Maria DiCenzo

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: producing theatre histories*

scripts it produced. Rob Ritchie covers similar ground in *The Joint Stock Book: The Making of a Theatre Collective*, but it is a more impressionistic and less comprehensive account. This is not a collection of plays; instead Ritchie includes a short history of the company, but devotes the bulk of the book (roughly eighty per cent of the space) to an illustrated chronology of productions (here combining photos, cast lists, venues, and dates), followed by a series of first-hand accounts from directors, writers, performers, stage managers, and administrators, who worked with Joint Stock at different points between 1974 and 1985.

Because both books offer more than just a narrative account from a single point of view, they raise some interesting structural issues related to the compilation of company histories in general. First, they highlight the problem of the perspective or positioning of the author/editor (an insider or outsider, a practitioner or a critic?). The prefaces are often indicators (directly or indirectly) of the relationship between the author/editor and the subject matter. For example, in her 'celebration' of the company, Hanna foregrounds her own involvement with Monstrous Regiment, and draws attention to how much she omits in her account:

This is a personal, partial – in both senses – record of some significant moments in the life of a theatre company. Even if I had wanted to, I am not the right person to write a scholarly document of social history. What I want to do here is to try and give some sense of what it felt like to be part of an enormous wave of social change. It isn't a minutely detailed account of The Monstrous Regiment's existence over the last fifteen years; more like a series of snapshots from the family album. So I apologise in advance to all those who will feel – who will know – that there are other versions of this story. (1991: ix)

Ritchie, on the other hand, adopts a very matter-of-fact tone and his detachment seems disturbingly sincere. After noting that the company decided to 'call in an outsider' and that he had 'never worked for Joint Stock or attended any of their workshops', he concludes: