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PART ONE

Why?

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1

DAVID WILES

Why theatre history?

We, the editors and contributors to this volume, are united by a shared conviction that history matters. We all wish to resist 'presentism', which may be defined as a belief that the past is irrelevant because its inhabitants, people just like us, are now irretrievably gone. We sense that our students are disempowered by their lack of appropriate maps of the past, yet we find it difficult to endorse standard accounts of the theatrical past because we have a different set of priorities. We find it a challenge, using available textbooks, to engender passion about the past, because these books do not explain why the past should matter to us, in the here and now. This lack of intellectual engagement with the theatrical past is a rather surprising state of affairs given that, in the domain of mass culture, there is a vast public following for historical novels and films, for museums and for heritage sites.

In the political domain there is a clear perception that history matters. When the contributors to this volume gathered for a conference in London in the summer of 2010, the teaching of history was being debated in the wider world. Niall Ferguson, a controversial historian of empire, drew media attention at a literary festival because the incoming Conservative Minister of Education, Michael Gove, leapt up and invited him to help shape the new schools curriculum. In his speech Ferguson lamented that his children had left school having learned history only in fragments, their knowledge seemingly confined to Henry VIII, Adolf Hitler and Martin Luther King, isolated moral case studies that offered no sense of how historical events interconnect. The left-wing press was fierce in its condemnation. The *New Statesman*, for example, concluded its attack on Ferguson and the new government by declaring that

> Michael Gove's wish to re-engineer how history is taught to children is, quite simply, about social control. It is part of a broader political discourse that seeks, ultimately, to replace the messy, multivalent web of Britain's cultural inheritance with one 'big story' about dominance and hierarchy, of white over black, west over east, rich over poor. But history is not about the big story, the single

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> story, the story told by the overculture. History is not about 'celebrating' the past, nor about making white kids feel good about their cultural inheritance. History is a process of exploring the legacy of the past, and questioning it – including the ugly, uncomfortable parts. No wonder the Tories want to tear it up and start again.[1]

There is a fatal flaw in this argument, for how can you explore and question the 'legacy of the past' unless you are taught what that legacy is? There is an assumption here that big stories are necessarily right-wing stories, which is clearly fallacious if, for example, we think of how radicals in the French Revolution were fired by big stories from Republican Rome, or of the economic models of society developed by Karl Marx. The *New Statesman*'s moral agenda concerned diversity and multiculturalism, and the journal feared, no doubt with reason, that the new Minister was attached to a national story that would downplay diversity.

Like those educationalists whom Ferguson attacks and for similar ethical reasons, theatre historians have retreated from big stories, stories that catch the imagination and connect to the public domain, out of fear that they will prove inherently elitist or nationalist, racist or masculinist. It is much easier to take on board, without ethical qualms, the moral drive towards inclusiveness and plurality, the drive to embrace oppressed minority and marginalised groups in the present. But in abandoning the big, public stories, theatre historians have lost the ability to point up the interconnectedness of past events. If theatre history is to be harnessed to ends other than right-wing nationalism, there is a conundrum to be resolved, and we have sought to confront the problem directly in this volume. All of the contributors are intent that they should not be the voice of an 'overculture', and all of us honour the principle of diversity, yet we are concerned that attention to the rich diversity of the contemporary world may allow no intellectual space for looking backwards. Therefore, we shall set out what we see as legacies of the theatrical past in the first section of this book, before offering alternative pictures of how events are interconnected. The problem is one of balance: how to weigh a synchronic (or contemporary) awareness of global diversity and the equal rights of all human beings against a diachronic (or historical) awareness that sets out how our multifarious world came to be as it is and thus how we might change it. We shall keep reaching in this volume for points of intersection between a vertical line that cuts into the past and a horizontal line that reaches sideways to the diversity of the present.

Indeed, we cannot study the past without studying the present, for the present changes the past. As Hazem Azmy pointed out in our meeting, the attack upon New York on '9/11' changed Egyptian history retrospectively.

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After 2001, the world seemed to be a different place, and accounts of the past had to be rethought and rewritten. Any historian needs to interrogate the present in order to ask important questions of the past. A historian of theatre must do this if she or he is to quarry documents and assemble data to some useful end. But in what way is our historical work going to be useful? We cannot escape the 'why?' behind our activity. Why does the past matter to *us*? When we confronted this question at our conference, three forms of answer emerged.

The first might be described as an aesthetic response: 'I love the theatre, and I love thinking about what I love.' One participant spoke of a love/hate relationship. Most theatre historians practise their profession because of an emotional attachment of this kind: they love going to the theatre, or some theatre, and as creative beings they imagine how they would love theatre better, or even better, if it were different, and at least in some respects more like the way it once was. Theatre audiences are more engaged when they have a sense of history, just as a sporting audience will be more excited when it knows the history of the game and of the team. Theatre practitioners have repeatedly looked to the past, to old stories, old spatial arrangements, and old techniques, in order to challenge and renew present practices. Historians thus have one role as servants to the art of contemporary theatre-making.

Then there was a more personal response, which relates to the fact that many who write about the theatre and its history are also practitioners of theatre. 'The stories told about me didn't fit.' No historian can work without empathy, without placing herself or himself in the world of the past, and we interrogate the past to find out who we are as individuals, and sometimes also who we are as artists.

Finally there was politics and the belief that 'I am making an intervention'. The title of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's essay collection *Moving the Centre* provided a compelling image in our discussions, relating both directly to our project in Part III of this volume and metaphorically to the idea that we should present history from the perspective of those who feel marginalised by their class, their profession, their gender, their race and so forth. 'Moving the centre' has two aspects: first, a challenge to the established centre of power, an act of transfer, and second, consolidation around a new centre. While challenging authority has been the ideal of modernist art for well over a century, building community does not enjoy the same prestige in critical writing, and yet from the perspective of a new or multi-cultural nation this may be a more pressing and progressive project. Historians shape identities, and new identities seek out their historians. The *New Statesman* places its emphasis on overthrowing old stories, but the world also needs from its historians a repertory of new stories.

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The idea of an 'intervention' presupposes that historians are not trapped in an ivory tower that encloses intellectual thought and prevents ideas from touching the 'real' world. In totalitarian regimes it is all too clear that ideas are dangerous, but in places like the UK and the USA it is less easy to see how historical analysis feeds into historical change: the processes are slow and indirect. In her book *New Readings in Theatre History*, Jacky Bratton demonstrates that theatre historians in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were engaged in a battle for institutional power. Authority was wrested from the theatrical profession and passed over to a middle-class voice that spoke of literary merit and thereby lent legitimacy to political strategies designed to control the auditorium. It is much harder to see such processes at work in our own world, because it is so close to us, and we have to be all the more alert. Knowledge was power in the eighteenth century, and so it remains today.

NOTE

1 Article posted by Laurie Penny on 1 June 2010: www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2010/06/history-british-ferguson.

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Theatre historians always work with a map of the past in mind. To put it less metaphorically, they write with some sense of a temporal continuum, where one phase leads to the next, linked by complex relations of cause and effect. The historian's task is to impose order upon the chaos of events that were once lived and experienced by a multiplicity of confused human beings, and, though hindsight brings undoubted benefits, there is always something arbitrary about the retrospective imposition of order. Historians are interested in moments or processes of change, because only by identifying change can they map continuities, but they differ radically in the kinds of changes that they think significant. Their priorities stem from different aesthetic tastes and different ethical priorities regarding the world they themselves inhabit.

In this section we shall look at how theatre historians within the European or Western tradition have mapped the past. The story that we shall explore in the next four chapters belongs to an intellectually and politically dominant tradition. This narrative seeks to track the journey that brought us to where we are now, and, for all its many byways and detours, it comprises a single story that countless historians of theatre have each tried to retell in their own way. It is a story that always needs to be challenged, and creative historiography necessarily involves questioning received versions in the light of new understandings or intuitions about the present. Historians never work on a blank slate. It is impossible to look at the past objectively as a set of unmediated events because past events always come to us packaged up as stories, and sources are always shaped and ordered by someone. Just as the Greek tragedians kept telling the same old stories of Oedipus or Orestes in new ways for new purposes, so historians keep reshaping old stories in order to accomplish their own intellectually creative

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work. It is necessary to see how historians have previously configured the past in order to configure it afresh.

This volume is not a theatre history but a 'companion' to theatre history, and we do not want to offer the reader a potted or predigested history of our own. Our aim in the following four chapters will be to provide the reader with certain core reference points and to explore how different historians have articulated them. In these chapters we have to 'do' some history in order to clarify the historiographic principles at stake. If we do not give you, the reader, some sense of the maps that historians have drawn in the past, we risk leaving you disempowered, as though 'theatre history' were a mystery accessible only to an educated few, unknowable and therefore easy to dismiss as unimportant.

There are two ways of organising history: genealogically and sequentially. The genealogist traces a family line from the present back as far as he or she can go, sifting through the records. There is much to be said for this approach, which asks directly and bluntly, how did we get to be where we are now? How do we uncover our roots? While amateur family historians get much pleasure from genealogies, members of other families find less to rivet them. Sequential stories are much more exciting because they begin at the beginning, and the reader is forever in suspense to know what happens next. Successful historians are good storytellers who demonstrate how, by unexpected routes, one thing leads to another. This is the conventional way of doing history, but it risks being more duplicitous than genealogy, for it may all too easily imply that the progress of the narrative equates with the progress of humankind, and that there is an inevitability in the outcome such that no alternative present becomes conceivable. Though each of the four chapters in Part II has its own chronological order, we have reversed chronology by taking modernism first and classical antiquity last. We have done this in order to point up the genealogical logic that lies buried beneath our crafted stories. To assist the reader, we have followed this introduction with a brief timeline that sets out in standard chronological order some of the major events to which the contributors allude.

In the four chapters of Part II we shall carve theatre history into four pieces, unashamedly reflecting tradition. The first is organised around the idea of modernism, an important concept in all branches of the arts. It could be said that modernism helped the arts know that they were 'arts' and not mere crafts, since the

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