

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-79463-3 - New Readings in Theatre History
Jacky Bratton
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Part I

Background

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1 Theatre history today

For more than a decade now theatre history has been, rather belatedly, coming to self-consciousness about knowledge. We still do not well know what we are supposed to be doing, what we can seek to know, what, in fact, we are talking about. There have been huge claims for the centrality of the discipline to the liberal education; and simultaneously the discovery by academic and professional institutions that fewer and fewer people are interested in it in its established form.¹ This uncertainty may or may not be linked with a more general concern about the fate of theatre itself, loudly asserting the vital importance of live performance in a world of increasingly virtual reality. Our realisations of doubt seem to trail a long way behind the theoretical disputes in wider historical studies, where the death and rebirth of narrative, for example, appear to have happened before anyone in the backwater of theatre seriously considered that one might do without it.² But since the 1980s academic theatre history has been increasingly uneasy, and there is no longer any consensus about such a shared endeavour, its terms of reference or its historiography. Spats take place. Despite many years of the digestion of Foucault and Derrida, not to mention writers more closely interested in the field, like Greenblatt and Orgel, it was still possible in 1999 for the respected theatre historian Robert D. Hume to refer to New Historicism as ‘an unfortunate complication’³ and to assert a version of the credo of the positivist which he calls ‘Archeo-historicism’ in the face of the widely held consensus about the non-neutrality of facts.⁴

Robert Hume is by no means alone in maintaining an antiquarian interest in the stage. At the opening of the twenty-first century many disparate, sometimes mutually discrediting, activities are going on. On the one hand, major undertakings in

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documentary history still roll forward. Scholars under the aegis of the Records of Early English Drama still cull materials from medieval documents and present them as self-verifying facts.⁵ The continuation into the next century of the massive calendar of eighteenth-century performances, *The London Stage 1660–1800*,⁶ is still projected, as *The London Stage 1800–1900*, and has produced one publication, *The Adelphi Theatre Calendar, Part 1, 1806–1850*⁷ as an earnest of its intent to list every performance in every theatre as its predecessor did (or asserted that it did – in fact *The London Stage* fails to include most performances in taverns, public halls and other spaces, or indeed in theatres beyond the patent houses). Computer technology seductively offers new possibilities of the comprehensive publication of data: the Adelphi microfiche have been translated into an on-line database; many other initiatives are beginning. On 10 June 2002, for example, at the London Theatre Museum, *Backstage* was launched, an on-line catalogue, reaching right down to the names on the playbills, that covers the theatre holdings of a large number of British libraries.⁸ Beside the work of compilation, that of synthesis and definition moves slowly forward. Attempts – to which this book is in some ways related – are being made in many countries of Europe to write national theatre histories.⁹ Books have appeared which question the grounds on which such histories are being written, and either, as in Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie's *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, suggest ways to use new historical methodologies, or, as in the ingenious structure of Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack's *English Drama, a Cultural History*,¹⁰ offer contextualisation of their own history by reviewing the constructions of previous writers alongside their own new interpretations. Meanwhile, books about the much more developed field of performance theory now often contain some move towards the inclusion of a theorised theatre history; and the first volumes of new kinds of history, taking up the most obvious developments in historical writing – feminist, *analiste*, New Historicist or cultural/anthropological studies, for example – have been published.¹¹ So developments in historiography and performance theory are at last beginning to filter into examinations of long-past theatre events, and from that a new hybrid, which might become a historiographically challenging and exciting new mode, begins to emerge. But no new direction or

set of procedures has so far been agreed; the performance falters; and the audience is becoming impatient.

Binary thinking in the twentieth century: theatre as 'ritual and revelry'

My first intention is to move backwards, and consider the historiography of the theatre as shaping the peculiar situation not only of the discipline today, disputatious, excited and unsettled as it is, but also the current state of the theatre, its equally troubled object of study. I hope to approach British theatre history by examining how it came to be written as it is, considering the forces that determined and shaped it in the nineteenth century, as part of the hegemonic battle for possession of the stage itself; and then to suggest a new historicising of the field, undertaken from a different position. One cannot, of course, change the course of past events, and reverse the direction taken by theatre performance and reception within western culture; but it is my hope that an understanding of the cultural determination of one influential and sometime highly regarded national theatre and its history will enable a clearer understanding of why theatre and its historical study are where they are today.

Underlying the organisation of the field of theatre history is, unsurprisingly, a series of binary assumptions. On the institutional level, the calendaring activities mentioned above are the legacy of the first mode of academic study of theatre history, which is usually fathered upon Max Hermann. His Theaterwissenschaftliches Institut in Berlin, founded in 1923, set out the model for the rigorous study of documented facts about the material remains of theatrical life – theatres or their ruins, promptbooks, designs, bills, costumes and so forth. According to its dogma, history lies in the artifactual record; nothing can be known without sufficient factual documentation.¹² This principle is still powerful, and is restated in Hume's 1999 volume cited above: he maintains strongly that satisfactory 'archaeo-historical' work is entirely dependent upon the first-hand study of adequate amounts of primary documentary evidence.¹³ The work done under its banner is indeed rigorous; to see this rigour at work one has only to consult the 1987 Society for Theatre Research edition of the first book that offers detailed British theatre facts,

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John Downes's *Roscius Anglicanus* of 1708, which Hume edited with Judith Milhous. The editors were expressly intending 'to help the reader follow Downes without being misled'.¹⁴ Every date, every name has been checked against other sources; no page of the text is without a substantial footnote, many of them containing more words than those of the original text. But beyond such facts, one might learn very little about Downes, or directly about his colleagues the actors, the plays or the culture in question from this book. The binary observed in this model of theatre history is a strict divide set up between this 'scientific' activity, susceptible of concrete proofs and never venturing beyond demonstrable facts, and the critical activities of students of the drama, who interpret and study the written texts in the light of the facts generated elsewhere. The theatre historian is expressly debarred from considering the plays that were put on by the people she or he studies, except in clearly limited and defined, factual ways.

The many distinguished archaeo-historical writers have not undertaken this work, of course, with the intention of belittling the study of the play text. Rather the reverse. Intent upon establishing an academic discipline that could be respected in its own right, the objective of *Theaterwissenschaft* is that its products should be of use to the wider world, providing a secure knowledge on which critical, aesthetic and conceptual responses to literature could be based. However, as the title of Hume's book, *Reconstructing Contexts*, makes clear, this effectively sets up the discipline as the lesser term in a powerful binary: it is merely context to the text of literature. Thus the study of the theatre is always at the service of the written drama, its *raison d'être*. As I hope to show, this is a debilitating assumption; and, moreover, it has unintentionally given rise to much tedious and inferior work by lesser hands, which cannot claim any function beyond the gratification of an impulse to unearth, hoard and dispute over the detritus of the past. No knowledge *need* be dull; but exemption from the obligation to be critical, imaginative, alert to implication and synthetic of ideas in one's research has led too many scholars to an intellectual inertia, and the antiquarian pursuit of relics for their own sake.

The obvious conceptual challenge to *Theaterwissenschaft* comes, of course, from the direction of post-Modern and

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post-structuralist thought, which questions the distinction between text and context, as well as the nature of fact, proof and evidence assumed in its quasi-scientific foundation. Again, the mainstream of historiographical revisionism has been there ahead of us, and one may find much recent work on the nature of historical truth, its rejection and reclamation, stemming from such moves as the questioning of 'grand narratives' in Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* in 1984¹⁵ and moving on through an intricate and protracted debate which is not (of course) susceptible of closure. In this line of thought theatre history is especially susceptible to challenge, but at the same time, it seems to me, potentially especially well equipped to find constructive responses. The susceptibility stems from the consciousness, shared by even the most stubbornly myopic antiquarians, that our study is of something which is always-already irrecoverably lost. While political life, for example, was played out at least partly in documents that have been archived, poems, novels and play texts are still in the library, and local identity inheres in surviving rivers, houses, families, the theatrical performance is in essence evanescent, gone for ever. Joseph Roach notes theatre historians' tendency to strike notes of 'irrecoverable loss' about the 'fragility of their subject', to express 'self-consciousness about the perceived contradiction of writing the history of so notoriously transient a form'.¹⁶ But the same writer, in his path-breaking cross-disciplinary study *Cities of the Dead: Circum-atlantic Performance*,¹⁷ shows that the subject of performance, if adequately theorised and imaginatively extended, offers wonderfully suggestive ways of dealing with its own absences. He begins with a quotation from the *annaliste* medieval historian Jacques Le Goff: 'Today documents include the spoken word, the image, gestures':¹⁸ what better than the theatre to provide a wealth of such documentation. In the course of his book, amongst many other things, Roach interprets a British theatre history even older than *Roscius Anglicanus*, James Wright's 1699 *Historia Histrionica*. Milhous and Hume dismiss Wright's work as dilettante, containing only 'some useful scraps of information',¹⁹ but to Roach it is 'an exemplary meditation on popular performance as a measure of epochal memory'²⁰ and takes a place in his synthesis of cultural history alongside slave dancing places, effigies of Elvis Presley and the funeral of Thomas Betterton.

Popular performance: 'theatre of pure diversion'

Roach's invocation of 'popular performance' points to another important binary, and one with which I shall be particularly concerned: that between high and low, elite art and 'the popular'. Tracy Davis argues that her fundamental reinterpretation of nineteenth-century theatre history in economic terms is necessary because it is still the case, in both Britain and America, that 'theatre with "enlightened" goals is cast as the "other" to commercialized entertainment'.²¹ I would reverse the terms, and so the emphasis: the British critical assumption is still that commercialised entertainment is the Other of the art of theatre. This impacts upon current thinking about the arts in fundamental ways; and it interacts significantly with the historiography of theatre. Whatever the minor byways pursued by antiquarian theatre historians of subsequent generations, the *Theaterwissenschaft* exclusion of the text from consideration did not mean – why should it? – that the interest of the historian should challenge the standing of the texts of high art. As Marvin Carlson points out:

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 European literary drama. The Greek and the Shakespearean theater were thus considered favored topics for historical investigation (as they still are), while the rich tradition of popular and/or spectacle theater, even in Europe, was ignored as undistinguished, decadent, or generally unworthy of critical attention.²²

The effect of this binary on, especially, the attitude to women in the theatre was wonderfully vividly expressed in 1931 by Rosamund Gilder, in a work whose recovery of important female contributions to past performance is still not superseded. It is, however, deeply embedded in the values of cultural hierarchy, and her language is richly suggestive of the effects of that tradition, even as she tries to break away from it and give proper attention to women in the theatre. She discusses women's exclusion from Greek Golden Age performance, and adds:

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[w]hile the official Greek theatre, forgetful of its sources in the cyclic dance and the dithyramb in which women had taken part, closed its doors to feminine participants in its elevated mysteries, that other theatre, forever effervescent at the heart of humanity, the theatre of pure diversion, continued its unfettered course. Ever since Eve invented costume, and, coached by the Serpent, enacted that little comedy by which she persuaded Adam that the bitter apple of knowledge was sweet and comforting, there has been something satanic in the very nature of theatre. Born of ritual and revelry, it is at once the child of God and the offspring of the Devil. We see it simultaneously reflecting the noblest aspects of the mind of man, stemming from his aspiration toward beauty and goodness and blossoming in the highest forms of art, and at the same time we find it creeping up from the gutter, befouling the image of its creator and reducing him to something a little lower than the beasts. In this double aspect it very fairly mirrors the larger human scene, and not least of all in its attitude toward woman. When, as in Greece, the nobler aspects of the theatre were closed to her, she came in, as was to be expected, by the Devil's way.²³

In such self-deprecatory terms Gilder outlines the history of the feminised Other set up by the theatre of male genius, of moral and sacred high art. She is concerned with the low estimation of women involved in theatre, but without challenging the binary thinking that has placed them in the inferior position.

The abjection of the 'theatre of pure diversion', and often all theatre whatsoever, is set out and explored at length in another classic text, Jonas Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Barish traces the prejudice he describes through its long philosophical and political history, but in the end sees it as a pathology, 'tenacious, elusive and protean in its own right, and springing, as it seems, from the deepest core of our being', an affliction which he sees as yet undefeated, since while 'the public may have lost much of its old suspiciousness of the theater' '[t]he theater remains suspicious of itself'.²⁴ In British scholarship explanations are always more likely to be sought in culture, and especially in class, than in psychology. With the new popularist turn of scholarship in the 1960s that became British cultural studies, the binary between sacred and profane art and the prejudice against entertainment and feigning were read as hierarchical, a matter of high and low. Hence there was a deliberate reaction, a move away from the prejudged, exclusory history of drama towards the study of 'folk'

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performances, customs, festivals, street theatre and the spectacular and musical theatres of ‘the people’. In nineteenth-century history, music hall and melodrama became the focus of work that attempts to recuperate or to understand these commercial entertainments in relation to a ‘little’ or ‘popular’ tradition deriving from broadside ballads, street singing and tavern culture, or to place them in a social-historians’ context of class definition rather than in the history of performance.²⁵ The obvious problem here, of course, is that to invert a binary of this sort is not to abolish it; but also, and more damagingly still, the definition of ‘popular culture’ has become increasingly problematised as attempts have been made to theorise it within a more sophisticated cultural analysis. A single entity called people’s theatre has tended to vanish into ideological smoke, leaving popular theatre history without a coherent field of study.²⁶ But the implications of this particular binary opposition remain and are, I will argue, at the root of much of the hegemonic work done by modern theatre history ever since it was invented.

That invention predates the twentieth-century *Theaterwissenschaft* movement; its British manifestation came into force at an easily pinpointed moment, the early 1830s, in the midst of change and modernisation on a very large scale. It was, indeed, one cultural aspect of the British response to the second wave of revolutionary change that was sweeping the rest of Europe. The British political outcome was the reformation of the parliamentary system, which was thought at the time to have staved off revolution; but many cultural changes were also part of that defensive response to the revolutionary impulse. It is my argument that at this particular point theatre history became a part of the hegemonic negotiation taking place at many levels in British culture, and that there was a vested interest in its reinvention in a particular mould – many of whose lineaments have survived until today, to the detriment not only of the historical study, but also of its object of contemplation, theatrical work itself.

The birth of our grand narrative

It was in the 1830s that the field became defined and its procedures set up so as to mark limits to what theatre is, and to establish it in a system of difference – text and context, high