Introduction

The times, the times are chang'd.
– John Fletcher, *The Tragedy of Rollo* (1640)

This book – a history of British theatre history – would not have been written in 1952 when Alois M. Nagler published *Sources of Theatrical History*, a weighty and widely influential compendium of extracts from primary sources documenting Western stage history from Sophocles to Strindberg. Nagler, the Austrian émigré who for thirty years taught theatre history at Yale University, was North America's most redoubtable champion of *Theaterwissenschaft*: the polemically "scientific" approach to the theatrical past, rigorously conducted through the collection, ordering, and authentication of source materials. As Nagler made clear on the first page of his book, the only goal of the theatre historian was "to reconstruct, both vividly and accurately, the conditions under which" plays were first performed. He placed little confidence in earlier works of theatre history, judging them to be unhelpfully inspired by "personal enthusiasm" or "local patriotism." Following the dictum pronounced by Max Herrmann at the University of Berlin half a century earlier, nothing valuable could be found in the unscientific writings on the stage produced by "the general dilettantism of the nineteenth century."[1] To venture further back in time was futility itself.

It was no coincidence that historiography did not strongly interest modernists, whose goal was to faithfully reconstruct the past from archival sources. Beyond the discovery and authentication of those sources, there was, so it seemed, no methodological problem to solve. For much of the twentieth century, as Michael Bentley has argued, scholars believed in an

[1] Alois Nagler, *Sources of Theatrical History* (New York: Theatre Annual, 1952), ix, xx, xxi. Nagler was indebted most immediately to Herrmann for the principle that a good theatre historian aims to reconstruct the lost performance event.

"emerging historical truth which, once demonstrated, no rational person could gainsay."[2] Indeed, the total dispensability of historiography – we don't need to know what earlier historians thought because we are better than they – was the very triumph of the modernist method.

Not yet have we fully renounced the modernist paradigm. Consider, for example, Ellen MacKay's broad assertion that "theater history perpetually re-begins itself" with a "purge" of past scholarship.[3] That was true for Nagler and his twentieth-century contemporaries but it was absolutely not true for their predecessors. In 1780, when Isaac Reed prepared the second edition of Robert Dodsley's *Select Collection of Old Plays*, he included the history of the English stage that Dodsley had written for the original edition published thirty-six years earlier and brought it up to date with his own "Supplement." John Payne Collier, in the 1825 third edition, included what both Dodsley and Reed had written. This example alone makes clear that theatre historiography once proceeded not by purging earlier scholarship but by preserving and valuing it.

Yet because we read chronologically remote histories more as sources of facts than as interpretive interventions in their own right, we remain largely unaware of the diverse historiographical principles and perspectives they enact. Despite the vigor of recent critical historiography, there remains a curious reluctance to engage seriously with the aims and methods of theatre scholarship produced before the early twentieth century, even though the first works of British theatre history date from the 1660s.[4] Indeed, the opening essay in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past* (1989) – the landmark edited volume that spurred a new interest in performance historiography – dismisses theatre histories written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as "too often inaccurate, fragmented, and pointless."[5]

[2] Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism 1870–1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13.

[3] Ellen MacKay, "Against Plausibility," in *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*, eds. Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 22–31; citation at 23.

[4] As the learned Robert D. Hume has observed, "[f]undamental differences in the practice of theatre history between the late seventeenth century and the later eighteenth century have been little understood and have received almost no comment from practising theatre historians or theoreticians of historiography." Hume, "Theatre History, 1660–1800: Aims, Materials, Methodology," in *Players, Playwrights, Playhouses: Investigating Performance, 1660–1800*, eds. Michael Cordner and Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 9–44; citation at 9.

[5] Ronald W. Vince, "Theatre History as an Academic Discipline," in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past,* eds. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 1–18; citation at 4. In more balanced reflections on disciplinary origins, Shannon Jackson and Marvin Carlson also locate the pioneers of theatre history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge

My intention here is not to fault other scholars but rather to point out the continuing, yet often unacknowledged, force of modernist historiography that discounts the interpretive value of scholarship predating what it regards as empirical rigor in the humanities.

I want to turn that assumption on its head. I want to take seriously a body of historical writing more trivialized than scrutinized. I want to find *histories* in texts usually regarded only as *sources*. Many of the works considered in this book – for example, Gerard Langbaine's *An Account of the English Dramatick Poets* (1691), John Downes's *Roscius Anglicanus* (1708), and John Genest's *Some Account of the English Stage* (1832) – are still known to historians of theatre and drama and sometimes used by them. My point is not that these works have been forsaken but that they have been principally used as repositories of facts and not as expressions of historiographical intent and vision. By taking these works seriously I mean treating them less as neutral sourcebooks and more as valid interpretations of the theatrical past. Thus, I understand historiography as embracing the study of the changing methods of writing history *and* the accumulated body of historical writing on a particular subject.

In conceiving this book I drew inspiration from two scholars who have expanded our collective historiographical consciousness. Peter Holland's essay "A History of Histories: From Flecknoe to Nicoll," which appeared in *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History* (2003), and Jacky Bratton's *New Readings in Theatre History* (2003) mark important steps in reclaiming the deep history of theatre history.[6] They have challenged the discipline to reappraise the material, methodological, and ideological bases on which it was founded and practiced for several hundred years. They have shown that matters are more complex than we had assumed. That I do not agree with Holland and Bratton on every last point is entirely to be expected because difference keeps scholarship alive. Yet that scarcely detracts from the lasting value of their research. If my study of past theatre

University Press, 2004). Carlson, "Reflections on a Global Theatre History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History,* eds. David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski (Cambridge University Press, 2012). When Carlson states that "theatre history was established as a field of study in the late nineteenth century" (149), surely he means that it was then established as an academic discipline. Theatre history as an organized "field of study" existed long before then.

[6] Peter Holland, "A History of Histories: From Flecknoe to Nicoll," in *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History,* eds. W.B. Worthen and Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 8–29; and Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially pp. 17–35. Thomas Postlewait also acknowledges the roots of theatre historical scholarship in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). Postlewait's monograph comprises extended versions of some of his most influential essays that were originally published between 1988 and 2004.

historians has taught me anything, it is that our indebtedness to other scholars is far more substantial than we customarily express. So I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge that in many respects this book is a long response to the challenge that fellow scholars have set down.

Research in the humanities has inclined in recent years toward ever-greater fragmentation, partly to focus on previously marginalized subject groups and partly to avoid the ideologically suspect totalities that sometimes characterized earlier scholarship. "Microhistory" is the most prominent example of the anthropological disaggregation of historical research, in which minute or local investigations are deployed to arrive at far-reaching conclusions. Ever-smaller units of analysis have also characterized much work in theatre historiography, which continues to organize itself tightly around case studies.[7] Countering that trend, I investigate in this book the explanatory potential of long-range historical study by examining the usually overlooked theatre histories and historians from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. I do so without wishing to reinstate the historiographical absolutes that microhistory has validly called into question.

Nor is my purpose merely revisionist: that is, to include otherwise secondary or peripheral figures within an undisturbed larger narrative. As Susan Bennett has astutely remarked, too often the result of historiographical inclusion – a necessary but inevitably partial undertaking – is an expanded reiteration of "what has always already been known" rather than a reimagining of what can be known.[8] Thus, my goal in this book is less to widen the community of past British theatre historians than to use that enlarged community to redefine what theatre historiography has been. Ultimately, then, I want this book not just to change the evidentiary basis for theatre historiography but also, and more importantly, to change the terms of scholarly investigation. By studying accounts of the British stage written from the Restoration to the end of the Victorian era as credible historiographical mediations, I hope to expand the scope of the discipline;

[7] See, for example, Rosemarie Bank and Michal Kobialka, eds., *Theatre/Performance Historiography: Time, Space, Matter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, eds., *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010) and Magelssen and Bial, eds., *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*.

[8] Susan Bennett, "Theatre History, Historiography, and Women's Dramatic Writing," in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, eds. Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester University Press, 2000), 46–59; citation at 53. She has similarly argued in a more recent essay that revisionist "historiographical labor" can fail to alter the contours of "theatre histories." "The Making of Theatre History," in *Representing the Past*, 63–83; citation at 72.

to integrate and comment upon existing scholarship, yet raise the stakes of inquiry; and to interpret the writing of theatre history in light of larger historiographical trends. My project begins with the story of our current historiographical moment, and how we got here.

Historicisms, Narrow and Wide

The epistemological rupture that broke through in the 1970s, and which is commonly labeled "postmodernism," caused much anger within a historical profession proud of its many archive-based accomplishments. After the linguistic turn in the humanities and social sciences foregrounded the power of language to construct reality, and not merely to reflect it, realism was effectively banished from academic historical thought. Scholars for whom relativism is itself an absolute principle can find it difficult to appreciate just how much of a loss to scholarship the debasement of empirical specificity was felt to be. A sardonic Walter Benjamin did not exaggerate when he described Rankean historical realism – "how things actually were" – as the strongest narcotic of the nineteenth century.[9] So strong that it survived well into the twentieth century, including through the principles and methods of *Theaterwissenschaft*.

Central to the postmodern critique of Enlightenment values is the proposition that there is no impartial vantage point for historians to occupy. Eighteenth-century scholars like Edward Gibbon and David Hume, among the few historians of their age still read, understood the fundamental precept of historicism that all human events are circumscribed by time and place and therefore can be understood only by reference to their particular time and place. Yet the Enlightenment awareness of diversity within history did not negate its belief in a human nature that, as Hume proposed, "remains still the same" in "all Nations and Ages."[10] What changed in history was not human nature but only its localized sequences of development. The historian stood outside the varied temporal unfolding of human nature, its singularity, like that of the natural world, being more discernable when appraised impartially and from a distance.[11]

[9] Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 463.
[10] David Hume, *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (London: A. Millar, 1748), 133.
[11] See George Nadel, "The Philosophy of History before Historicism," in *Studies in Philosophy and History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 49–73.

Postmodernity has embraced a wider historical consciousness: the recognition that historians themselves are part of the processes of history. A historian looking at the past is not a *subject* who looks at an *object*, like a tourist stopping in front of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Whenever historians say something about the past they are also, and inevitably, saying something about themselves. So orthodox has this view become that we are no longer startled by Hayden White's once controversial claim that historians confront an essentially neutral data field that they selectively employ according to their political and esthetic values.[12] The interest in theatre historiography that has arisen over the past few decades is nothing other than the disciplinary manifestation of our consciousness that historiography is itself constructed.[13] And so for us, historiography bears a double meaning, as Michal Kobialka has articulated: It "generates different questions that are being asked of research material" *and* "destabilizes, rather than relativizes, the notions of an event and a fact."[14]

How Do Historians See?

As Erika Fischer-Lichte explains, we construct histories by asking subjectively chosen questions of subjectively chosen objects.[15] Evidence is the object that enables you to answer your subjectively formed question and a good question is the one that you can answer by appealing to your subjectively chosen evidence. Yet "subjective" does not mean "personal";

[12] The classic text on this point is White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

[13] In addition to the works cited above, see also Ronald W. Vince, "Comparative Theatre Historiography," *Essays in Theatre* 1.2 (1983), 64–72; Vince, *Renaissance Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984); Vince, *Ancient and Medieval Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984); Bruce A. McConachie, "Towards a Postpositivist Theatre History," *Theatre Journal* 37.4 (December 1985), 465–86; Vince, *Neoclassical Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988); Joseph Roach, "Theatre History and the Ideology of the Aesthetic," *Theatre Journal* 41.2 (May 1989), 155–68; Michael L. Quinn, "*Theaterwissenschaft* in the History of Theatre Study," *Theatre Survey* 32 (November 1991), 123–36; McConachie, "Theatre History and the Nation-State," *Theatre Research International* 20.2 (1995), 141–8; Roach, "Reconstructing Theatre/History," *Theatre Topics* 9 (1999), 3–10; Robert D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); William Ingram, "Early Modern Theater History: Where We Are Now, How We Got Here, Where We Go Next," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, ed. Richard Dutton (Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–15; S.P. Cerasano, "The Dream of a Perfect History," *Renaissance Drama* n.s. 40 (2012), 47–56; and Rebecca Schneider, *Theatre & History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[14] Michal Kobialka, "Historical Archives, Events and Facts: History Writing as Fragmentary Performance," *Performance Research* 7.4 (December 2002), 3–11; citation at 7.

[15] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 342.

rather, it means the structuring forces of cognition that, while neither natural nor essential, cannot be reduced to individual taste or preference. In many stage histories the structuring mechanisms are periodization and plays. These mechanisms are not *what* we think about; they are *how* we think. It is how performances as historical events organize themselves in our consciousness. Thus, we are accustomed to reading – and writing – books with titles like *Hamlet through the Ages* or *Medea in Performance*. But we are less accustomed to thinking about how these ideational givens create their own object of study, in as much as historiographical form creates its own content. It is possible to imagine performance histories that do not cling to periodization and that do not regard theatrical performances as performances *of plays*. But it is difficult to write such histories, primarily because of the continuing force of institutional practices and conceptual biases.[16]

The banishment of realism from historical thought has not banished the necessity of archival labor. But that labor appears in a new light: because we now accept that the findings of research are not transparent to their own meaning. Most significantly, we are aware that the archive has never been a neutral or disinterested site for the production and organization of knowledge. Indeed, it has been the locus of an acutely felt desire to return nostalgically to the site of unequivocal origin – as Jacques Derrida put it, "to the most archaic place of absolute commencement."[17] Moreover, to organize disparate materials into a "collection" is already to interpret the past, because whatever is organized must be organized in a particular way. As Michel de Certeau has explained, the collection presumes the totality of the past events that it documents even though it is the collection itself that produces a conception of pastness through its initial "gesture of *setting aside*."[18] Archival inscription "foregrounds and reiterates favored representations," Joseph Roach reminds us, while the absence of archival detail "occludes the undesirable ones."[19] As in a Möbius strip, the tasks of recording and creating history cannot be distinguished. And so the archive is both a physical place – a warehouse of

[16] Performance studies has given us alternative models for understanding the phenomenon of performance, most notably Richard Schechner's articulation of "restored behavior" and Joseph Roach's concept of "surrogation." Both paradigms can accommodate a performance event that utilizes a dramatic text but neither defines performance in terms of any affiliated text.

[17] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 91.

[18] Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 72.

[19] Joseph Roach, "Theatre History and the Ideology of the Aesthetic," 159.

historical information – and a symbolic event – the enunciation of what is historically thinkable.[20] Yet instead of reducing the archive to an overindulged metaphor, I focus throughout this book on the concrete archival practices of specific historians. In so doing I share Rosemarie Bank and Michal Kobialka's materialist emphasis on historiography as "the arrangement of the historical record."[21]

Nor do the raw materials of history exist in a pre-archival state of nature. Far from being neutral, the materials out of which archives are constituted are inevitably slanted, because they result from prior determinations of relevance that privilege some data and sideline others. As Paul Veyne has observed, the significance that we ascribe to certain facts derives only from the criteria of importance that historians later impose upon them.[22] Nor can we insist that some facts are more important than others by virtue of their consequences, because the criteria of significance for consequences are likewise predetermined by the historian. There are no irreducibly elemental facts out of which a total history might be compiled. There are only facts chosen for their signifying potential within a certain plot or itinerary.[23]

In the 1830s, John Payne Collier complained that Philip Henslowe had not organized his "Diary" efficiently, thus attributing to that varied memorandum book an evidentiary stature that its compiler never intended. In so doing, Collier attributed a corresponding agency to Henslowe, making the theatre entrepreneur a theatre historian *avant la lettre*. Such presumptions of historiographical intent arise not from the artifact and its creator but from the demands subsequently placed upon them by investigators. Indeed, the Diary survived not because anyone thought it would be an excellent documentary source for theatre history – no such discipline existed when Henslowe died in 1616 – but because his papers were later deposited at Dulwich College.[24] There the Diary remained, a largely unknown quantity until Edmond Malone in 1790 realized just how much unique information it contained about the Elizabethan stage.

[20] For a helpful discussion of the archive as it relates to early modern drama and theatre, see Alan Galey, *The Shakespearean Archive: Experiments in New Media from the Renaissance to Postmodernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[21] Bank and Kobialka, eds., *Theatre/Performance Historiography*, 2.
[22] Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, trans. Mina Moore-Rinvolucri (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 20.
[23] See James Wilkinson, "A Choice of Fictions: Historians, Memory and Evidence," *PMLA* 111.1 (January 1996), 80–92.
[24] Henslowe's stepdaughter was married to the actor Edward Alleyn, who founded Dulwich College in 1619.

A Methodological Prolegomenon

In responding to the challenge of redefining British theatre historiography I have had to organize a vast amount of material.[25] The historical record itself provided the starting date – the Restoration – because that was when the first histories of the British stage were written. The end point was more difficult to determine, because there was no precise moment when theatre history became a modern discipline, which I knew would be the outer limit of my study. Initially, I believed that this book would conclude with E.K. Chambers – in particular, the 1923 publication of *The Elizabethan Stage* – because he occupies a liminal position between "amateur" and "professional" theatre historians. Yet during the course of my research it became clear that the methodological apparatus regarded as the inaugural feature of academic theatre history – that is, performance reconstruction based on authoritative primary sources – emerged much earlier, in the mid and late nineteenth century. The shift that took place in the early twentieth century was not about how to practice theatre history but about how to brand it professionally. And so the main chapters of this book conclude in the nineteenth century, when the scholarly basis for professional theatre history was first established. The scholarship came first and was followed by a narrow professional identity characterized ever-more emphatically as "scientific."[26] In the Postlude I carry the story forward to the advent of modernism in the twentieth century, arguing that the methodological line from Collier to Hazlitt to Chambers to Nagler is more or less unbroken.[27] This continuity has been obscured for reasons of academic narcissism – professional theatre historians could not allow themselves to be indebted to amateurs – but its existence cannot be gainsaid.[28]

[25] Most British theatre histories written during the period in question focused on London, such focus necessarily reflected – but not endorsed – in my historiographical account. Legitimately challenged by theatre historians today, a London-centered approach was nonetheless dominant for centuries. Works such as Richard Wright Procter's *Manchester in Holiday Dress* (1866) and James C. Dibdin's *The Annals of the Edinburgh Stage* (1888) were exceptions to the metropolitan rule.

[26] Whether scholars today believe that an impersonally scientific engagement with facts is possible is a different question.

[27] In his chapter on Tudor and Stuart theatre, Nagler is guided principally by Chambers in identifying primary sources, which he quotes not directly but from Chamber's transcriptions in *The Elizabethan Stage*. See Nagler's endnotes (*Sources of Theatrical History*, 594–5).

[28] In a study of this length, sacrifices in coverage are inevitable. No doubt some readers will wish that I had continued my study well into the twentieth century, with longer examinations of Chambers and Allardyce Nicoll. While acknowledging the validity of that preference, I am mindful that there is no stopping point that would please all readers. Nor do I claim to have written the last word on the subject.

During this long period – 250 years – many different people wrote many theatre histories of many different kinds. How should these works and their authors be presented? As Herbert Butterfield observed in the 1950s, anyone writing the history of historiography "must avoid the disjointed chronicle, the temptation to give a straggling meaningless string of names."[29] His cautionary advice is still relevant. It is pointless to undertake a study of historiography that amounts to nothing more than a compendium of thinkers and their thoughts. Lines of authorial influence are important only if they shed light on how historians reshaped and adapted the work of their predecessors to respond creatively to the demands of their own time. So instead of writing a book about history *books* I have tried to write a book about historical *practice*.

Thus, I provide biographical information on various historians to contextualize their practice. Retracing, as best I could, their own intellectual journey, I studied the materials they studied and I read the books they read.[30] More importantly, I examined the letters, drafts, and notes that some of them left behind in the course of their work, because such informal documents often express more clearly a particular historian's assumptions, desires, and working methods. That these underlying materials are rarely consulted only confirms the fact that we still have much to learn about theatre historians from the past. Moving beyond the writings of individual historians, I have explored the social environment in which they worked, looking at the availability of patronage and primary sources, the marketplace demand for theatre history, and the gradual shift in attitude toward intellectual labor from a communal undertaking with no fixed terminus to a solo enterprise that culminated in the magisterial monograph.

Few readers will be familiar with every historian and every historical work under discussion. Indeed, our collective amnesia about British theatre historiography in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries is a main justification for this book. At the risk of coming across as an antiquarian myself, I have tried to give a sense of how these works were put together and what it is like to read them. The diversity of how theatre history could be written struck me most: catalogue, calendar, chronicle, list, dictionary, dialogue, documentary transcription, marginalia, biography, and narrative. We now take for granted that historical writing is

[29] Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge University Press, 1955), 8.

[30] In a few instances this was not possible: e.g., John Downes wrote *Roscius Anglicanus* in 1708 partly from memory and partly from documents that no longer survive. In many cases, however, sources and documentation are extant.