

Theatre historiography for tomorrow

Report on a roundtable convened in London on 4 and 5 January 2018, organized by the Department of Drama, University of Exeter; and the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance, Royal Holloway University of London

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DW

What follows is an account of a conversation that took place between twenty-five theatre historians of different nationalities and different levels of seniority, including not a few struggling with precarious forms of employment.¹ We wanted to discuss how we might steer the future of our sub-discipline within the wider field of Theatre Studies, and at the same time stake out our claim for the importance of historical thought. The context of our discussion was provided by four factors:

- the marginalization of historical study within Theatre Studies, particularly in the UK where there is an ever-increasing emphasis on performance practice, and in the USA where the trend is towards a broad-based ‘performance studies’
- a cultural environment committed to presentism, globalization, and heritage as distinct from history
- managerialism within the university sector, which constrains academic choices and demands instant academic products
- recognition of our responsibility to a wider public, whose historical imagination is fed by the media

Our discussions were structured around six topics, moving from broad questions of epistemology to practical proposals for action.

We are presenting this account in the form of a dialogue. As responsible historians, we recognize our moral duty to impart to you, the reader, as truthful an account as we can of what actually happened. But faced with two days of intensive discussion, we have to impose order on the chaos of raw data, and tell a story that will engage your attention as you scroll quickly down this page, or more likely turn up the topic of ‘theatre historiography’ in an online search. We are constructing this text in dialogue form in order to underline that we cannot report definitively on what happened, however scrupulous we try to be, but can only recount the past by looking through the lens of our own experiences and concerns.

1. Truth in a post truth society

DW

In the opening presentations, Jim Davis (Warwick) set out the ethical case—in an era of fake news and media irresponsibility—for trying our best to tell the truth of how things were, even though truth is relative and ultimately unattainable. Jan Lazardzig (Berlin) argued for a science of the archive in a post-archival society. Kate Holmes (Warwick) as a historian of circus described the kind of knowledge that can be extracted from memoirs and posturing anecdotes. Fiona Macintosh (Oxford) addressed some of the institutional barriers presented by administrators dedicated to monetization, fast scholarship and public engagement strategies; she argued that we should take heed of Harry Frankfurt’s 1995 argument that ‘bullshit’ is more dangerous than lies because the ‘bullshitter’ pays no regard whatsoever to the truth. And finally Liz Schafer (RHUL) described a legal case around alleged inappropriate on-stage behaviour by Geoffrey Rush in order to pin down the problems of truthfulness peculiar to theatre.

In response to these provocations, the conversation turned to the question of excess emotion in the public sphere and I found myself wondering whether the historian can ever operate without emotion. Holly-Gale Millette tried to define the ‘youthquake’ phenomenon, suggesting that the discourse of the young privileged experience, with feeling more important than fact. I was particularly struck by Mechele Leon’s description of how her students in Kansas do not seem to know what truth is. She wondered whether her own pedagogy—which entails relativizing textbooks in accordance with the wisdom of post-modernity and proclaiming the death of the author—is misplaced in the current environment. Bruce McConachie argued that truth should be seen as plural rather than relative, with legal truth as in the Geoffrey Rush case needing to be distinguished from the kind of truth relevant to a historian. Elaine McGirr spoke about the danger of historical truth being a function of power exercised by a person in authority, and the topic of the historian’s authority led Anke Charton to cite the ironic title of her course in the theatre department at the University of Vienna: ‘Making History Great Again’—a parody of Trumpian rhetoric.

Tracy Davis returned to the particularity of the theatrical medium raised by Liz Schafer. Multiple falsehoods oblige the spectator to ‘figure it out’, she argued, and theatre skills therefore create an enhanced ability to address the complexities of the past; accordingly we need to understand how past forms of theatre created different forms of discernment. Davis raised some complicated issues, which we all needed time to ponder. When Elaine McGirr and Liz Schaefer raised the problem of the historian writing for the archive and for a tiny readership, Bruce McConachie responded by citing Wikipedia, observing how the Internet makes scholarship much more widely available. Holly-Gale Millette was sceptical, describing the processes of compartmentalization that face early career researchers, and the real-life problem of combining scholarship with a public face.

The initial presenters each tried to summarize where the discussion had taken them. Jim Davis believed that we should stop worrying about epistemology. The key task for historians now, he urged, was to make their work accessible, to avoid

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speaking in tongues, and to point out the significance of their work so it doesn't disappear. Jan Lazardzig described the difference between teaching in Amsterdam, where the department remains happy to provide students with grand narratives, and Berlin, where canonical narratives are judged untrustworthy and teaching is focused on isolated case studies. To 'make history great again', he felt, one has to go back to the big stories and not leave students feeling powerless because all their knowledge has become compartmentalized. For Fiona Macintosh the answer was not to ditch theory but to historicize it, and to show how different theories are produced by the needs of specific historical moments. For myself, reflecting back on the discussion, the big conundrum is the one raised by Leon and Lazardzig: in a mediatized world where it is too easy to junk truth, do we have to stop citing all those poststructuralists who insist that truth is relative to the perceiver, and jump into the public fray bearing information? I take Davis' point completely, that the useful thing we can teach our students is to discern between competing narratives—and if in the UK we are teaching students to read bodies rather than dramatic texts maybe the same principle still applies.

MT

The discussion of truth in a post-truth society revealed many levels on which we face the conundrum of 'truth' in our research on theatre history. The pursuit of 'truth' is more than just a central ethical issue in the work of theatre historians—particularly in regard to balancing personal, political, and financial forms of explanation, and to our own emotional engagement with the subjects we scrutinize; for, as Jan Lazardzig pointed out 'truth' is also about our permission to access archives, and truth is fundamental to the key historiographical task of arranging the historical record through our choice of facts, documents, narrative and so on. The discussion brought out for me as for you the importance of addressing 'truth' in the classroom, a point flagged by Lazardzig when he compared the different approaches of the institutes in Amsterdam and Berlin. I also picked up on Bruce McConachie's remark that we need to see 'truth' in the classroom not as a search for Truth but as an acknowledgment of multiple truths. I'm not sure that means we should give up on poststructuralist theories but think rather that we must take a responsibility for the truths we are presenting both in research and in the classroom.

A further important point, raised by both Kate Holmes in relation to circus and by Fiona Macintosh in relation to ancient Greek theatre, concerns the second part of our topic: the 'post-truth society'. As both pointed out, we have always lived in an age of post-truth, and Macintosh instanced speeches in Euripides. If the notion of post-truth has now entered current public debate, this may give theatre historians a platform to discuss the complexity of 'truth' in a popular context.

DW

I think we have both picked up on the same overall collective concern: in what we recognise rightly or wrongly as a 'post-truth society', we feel an ever stronger ethical

commitment as historians not to stray beyond what we see as truth, and a commensurate concern that our voices should not be marginalized. How do we resolve the tension between these two ambitions?

2. The Affective Turn

MT

Bruce McConachie (Pittsburgh) wanted to build a bridge between theatre historiography and recent developments in science in order to find a more precise language to describe emotions and affects in past performances. Samantha Mitschke (Birmingham) raised questions about the skills required by the theatre historian in order to describe how people have ‘felt’, referencing her own audience research which required spectators to put into words their experience of violence on stage. Maria Grazia Turri (Queen Mary University of London) took psychoanalysis as a metaphor to describe the relationship between past history and present experience, arguing that the historian seeks to unearth not only facts about the past but also an emotional connection in order break a compulsive relationship with the past. David Wiles (Exeter) set out the need for an ‘affective turn’ as historical change could not be explained by rational processes, and he argued for a history of emotion in order to get to the otherness of feelings in the past. Lastly, Willmar Sauter (Stockholm) described his experiences of bringing archives and historical artefacts to life on stage in the project ‘Performing Pre-modernity’, pleading for a ‘practical epistemology’ in making theatre history, taking the experience of both actors and spectators into account.

Mechele Leon flagged a fundamental issue that arises when the theatre historian investigates affect: when looking at audience experience we are always dealing with expressions of that experience. This problem was repeatedly addressed in the continuing debate. Jim Davis observed that we are always confronted by a question of language, as we are forever dealing with verbal explanations of affects, emotions or experience that are never unmediated. In a similar vein, Anke Charton drew a distinction between different modes of affect; on the one side as quantifiable, measurable data, and on the other as a narrative of what a certain feeling means to different people in different times.

Although I completely understand the desire expressed by Bruce McConachie to gain insight into how it felt to experience historical performances, and I agree that people make meaning of their lives emotionally, I share Jim Davis’ concern that all we have to work with are words. In fact, one could argue that we are looking at three aspects of emotions when investigating what it must have felt like to witness past performances: affect as physical process; the perceptible expression of affect; and reports of such expressions. Cognitive science may give us some insight into the physical process of affects and emotions, but unless we are able to measure such reactions in the audience (via neuroimaging, electrocardiography or other scientific equipment), we have no choice but to rely on reports of emotional expression. As was also picked up in the discussion, the expression of emotion is framed culturally within regimes of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. This became clear when

Mitschke described her research into Holocaust drama, which tends to enforce a certain 'correct' response from people she interacts with. In the case of live audience research, knowing that one is being watched has an effect on the audience's behaviour. As Elaine McGirr pointed out, spectators become more conscious of their behaviour when they themselves are being spectated, and may even attempt to fight certain physical responses in accordance with their 'expected' (gendered, class-based etc.) status. Reports of audience reactions, emotions and affects are culturally coded and written with a particular agenda, as Tracy Davis pointed out.

I was struck by Jan Lazardzig's point that each period in time generates a theoretical frame of audience behaviour so that in fact we are always looking through specific frames of theory to make sense of historical affects. His question of how we might be able to create a dialogue between the history of theory and the history of affect I think may help in our quest to know more about the emotional responses of past audiences and understand how they made meaning of these emotions.

DW

Looking back on this discussion, my mind turns upon three points. First is the connection to the opening panel. In the current political environment defined by Brexit, Trump, and the rise of the European right, we were collectively concerned about the power of emotion in the public sphere, but our rallying calls for objectivity and evidence-based reasoning are complicated by the recognition that we as historians have feelings about our subject matter, and we write for readers who have feelings. Second, I was struck by Tracy Davis' remark that even in private diaries 'everybody lies'. Given our typically language-centred training, how do we as historians get at the past emotions that have driven historical change? Thirdly, I sense in what you say a certain anxiety about Bruce McConachie's call for an engagement with cognitive science. To my mind, he rebutted rather persuasively the charge that he was introducing a new essentialism to theatre historical discourse—as distinct from new questions and complications—because the science of mind is constantly shifting. Let me ask you, Magnus, were you persuaded by the contention that there is a discernible 'affective turn' within the academy at large and within theatre historiography in particular?

MT

I absolutely agree that emotions are a driving force in historical change and I think the question you raise about how to get at past emotions is of major importance. Attempting to reach that goal, we as historians are always dealing with witness reports or other material traces of past *expressions* of emotion. I think we concur that such evidence can never be objective but is always defined by morality, ideology or other norms of appropriate or legitimate behaviour, and sometimes, as Tracy Davis noted, even apparently personal documents can be marked by lies. I find intriguing Bruce McConachie's proposal that we should look to cognitive science in our search for a vocabulary to describe the importance of emotions in past performances, but

this does not get us past the fact that we are dealing with accounts of historically-determined behaviour, mostly in the form of writing, that are not objective. Therefore, I am more drawn to the idea proposed by Lazardzig that we focus on a dialogue between the history of theory and the history of emotion.

3. Globalization: after identity politics

DW

Theresa Eisele (Vienna) spoke to her doctoral project, relating the figure of the Jew in Viennese popular theatre to the strategy of actual Jews managing their identities in the Viennese public sphere. Laura MacDonald (Portsmouth) described her work on musical theatre that circulates through East Asia after breaking free from New York and London, and she related this subject matter to her own experience as a historian crossing borders to create different narratives for different locations. Jane Milling (Exeter) evoked her experience as a PhD supervisor steering the work of students from many parts of the globe, and she cited Dipesh Chakrabarty to explain why European modernity with its discourse of human rights had become a global reference point, wondering if it was possible to have Enlightenment principles without their undesirable consequences. Magnus Thorbergsson (Iceland) described the experience of a historian on the ‘margins’ of Europe, and the flawed historiography pursued by his predecessors in an attempt to assimilate Icelandic practice with cosmopolitan modernity and thereby lend prestige to the mode of theatre.

Jim Davis introduced what would become a running theme in the discussion, the question of national historiography. He himself operates (in common with many) as a historian of British theatre, but sees a tension produced by the fact that so many actors in the past have circulated freely across national borders. Macintosh pointed to the significance of British theatre departments growing out of English departments, in a situation quite different from Germany, with important implications for a nation and language-based focus of scholarship. Jim Davis described his experience in Australia, where there has been pressure on historians and performers alike to create a distinctive Australian identity in order to counteract the sense of working on the cultural periphery; what Thorbergsson called the ‘margins’. The discussion turned to the way negative concepts of the ‘peripheral’ could be transformed into positive concepts of the ‘local’—a point raised in Milling’s opening remarks, and familiar to many of us as the theme of the 2006 IFTR conference in Helsinki.

The discussion of identity politics was less focused, perhaps because there was no shared understanding of what the term ‘identity’ implies. Jan Lazardzig (with experience of working in Chicago and Amsterdam as well as Berlin) remarked that identity studies were certainly not the main theme of German scholarship. Mechele Leon threw out a question that received no direct answer: how far is the US concern with identity which results in histories of gay theatre, black theatre etc. a particular concern of the USA? Tracy Davis reflected on the continuing importance of North America being a land of settlers with diverse histories, and went on to raise the question of ‘cultural

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colonialism'; a term which in her view should often replace the term 'globalization'. In respect of our discipline, the crux for her lay in the language we use to describe performance, and she cited a 2017 study (*Performance Studies in Canada*) addressing the problem of finding a critical language to address first nation performance practices.

The major unresolved questions for me at the end of this discussion were twofold. First, how do we reconcile Davis' fears of neocolonialism with MacDonald's description of a Hollywood musical that, in her view, has become authentically Korean despite its adoption of a US form? Which brings me back to our big concerns with truth and accessibility: how do we as historians balance over-anxious cultural introspection against the danger of buying into the values of global capitalism while neglecting minority and subaltern voices?

My second question concerns the framing of our work round the nation state: does this characteristic feature of our historiography feed the nationalist tendencies which so many of us lament and fear at this time, or do we conversely need to keep interrogating specific rhetorics of nationhood? Which returns us to the question of whether we are writing for scrupulous like-minded scholars of liberal inclination, or whether we are reaching out to a broader public, with less control over the way our material may be used.

MT

To some extent your first point relates to one of the issues raised by Laura MacDonald in her opening remarks and by several others in the discussion that I found interesting: the question of location and mobility, maybe less in regard to the research topic than to the theatre scholar. MacDonald mentioned her placements as a teacher and researcher in Groningen and Shanghai, pointing to the mobility of the theatre historian, and she raised the issue of how funding does not simply facilitate our research into global theatre history but also provides a framework and focus for our subject of research. In her case, getting a fellowship in Shanghai meant placing an unanticipated focus on a Chinese context. As the mobility of the theatre historian is heavily dependent on funding possibilities, a desire to investigate global theatre history means greater dependency on funds facilitating mobility; funds that may have aims which we could define as neo-colonial, pushing our research projects towards certain fields while others are neglected.

As you note, the question of identity politics was somewhat side-lined because of different attitudes to this issue in different national or regional contexts. What had the greatest impact on me in this discussion were the various attempts to deal with spatial issues: the placement and mobility of theatre historians led me to think about where theatre history is made and how geography defines our research subject. The discussion challenged our geographical vocabularies, as, for example, in Jane Milling's attempt to redefine the relation between centre/capital and periphery and in the discussion of how nation and nationhood relate to local structures.

In hindsight, I'm a bit surprised how little attention was given to the question of language, although Liz Schafer and Maria Turri both mentioned language as a barrier for someone attempting to research global histories. The question of language touches

upon the access of the researcher to archives and documents in a foreign language and is of central importance to scholars from outside the Anglophone world. Perhaps the fact that only a quarter of the participants in the symposium were from non-English-speaking countries played a part in lessening our emphasis on language?

4. Is 'culture' still a useful category?

MT

The theme of the opening session on the symposium's second day was 'culture'. Anke Charton (Vienna) wanted to focus on the shifting nature of the term, asking what the word culture (or Culture) means at a specific point, and for whom, in order to expose shifting processes of inclusion and exclusion. Turning the question around, Mechele Leon (Kansas) wondered why culture might be thought to have become a problematic category for theatre historians, and argued for a reconceptualization of the relationship between culture and nation. With reference to Raymond Williams, Kate Newey (Exeter) drew a distinction between 'culture' as a verb and as a noun, a linguistic distinction that entails different cognitive practices: verbs relate to processes while nouns fix culture as a thing.

Liz Schafer raised the question of how the word 'culture' works in different languages and Jim Davis recalled that in *Keywords* Raymond Williams elucidates different meanings of the word at different times and in different languages. The question of language resonated later in the discussion in relation to Leon's invitation to rethink the association between culture and nation. In the processes of transnational circulation, language is a tool that provides or complicates access to cultures. Furthermore, as Laura MacDonald noted, access to cultures also depends on national borders, so border controls and travel options also shape our comparative evaluation of cultures. In regard to terminology, Nurit Yaari described her concern about using the term 'culture' in Israel where institutions, critics and scholars of culture are under attack from politicians, including the 'Minister of Culture'. Willmar Sauter pointed to the way notions of national culture are being incorporated into ideologies of right-wing political movements. Returning us to historiography, Leon urged us to create a space between our personal unease as historians with the term 'nation' and the realities of nationhood at any given historical moment.

Tracy Davis led the discussion on to 'Cultural Studies', with its focus upon cultural production and circulation, and brought up the interesting point that the term 'art' had not come up in our discussions or seemed relevant so far, but was important in creating value within elite forms of production.

Bruce McConachie introduced biology into the discussion of culture, arguing that we need to think simultaneously about culture and biology. His provocative input prompted Tracy Davis to ask what advantage there was in bringing biology into the discussion. She disputed McConachie's claim that we cannot understand emotions without biology, pointing to the complexity of many historians' non-biological accounts of emotion. McConachie rejected the charge of reductionism, and commented that human beings would not have culture if we were not a particular

biological species, with culture and biology having supported each other for over two million years. This was a conversation that had to be curtailed because of the time constraints of the session.

At the end, the discussion returned to the question of value, with David Coates describing debates arising from the nomination of Coventry as a City of Culture articulated around the sarcastic question ‘Does Coventry have culture?’ For Claire Cochrane this was a useful case study for discussing and mediating notions of culture. Tracy Davis contrasted this *pre factum* designation of ‘culture’ with *post factum* designations, such as the Spanish *Siglo de Oro* (Golden Age), identified by Charton as a construct of the eighteenth century.

In my response to the opening remarks, I was particularly struck by Kate Newey’s distinction between culture as verb and noun, which I connected to Anke Charton’s distinction between culture as tool and subject. The first category indicates movement, change and development, while the other seeks to nominate, fix and define. To my mind, the discussions revealed that culture remains a useful category since it helps to demarcate a field of debate around nation and transnationalism, value and distinction, production and circulation, biology and affect.

DW

Never mentioned, but in the background to this conversation, was the Bloomsbury *Cultural History of the Theatre* published four months previously, with Tracy Davis serving as a general editor and Mechele Leon a volume editor. It was clear from this buzzing conversation that the word ‘cultural’ retains a considerable purchase in 2018.

Leon began her presentation by stating firmly that theatre history was no longer concerned with ‘legacy’. Tracy Davis threw in the apparently taboo topic of ‘art’, which she reclaimed for cultural studies by interpreting it as a marker of historically ascribed value. Participants in general seemed to me comfortable with the ‘cultural studies’ approach to theatre as social process, and I wondered if, more particularly within a European context, we are not tempted to obscure our actual relationship to theatre as an aesthetic practice. We, in the UK at any rate, teach students of whom many will become theatre practitioners. If I consider my Exeter colleagues, Kate Holmes’ work on circus, Kate Newey’s work on pantomime, and Jane Milling’s work on amateur theatre all in different ways validate a form of practice and hopefully in the longer term will enrich those practices. When you critique bad Icelandic historiography, you surely hope that this will impact, not immediately of course, upon future Icelandic theatre practice? Tell me what you think about this.

I sensed a certain discomfort in the room in face of Bruce McConachie’s challenge that we should frame our concerns less around the nation-state than around the Anthropocene, and I picked up Jane Milling’s comment that the survival of the species is in question. I’m not clear how we as theatre historians might take on this moral challenge and yet avoid being reductive in our analyses. Using theatre history as a way to think about the nature of the human being should not, I think, not automatically be off the agenda. Again, what is your opinion?

MT

Actually, my teaching activities have mainly been directed towards acting and theatre-making students and I have also been actively engaged in developing a curriculum for theatre students at the Iceland Academy of the Arts. Therefore, I have been very much aware of how my approach to theatre history may have an impact on future practice, which has forced me to consider the purpose of teaching theatre history to practitioners where the aim is not to train theatre historians but to encourage students to engage actively and critically with history within their creative process. Taking the cultural studies approach to theatre as a social process, as you say, is an important part of that engagement, challenging students to think about the social context of their own practice.

I think the discomfort you sensed in face of McConachie's challenge was understandable, and did not constitute a complete rejection of using theatre history to think about human nature. Focusing on terms like the Anthropocene may be rewarding in many ways, but it is difficult to see how a notion of the Anthropocene is helpful when, for example, working with pantomime, where it is difficult to ignore the framework of the nation-state. Furthermore, I believe most of us have been trained to view terms such as 'nature of the human being' as highly questionable. The questions raised by Tracy Davis about the benefits of bringing biology into the frame are in my opinion not to be seen as a way to reject McConachie's challenge but rather as an urge to find out what there is to gain from such an approach.

5. How can the insights of Performance Studies inform theatre historiography?

DW

Tracy Davis (Northwestern) began by developing a complex argument about performative legibility. Using theatre as a 'querying tool', the historian can—as in the instances she gave of nineteenth-century black preaching and oral narratives of slavery—identify traces of performative agency. Stefan Hulfeld (Vienna) argued that the separation of theatre from performance studies was a relatively recent phenomenon, offering the instance of the 1848 revolution in Vienna when theatre as an institution collapsed to be replaced by mediaeval forms like the charivari. Nurit Yaari (Tel Aviv) lamented the lack of any broad-based account of performance in Israel, and floated the idea of an Internet-based project which would assemble like the stones of a mosaic data about kibbutz festivals, classroom performances developed in the teaching of Hebrew, etc. The three presenters clearly had very different agendas: Davis being driven by the rift of race in the USA, Hulfeld by a concern for cultural continuity, and Yaari by a desire to democratize her discipline.

Jim Davis put his finger on the point evident in Tracy Davis' presentation that Theatre Studies can as well be used to inform Performance Studies as vice versa. Willmar Sauter observed that the word 'performance' is an Anglicism with no equivalent in other European languages, and alluding to Richard Schechner (whose star has conspicuously waned), he described the turmoil around the emergence of

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Performance Studies in the USA, adding that European historians in the domain of *Theaterwissenschaft* have always placed festivals within their remit. Hulfeld felt there was no perfect term to embrace the complex of *ludi* and spectacles that concerned him, while Yaari acknowledged that the French term ‘*arts du spectacle*’ served better than the English term ‘performance’ to convey her field of interest. Differences of language were clearly bound up with institutional and intellectual differences that separated the USA from continental Europe. For Hulfeld, the problem with US Performance Studies was its characteristic presentism. As an American French specialist, Mechele Leon attempted to resolve the communication problem by separating ‘Performance Studies’ from ‘Performance Arts Studies’. In relation to cultural divides, Anke Charton observed how the embedding of practitioners in UK theatre studies lent British scholarship an approach to ‘performance’ that differed from continental Europe.

In face of these cultural agendas, the conversation turned to institutional questions. In response to Elaine McGirr’s description of how areas of study were being chopped up in the UK to create the illusion of choice, Jan Lazardzig suggested that the commodification of teaching and research was leading to new and troubling orthodoxies, and he saw a hopeful parallel with scholarship in the GDR in the 1970s when scholars used the notion of ‘theatricality’ to camouflage their attempts to work against imposed ideas. I was left wondering what these new orthodoxies might be.

From the chair, Mechele Leon sought to open up the conversation by asking for specific examples of how Performance Studies had informed theatre historical research. Anna Meadmore proffered the example of Richard Cave’s work on Yeats, which I would myself classify as PaR (performance-as-research) rather than Performance Studies, but Meadmore’s example points to the difficulty of using the word ‘performance’ even within the Anglophone world. Others pointed to work on Dutch Christmas festivals, elocution, rioting, and audience behaviour. The list could have gone on, describing what has been done hitherto rather than pointing the way forward.

When Lazardzig, with his commitment to a science of the archive, picked up on Tracy Davis’ earlier reference to historical data that sat outside Diana Taylor’s fashionable distinction between the archive and the repertory, Davis responded that she was interested in the limits of knowability, and in traces of the past that had the condition to become archivable. Lazardzig wondered if there was some self-reflexivity involved in this project, and drew an analogy with ‘critical whiteness’ studies. I suspect the conversation at this point began to seem arcane to some European trained participants—but I feel it is worth recording these struggles to communicate in face of competing academic discourses. In the summation, Hulfeld insisted that the boundaries of our disciplinary competence lie in the question of what makes a human being into an actor, while Tracy Davis spoke of a transit *through* theatre to questions that often lie beyond theatrical art.

The problems that we had in formulating a collective remit for our historical work relate to issues addressed earlier in the round table. What is the difference between being and acting? And what is our working definition of culture? The question that this session

never addressed was the instrumental one: who are we as historians writing for? And how are we seeking to change or conserve the world through our historical enquiries? As we took our tea break, I reflected on the differences between US, British and continental European academic cultures, with the pressures of modern academic life making it ever harder to speak with each other rather than simply speak at each other as we jet off to short-break international conferences, with our thoughts neatly printed out and packed in our wheelie-cases.

MT

Welcome to the world of non-English-speaking academics! I cannot count how often I have experienced discussions about how to translate the term ‘performance’ into Icelandic. A futile task. I think this session not only showed the difficulties of communicating different key concepts and translating academic discourse between languages, but also revealed, as you note, differences in academic cultures and practices. Willmar Sauter not only stressed the Anglicism inherent in the discussion of ‘performance’ but also observed that we can approach the term from two different standpoints. First there is the institutional entity of Performance Studies which, as Sauter noted, is part of a power struggle within the academia; a US-model which may have little or no relevance to institutional structures outside the US even though the research itself may have a global impact. The second standpoint asks what Performance Studies has added to our field, where Sauter in my opinion rightly stressed a certain openness and inclusiveness that may have existed before, but with the institutional emergence of Performance Studies has become more pronounced.

In this context, I keep coming back to the point raised by Tracy Davis at the beginning of her presentation, that the term ‘performance’ and Performance Studies as a discipline first and foremost add new places to look for data. I think many in the room shared the difficulty of finding a common vocabulary given the range of perspectives that we brought to the table—a problem that is not solely caused by differences between our national languages many of which lack the word ‘performance’. I think the openness and the availability of new sources of data stressed by Sauter and Davis can be seen in this context as a foundation for a common vocabulary. However, with the new openness comes the problem of boundaries. What are the boundaries of ‘performance’?

I sense some pessimism in your final remarks. Are you saying that debating terminology (and talking at each other rather than with each other) has the result that we do not get to the instrumental questions?

DW

I would rather emphasize my optimism, and say that on this occasion we did make space to talk to each other, and to start cutting through to the basic instrumental question: who are we writing for and what are we aiming to achieve?

6. In a polarized world what can theatre history do?

MT

The last session of the symposium focused on what theatre history actually achieves. David Coates (Warwick) started by considering how we do theatre history in the classroom, taking stock, for example, of the challenge to contemporary academia provided by practice-based teaching. Claire Cochrane (Worcester) raised the question of who speaks and who is ‘in the room’ when it comes to theatre history. Elaine McGirr (Bristol) spoke of the importance of theatre historiography in unwriting dominant narratives so as to provide new examples for young students—particularly female students in the case of her research into nineteenth-century actresses. Anna Meadmore (RHUL) questioned the methodology used to measure the research impact of theatre history and theatre practice, contrasting the relative influences of journalistic theatre criticism and theatre historiography in shaping dance practice. Lastly, speaking about the academic’s need for a broadening of approach and adaptability, Holly-Gale Millette (Southampton) portrayed the situation of the freelance theatre scholar, forced to find a variety of ways to utilize her training and experience.

Kate Newey picked up on Coates’ account of practice in the classroom, stressing the importance of moving beyond the studio. Emphasizing the importance of historical imagination, Newey spoke for a creative approach to archival work that in her experience has been very popular among students—a view endorsed by several other participants. Willmar Sauter emphasized the generic skills taught through theatre history, which include the ability to formulate a problem or to carry out an investigation. In relation to McGirr’s call for new stories, David Wiles asked how one persuades people to read these new stories, introducing a discussion about who are we writing for and how we bring our research to our target audience. Jim Davis continued on that note by asking, how do we know if our research has had an impact?

Perhaps because the time for discussion was shorter during this last session—or maybe conference fatigue—it felt as if we had only scratched the surface of this topic. We needed to push further our discussions about the relationship between historiographic practice and teaching methods, and I discerned a common longing to reach a broader audience. To my mind, we never managed to address the phenomenon of a ‘polarized world’. Of course, we need to ask what exactly is meant by ‘polarized’? Cochrane addressed the obligations of the theatre historian in face of binary power relations, but the ensuing discussion focused more locally on the classroom, the reading public and the measurement of research impact. I was struck by how many voices in the room called for a more active engagement with the archive, and I couldn’t help recalling Jan Lazardzig’s presentation in the first panel, where he spoke about the closing of the Amsterdam theatre archive. How can we engage more creatively with the archive, if it is no longer accessible?

DW

As you say, we never directly addressed the question of a political world that seems increasingly polarized. One polarity evident to me in the room was the division

between senior scholars in secure jobs and junior scholars in more or less precarious forms of employment. Their *cri de coeur* was unmistakable. It became clear in the discussion how far the consumer-driven marketization of the University sector—particularly within the UK—means that within Theatre Studies there are few jobs today for those who label themselves ‘theatre historians’. Aspirant historians have to follow where the teaching possibilities lie, so historical research is being driven by political forces over which we have little control. And research is being driven also by the need to write marketable books for students. These subtle pressures contrast with the much more overt climate of political oppression which Nurit Yaari pictured in Israel. A deep ambivalence ran through this discussion. On the one hand, participants wanted autonomy and integrity, and on the other hand they wanted to reach a wider readership and enter the realms of public history, at the risk of losing editorial control. The desire to reach that wider readership relates to the polarity that has become so evident in the Trump/Brexit era between an us and a them, between internationally minded liberals and those perceived by ‘us’ as redneck nationalists. Internal debates within the liberal camp perhaps now seem less pressing in light of a wider threat.

Another aspect of ‘us’ and ‘them’ related to disciplines. Tom Postlewait (alas prevented by ill-health from attending) laid the foundations through his 2009 *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* for the idea that we inhabit a distinct discipline, which we should defend with pride and confidence. However, Claire Cochrane raised the problem of ‘disciplinary silos’, and Fiona McIntosh (the only academic present not attached to a Department of drama/theatre/performance) urged the importance of talking to colleagues in other departments. Her contribution was a reminder of how many theatre historians operate within departments of literature, where different conversations take place.

The final brief wrap-up session produced, unsurprisingly, an explosion of questions rather than any clear conclusions. While some favoured meta-reflections about the history of historiography, others felt an urge to ‘just get on and do it’. Part of the same dilemma: should we dream of creating an Institute for Theatre Historical Studies, or should we think positively and creatively about the way pedagogic pressures are forcing us to find different frameworks within which to continue thinking historically? If our discipline has a core, then I sensed from the discussion that this core is our shared passion for the archive. The focus of our optimism lay in a shared sense of all the archive can reveal to challenge what we had once thought.

MT

To my mind, the last session and the concluding wrap-up discussion revealed the centrality of an often-voiced question: who is in the room? We should not ignore the fact that the majority of the participants (15 of 25) were affiliated to UK institutions, alongside three representatives from the USA, so the focus was bound to be Anglocentric. A revealing example can be seen in the last session, entitled ‘In a polarized world...’ where the main examples of polarization were found in Brexit and

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Trump (and to some extent the rise of the European far-right movements). Since the remaining seven participants came only from Germany, Sweden, Iceland, Israel and Austria, the geographical coverage was limited. When our final discussions turned to institutional practices, job situations and pressures of academic life, the emphasis was naturally upon universities and theatre studies programs in the UK, which, as you note, suffer from a consumer-driven focus. I do not doubt that colleagues all over the world are dealing with comparable issues of the market, budget cuts and broader crises of the humanities within the university, but I'm also certain that a more international discussion would reveal myriad ways in which theatre historians are responding positively. Which brings me back to Jane Milling's question about *where* research in the field of theatre history is being undertaken, and *by whom*, and to our need to redefine relations between the centre and the periphery.

DW

Necessarily, a discussion to be continued...

NOTE

- 1 We have adopted the standard courtesy of giving every contributor an academic provenance. As Kate Holmes pointed out to us, this convention fosters an illusion of secure employment.

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