

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY KIM SOLGA

Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions. Edited by Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010; pp. 302, 8 illustrations. \$85.00 cloth, \$28.95 paper.

Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography. Edited by Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010; pp. 428, 19 illustrations. \$29.95 paper, \$29.95 e-book.

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Reviewed by Marlis Schweitzer, York University

Theatre and performance historiography has entered a renaissance of sorts, or so it would seem from the two excellent collections under review here. Published in the same year, *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* and *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions* offer a series of insightful, meticulously researched, and elegantly written essays that continue the work first begun by Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance* (University of Iowa Press, 1989). Published at an important turning point in debates over the value of critical theory to historical scholarship, *Interpreting the Theatrical Past* demonstrated how theory might enliven the practice of researching and writing performance history. Today, most if not all of the authors gathered in *Representing the Past* and *Theater Historiography* take theory as a given. They nevertheless stress the need for theatre and performance historians to continue thinking about how and why they privilege certain methodologies and narrative trajectories over others, to reexamine their biases, and to consider what might be gained from turning to other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences for inspiration.

As its title suggests, *Representing the Past*, coedited by Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, is in many respects the long-awaited “sequel” to *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*. Although the editors acknowledge a clear relationship with the earlier collection, they emphasize that their goal was not to “rethink, reformulate, or reconstitute *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*” (3), but rather to “investigate some of the fundamental conditions of historical inquiry and understanding . . . focus[ing] on aspects of historical research, analysis, and writing that do not change” (3) through the unifying topic of representation. To that end, they have invited fifteen leading scholars to write essays that explore one of five key concepts—“*archive, time, space, identity, and narrative*” (9)—that remain relevant to the historical study of theatre and performance. These concepts, which “serve as coordinates of the mind, as categories of thought,” are central to

the historian's work at "all phases of historical research, analysis, interpretation, and writing" (16), but are nevertheless broad enough to allow for a range of perspectives and approaches. The result is a rich and varied collection of articles on subjects that include ancient Greek theatres (David Wiles), colonial Indian performance (Aparna Dharwadker), Chinese political theatre (Xiaomei Chen), and the Wooster Group (Shannon Jackson).

In *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*, Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen make a similar point of acknowledging their debt to previous generations of theatre scholars; their Acknowledgments page is a veritable "who's who" of contemporary theatre and performance studies, and a vivid reminder of the importance of good teachers for the development of new generations of theatre scholars. Indeed, one of the most obvious differences between *Representing the Past* and *Theater Historiography* is generational: whereas most of the contributors to *Representing the Past* are established scholars with lengthy and impressive publication records, the majority of contributors to *Theater Historiography* are emerging or midcareer academics. This poses the question of whether the two collections represent a larger generational schism within the discipline of theatre and performance studies, to which I would answer no. Rather, the near-simultaneous publication of thirty-six diverse essays on the subject of theatre and performance historiography stands as a testament to the discipline's expansion over the past two decades, with respect to graduate education, theoretical engagement, and interdisciplinary exploration.

Of course, there are some notable differences between the collections, particularly where terminology, structure, and organization are concerned. Canning and Postlewait use the term "performance historiography" to unite the work of scholars from "the fields of theatre history, cultural studies, critical theory, dance history, and performance studies" (1), whereas Bial and Magelssen prefer "theater historiography" because in their view the term "theater" is "sufficiently expansive to include the variety of events, behaviors, and phenomena encompassed within these pages" (Bial, 285). While some readers might question this decision, interpreting it as a colonizing gesture that privileges theatre over other forms of performance, Bial insists that scholars need to move beyond viewing theatre and performance studies as competing disciplines. In fact, he writes that "we might regard the most recent 'historiographic turn' in both theater history and performance studies as an attempt to reconcile the two camps" (285). Certainly the interdisciplinary nature of many of the essays in the two collections suggests that historians are moving beyond the theatre studies-performance studies debate and focusing instead on finding productive new ways to apply theoretical frameworks and methodologies from both disciplines.

The collections also depart from one another structurally and thematically. Canning and Postlewait divide *Representing the Past* into five parts, with three essays in each. The editors explain that they considered different organizational strategies early in the editing process, but ultimately decided to ask three scholars to draw from their current research projects to reflect on a specific historical concept. So, for example, the initial division, "Archive," includes a chapter by Christopher Balme that outlines new strategies for examining playbills; a chapter

by Susan Bennett that examines the limitations of revisionist historical scholarship that ignores commercial theatre production in order to promote narratives of resistance and political activism; and a chapter by Claire Sponsler that uses evidence from often overlooked sixteenth-century sources to offer new insights into the development of morris dancing. Thus while the essays are linked thematically, the diversity of methodologies, content, and argumentation makes the collection refreshingly nonprescriptive.

Canning and Postlewait's well-balanced groupings also work to highlight new trends in contemporary performance scholarship. This is perhaps most notable in the concluding part, "Narrative," which features Susan Leigh Foster's choreographic interpretation of two seventeenth-century dance histories; Brian Singleton's analysis of writer-producer Oscar Ashe, who promoted "well-established cultural and political narratives" (356) in World War I London through spectacular orientalist productions; and Bruce McConachie's return to the work of philosopher-historian R. G. Collingwood, who anticipated recent discoveries within cognitive neuroscience by arguing that historical reenactment aroused empathy. Other exceptional essays include Tracy Davis's theoretically rich piece on "performative time," Catherine Cole's autoethnographic reflection on how her identity as a researcher affected her ability to access state archives in South Africa, and Harry Elam's close reading of the work of Lorraine Hansberry and Suzan-Lori Parks. Though such eclecticism may deter readers looking for a straightforward "how-to" manual (in which case I would direct them to Postlewait's excellent 2009 publication *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*), those looking for a sampling of exemplary historical scholarship will find much to admire in *Representing the Past*.

Bial and Magelssen adopt a similar five-part structure in *Theater Historiography*, with four or five essays in each part. Although many of these essays address issues that have long been of concern to theatre historians, Bial and Magelssen use the central organizing idea of *intervention* to unite their authors' contributions. Noting that "those who would write theater history stand on the threshold of another epistemological shift" (2), the editors organize their book's five parts around topics reflecting contemporary disciplinary issues. These include "Unearthing the Past," which takes up questions of evidence; "The Stakes of Historiography," which examines the ways that political agendas inform historical scholarship; "Historiography for a New Millennium," which looks at how technology and other recent social developments are affecting historians; "Performance as Historiography," which analyzes the performative aspects of history; and "Theater History's Discipline," which identifies how disciplinary and institutional shifts are affecting the practice of theatre history.

Like the essays in *Representing the Past*, the twenty-one essays in *Theater Historiography* cover a diverse and exciting array of subjects, from pornopolitical plays of the eighteenth century (Alan Sikes), curse tablets buried by Roman slaves (Odai Johnson), and Nicaraguan drama dances of the 1960s (E. J. Westlake), to North Korean musicals (Suk-Young Kim), Christian evangelists (John Fletcher), and absurdist theatre in 1950s Yugoslavia (Branislav Jakovljevic). Bial and Magelssen eschew any attempt at chronological organization and instead arrange

the essays in a daisy-chain-like manner “so that each contribution might speak meaningfully to the work that appears immediately before and after it” (8). This approach works extremely well with certain essays; for example, Jonathan Chambers’s contemplation of the concept of death in Stanislavskian actor training resonates wonderfully with Mechele Leon’s essay on the fiasco of Molière’s death, which uses ideas from Nicholas Ridout, who follows Leon with his own piece on the recent Belgian production of *The Ice*. Of course, some of the connections between essays are less obvious or more tangential than others, and the daisy-chain organization assumes that readers will follow the sequence laid out by the editors, which is not always the case. But this organizational tactic is nevertheless imaginative and fun for those who choose to follow the editors’ path.

One of the more interesting ways in which *Theater Historiography* departs from *Representing the Past* is through its inclusion of several essays that speak directly to the material conditions shaping historical scholarship today. Sarah Bey-Cheng challenges the tendency to dismiss digital technology as an insufficient tool for performance analysis, arguing that as more and more theatre and performance artists incorporate digital technology into their performances, historians need to rethink their relationship to the digital and “need not separate digital archives from [other] forms of reembodyed performance archives” (129). In “History Takes Time,” one of the most politically passionate essays in the collection, Patricia Ybarra analyzes how neoliberal principles have made it more difficult for graduate students to undertake historical projects that require lengthy archival immersion or familiarity with multiple languages. “The modes of late capital have in fact transformed the process of scholarly production into a business that quantifies our products but does not value intellectual process as labor,” she writes (258). Ybarra concludes her essay with the hopeful suggestion that the collective slowing down of academics, our refusal to produce for the sake of maintaining productivity—an approach drawn from the work of labor activists—might be one solution to this otherwise difficult problem.

Taken singly or together, *Representing the Past* and *Theater Historiography* will give readers much to consider about the practice and theory of writing history. Faced with the rewards as well as the risks of interdisciplinarity in institutions that question the value of the arts to education, the contributors offer numerous suggestions for how scholars might address these challenges and continue to produce work that asks difficult questions about the past for the benefit of the present.

A final note: for those interested in seeing how the conversations begun in these collections are continuing beyond the printed page, I encourage you to visit <http://theater-historiography.org/>, a Web site designed by Magelssen and Bial with the support of the University of Michigan Press to function as “as a meeting ground for dynamic conversation about theater history and how we go about practicing it in our classrooms and in our research and writing.” Through such conversation, the important historiographic renaissance signaled by *Representing the Past* and *Theater Historiography* will continue to flourish.