Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEWS

Theatre, performance and analogue technology: historical interfaces and intermedialities, edited by Kara Reilly, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2013, 269 pp., £58 (hardback), ISBN 9781137319661

For a seemingly conservative art form, theatre history is nevertheless full of technological futurism. Robots, for instance, first appear in Karel Čapek's 1920 play, *R.U.R.* (Rossum's Universal Robots) and Edward Gordon Craig anticipated the figure of the digital avatar with his concept of the Übermarionnette in 1905, to say nothing of the Italian Futurists. Audiences at the twenty-first-century Coachella music festival thrilled to the 'holograph' of deceased rapper Tupac Shakur, only to learn (or not) that they were compelled by a nineteenth-century stage trick.

In her critical anthology, Kara Reilly recalls some of this rich history by focusing on the analogue precursors to contemporary intermedial performance and situating technologies as performing objects. Rather than tracing a teleological development from the analogue to the digital, the essays here explore technology's impact on theatre history and historiography, both recovering overlooked innovators in the development of spectacular machinery and examining how technology itself performs in specific historical moments. At its best, the anthology offers compelling examples of unexplored facets of theatre history, highlighting the mechanical and conceptual underpinnings for much of our current digital wizardry. While the essays ably demonstrate the broad range of analogue intermedialities in theatre history, the scope of the book may be over-extended.

The book is organized into three sections: 'Interrogating Historiography'; 'Industrial Bodies and Dance'; and 'Performing Science and Technology'. The first section is arranged chronologically, beginning with Richard Beacham's essay on Heron of Alexandria's 'toy theatre' and concluding with Brandin Barón-Nusbaum's recovery of scenographer Mariano Fortuny. The first three authors, including Beacham, Odai Johnson and Victor Holtcamp, focus on the technological construction of history in, and as, performance. Both Johnson and Holtcamp explore historiography as a negotiation between technological representation and social constructions of reality. As Johnson relates through his account of imagined mechanical elephants in Greek history, 'Classical historiography … was a simulacra of the real real, but arrived at a position by eliminating the fabulae until a good replication – as it should be – was able to both mimic convincingly and confront the real' (51). Following a similar line of argument, Holtcamp examines the collaboration of William 'Buffalo Bill' Cody and Steele Mackaye in their 1886 production, *The Drama of Civilization*. Both Johnson and Holtcamp read the technologies of performance as the mediation of authenticity and pretence that would, as Holtcamp puts it, 'create a technology of history itself' (70). That these negotiations should occur in overtly theatrical contexts affirms Reilly's introductory argument that theatre history is itself a kind of technological site that remediates prior technologies and performances.

These opening analyses provide the foundation for other essays that highlight often under-theorized events in theatre history. Katherine Newey considers the emergence of fairy iconography in Victorian entertainments as a kind of technological construction of femininity, while Naomi Stubbs looks at American pleasure gardens as idyllic enactments of a declining rural landscape that simultaneously – and paradoxically – staged technical firework displays to reinforce American identity as inextricably linked to technological proficiency. Adrian Curtin's 'recalling' of the nineteenth-century theatre phone and Michael M. Chemers' history of social robots demonstrate analogue origins for contemporary digital technologies. (Curtin's image of French public transit riders using the 1895 equivalent of ear buds is as funny as it is prescient.) Chemers' phrase provides an apt summary of much of the book: 'modern problems, ancient solutions' (247). Anyone making the case for the necessity of theatre research amid technological histories will find these essays essential reading. Both Beacham's digital reconstructions from his work at King's College Visualization Lab and Chemers' direct engagement with the dramaturgy of robotics offer not only fascinating stories of the theatrical past, but also models for how theatre and performance studies can contribute to and participate in diverse fields of empirical study today.

Although perhaps the ultimate 'analogue' technology, theatre nevertheless contributes both technological developments and methodologies that enhance digital history and historiography. To wit, Ciara Murphy's examination of Enlightenment science frames experimentation itself as performance, noting the emergence of the public lecture demonstration in the context of early electrical experiments. Electricity was ideal for the stage because unlike other technical developments of the time, 'electricity could move' (168). As TED talks and YouTube instructional videos proliferate in, and as, popular scientific discourse, Murphy's essay reminds us of a longer history of public science as performance and she presents a useful lens through which to interpret the current trend of science as entertainment.

As a preliminary investigation, Reilly's anthology affirms the intersection of performance and technology as mutual constitutive histories, although the range undermines potential for a deeper examination. Reading among such disparate examples, one might wish for a more focused selection of material to explore more fully a particular period or genre, such as the lecture performance. I would also suggest a need for greater reading across disciplinary literatures, especially modernism in literature and art history (cf. Tim Armstrong's *Modernism, Technology and the Body* [1998]). There is no doubt a greater need for work in this area and a theoretical engagement with the analogue in intermediality is a welcome addition to the field. For those of us invested in the continued collaboration across the arts and sciences and the integration of performance into the cultural histories of technology, one hopes there will be more to come.

Sarah Bay-Cheng
University at Buffalo, State University of New York
baycheng@buffalo.edu