

Victorian Theatricalities Forum

Playbills Under House Arrest: A Reply to Richard Schoch

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Richard Schoch's strictures might have been a just rebuke to us all five years ago. But I wonder if they do justice to the questions which theatre historians are now starting to ask. As we start to write the history of British theatre – as opposed to the metropolitan narratives which have too long stood as surrogates – the theatrical archive is coming under a new kind of scrutiny. In York, for example, one of the nation's great ecclesiastical libraries finds itself unexpectedly playing host to a major collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century playbills.

Some time in the late nineteenth century, the antiquary and bibliophile, Edward Hailstone (1818–90) of Walton Hall in Wakefield bought at auction some job lots of eighteenth-century playbills. Over several decades, Hailstone built up an extraordinary collection of manuscripts, ephemera and rare books about Yorkshire history, politics and topography. In his will, he bequeathed this collection to the Dean and Canons of York Minster, whose archive of incunabula and early modern books had already made it one of the nation's most important ecclesiastical libraries. The Church, Hailstone believed, was likely to be a far more responsible custodian of his collection than the State: on more than one occasion, he denounced public libraries as the destroyers, rather than the preservers, of books. And so the playbills of this Victorian collector came into the possession of the Church of England: a curious case of a theatrical archive finding itself, to use Derrida's terms, in 'Mal D'Archive', under religious 'house arrest'.

The forms of 'hospitality' offered to this theatrical archive in its new ecclesiastical home are curious indeed; the new home for these playbills – in a building which remains from the old Archbishop's Palace – was only a few yards away from the site of an earlier York playhouse. The playbills had come back, like ghostly spectators, to their origins, as if to mark, to memorialise and even to recuperate a lost theatrical site in the city.

Inside the archive, unexpected points of contact emerge between the ephemera of a nineteenth-century bibliophile and the contents of the Archbishop's study. There's something wonderfully contradictory about a collection featuring both anti-theatrical tracts, donated by canons and archbishops and, at the same time, well-thumbed copies of plays written by clergymen-playwrights. Yet since the medieval period, the Church has

acknowledged the power of performance to enhance, and even reinforce its own authority as well as to threaten that authority.

The incorporation of Hailstone's playbills into the Minster Library is one of those acts of assimilation that sheds unexpected light on the Church's fascination with, as well as its anxiety about, performance. In 2007, following the financial crisis which almost closed the library, the librarian put together a small exhibition about the playbills, with proceeds going to the fund to support the upkeep of the library. Interestingly, a significant proportion of this exhibition was devoted to explaining the procedures and ideology of preservation (as opposed to conservation) of these documents. The exhibition was successful in introducing significant numbers of visitors to this major theatrical collection. Nonetheless, it was hard not to detect an implicit containment of its disruptive, even anarchic potential. Just in case we hadn't read Derrida, the detailed accounts of cleaning (purifying) and mounting these bills explicitly drew attention to the fact that these records of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatre are, indeed, under house arrest.

Hailstone was constructing an archive at a moment when, as in Derrida's argument, a 'structural breakdown' in theatrical memory was taking place. By the late nineteenth century, theatre no longer held that central, unifying position in the cultural life of the nation which it had enjoyed a century earlier: patterns of leisure had fragmented; entertainment venues were multiplying. By this time, there could scarcely have been more than a handful of spectators still alive who could describe at first hand the experience of weeping over Sarah Siddons' performance of *Belvidera* or of watching John Philip Kemble's icily neoclassical portrayal of *Coriolanus*. With the exception of *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) or *The School for Scandal* (1777), the stock repertoire of eighteenth-century plays (and the spectators' *intensive* theatrical knowledge of legitimate drama) had all but disappeared. In Hailstone's day, these thin, fragile bills on cream or pale blue paper did indeed memorialise and embody a vanishing theatrical past. As Jacky Bratton points it,

The body of theatre history hangs upon these bones; its face, its gestures are familiar to us from these types and borders [...]. In every metropolitan and provincial library, local record office and private collection lie the enticing bundles of bills [...]. It is from this source, more than any other, perhaps, that our conviction that we feel we know what happened in the theatrical past ultimately stems.¹

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It's a passage unconsciously haunted by the memory of Hamlet gazing at the skull of Yorick. We feel we knew these people, and the sight of their bones is at once enthralling and poignant: the bold, alluring fonts and short asides (no boys admitted to the gallery until the fourth act; tickets to be had at Palmer's coffeehouse) speak in intensely vivid voices. And we remember the hundreds of bills printed to advertise these performances, to be thrust into a playgoer's hand, handed round a genteel drawing room, pasted on the walls of the nation. What was ubiquitous is now singular; what circulated freely around the urban spaces of the city has become a forlorn document encased in an antiseptic plastic wrapper. It's all too tempting to fall into that narrative of loss which, as Joe Roach observes in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (Columbia University Press, 1996), somehow pervades theatre historiography despite the material richness of the archive.

Bratton's argument rehearses nothing less than an archival *coup d'état*. Significantly, the playbill becomes a crucial weapon for usurping what she sees as the methodological tyranny of 'self-verifying facts' characteristic of traditional theatre history. In the hands of the antiquarians, Bratton suggests, playbills simply represented the 'solid, comfortable, substantive stuff of theatrical history'. For the theatrical moderns, by contrast, the playbills provide the bones from which to create a distinctively fleshy critical practice. Theatre historians, it turns out, are now in the business of reanimating the corpses. For Bratton, playbills seem to transcend their own textuality, summoning back the forms of subjectivity and kinds of 'inside knowledge' at the heart of the theatrical event.

This idea of the playbill as the skeleton of theatre history is a suggestive one, especially for thinking about the nature of the theatrical archive. But there's a contradiction at the heart of Bratton's argument between this elevation of the performing body – its skills, its forms of community and ways of promulgating professional identity – and its relative lack of attention to the circulation of performing bodies – not to mention plays – in the theatrical marketplace. This is a revisionist manifesto, in other words, which sometimes seems to sidestep geography, and, by extension, to downplay the British theatre's intense preoccupation with questions of regional, national or colonial identity. Yet what the Hailstone archive reveals in such striking ways is the mobility of

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performance in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. At this moment, too, new kinds of ‘intercultural’ performance began to emerge; players such as Charles Mathews the Elder, to rephrase the terms used by Stephen Greenblatt, were starting to market themselves as ‘specialists in cultural exchange’. Digging in archives such as Hailstone’s raises important methodological questions, but the dirt is also vital for reconstructing the geography of British theatre.

¹ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 38–39.