

Victorian Theatricalities Forum

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Richard Schoch is one of the few theatre historians whose use of source material can be described as both inspiringly creative and impeccably responsible, so I have no doubt that he is not guilty of the insidious assumption at the heart of his comments, namely that one is conducting archival research when one receives a carefully-assembled file of press clippings, playbills and photographs from a library assistant at some major institution. Theatre history used to be a question of dividing the past into eras dominated by great men, and the archives often reflect this old-fashioned approach. A more innovative theatre historian researching, say, theatre architecture or audience composition would have to be much more diligent in seeking out source material that, with few exceptions, would not be found preassembled in one of those A4-sized boxes, the innocuous colour of which reflects their usually bland contents. Even standard repositories like the Victoria and Albert Museum Theatre Collections and the British Library can yield much more than boring boxes when researchers ask interesting questions. There are also fascinating collections that have been allowed to remain intact, so that the idiosyncrasies of the collector prevail over the assumptions current whenever the collections were acquired by their later institutional owners. The Bram Stoker collection at the Shakespeare Centre, though it corresponds well enough to Schoch's complaint since it relates mainly to Henry Irving, is fascinating for what it reveals about Stoker as much as Irving. Less famous collectors, and much more idiosyncratic material, are to be found in specialist archives and libraries the world over. Readers of **19** need hardly be reminded that periodicals are also a valuable source of information unclouded by the historian's hindsight. Fascinating theatre history is recorded week by week or month by month in the theatrical periodicals, of course, but also in specialist periodicals for working-class readers, for instance, and much of this archival gold remains completely unmined. There is no end of material that falls outside the bounds of Schoch's complaint, and really no excuse for redoing old-fashioned theatre history when there is so much more that remains to be discovered in the archives. The solution must be more than just the kind of cross-referencing and corroboration that would remedy scholars' sometimes lazy use of theatrical evidence: the laziness of the questions that we ask needs also to be addressed. The kind of responsible theatre history that Schoch seems to be proposing, in which researchers are aware of the personalities and preconceptions underpinning the collections in which they conduct their research, is

almost inevitable when scholars decide not to take yet another bite at the usual low-hanging fruit.