

Victorian Theatricalities Forum

John Stokes

Is it merely that old admonisher Jacques Derrida who has caused the current fuss about archives? Were we completely benighted until now? Didn't we always know there was a problem? A famous passage in *Archive Fever* (1995) reminds us – in distinctly Foucauldian vein – that knowledge is 'produced', that events can never be separated from their records:

This is another way of saying that the archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archiving produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the so-called news media.¹

But for most of us, surely, this is yesterday's news. (See, for instance, W. B. Worthen and Peter Holland (eds.), *Theorizing Practice. Redefining Theatre History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and the now seminal work of Tracy C. Davis as well as of Jim Davis and Victor Emejanov.) Paying attention to the 'technical structures' that determine content (entirely? or only to a degree? – those are the more difficult questions) is not a recent realisation, certainly not in the field of theatre history. As if we didn't know that any archive leaves much out, more than we could possibly guess at. Perhaps it's only when the archive becomes thoroughly, or potentially, institutionalised that one might be tempted to forgo that knowledge and submit to what Derrida would see as a form of political control.

That might be enough to make us ponder over the rationale of a National Collection in the first place (though not, of course, to disband its holdings). Looking back at Gabriele Enthoven, at Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, and the many thousands who, then as now, have hoarded programmes and press cuttings according to their own predilections, may make us wonder if a National Collection doesn't beg as many questions as a National Theatre. Not that I would do without that either.

When I first started doing theatre history the Enthoven Collection, as it then was, occupied a distant upper story of the Victoria and Albert Museum and was satisfyingly dark and dingy. Just getting there was a reminder of the mortuary air that can surround the theatrical archive and, at least in those days, the slightly morbid business of theatre research, still an amateur hobby for many – but not necessarily ineffective because of that.

One hardly needed to be reminded that Gabriel Enthoven hadn't been very interested in the popular; the very remoteness of the place itself told you as much. And the atmosphere was compounded by the fact that George Nash, the dedicated curator of the collection at the time, was a Gordon Craig scholar – as were many other serious people, admirers of an exile from the British Theatre whose private visions rarely achieved public realisation. I remember, at about the same time, phoning Mander and Mitchenson with an enquiry and being asked, first, for my credentials – easy enough since I was a registered PhD student, though they weren't much impressed – and second (much more difficult) if I had any money, because didn't I know that this was a private collection, privately funded, not a charity? They supplied me with a photograph which I reproduced in a book only to discover later that it had been misidentified. Since then, of course, the collection has gone happily to Greenwich where the ghosts of M and M may still linger but are now kept on their best behaviour by a highly professional curator, himself a distinguished theatre scholar.

The limitations of a collection may, in fact, be one of its strengths. Idiosyncrasies of the archive can tell us something about the attitudes of at least one kind of theatre-goer. The whims of the fan, the obsessive, are just one of the 'facts' that they can reveal. Another collection that I know reasonably well, though it is constantly enlarging, makes the point with great style. The Oscar Wilde holdings in the William Andrews Clark Library in Los Angeles (part of UCLA) have grown steadily over the years as a result of cumulative buying policies, although the nuclei were established by wealthy bibliophiles fascinated by rare editions and manuscripts pertaining to Wilde, alongside, I strongly suspect, curiosity about his less professional activities. An archive like this one, based on a theme or personality rather than a period, can have a different kind of open-endedness. The Clark is – or at least used to be – interested in any item relevant to Wilde, and in any aspect of his life and work from the moment of his birth until the present. But this kind of collecting is expensive to maintain and takes real professional dedication on behalf of the curators. To work on the Clark Oscar Wilde collection, which is housed in a Palladian style villa in one of the less glamorous districts of L.A., is to be newly aware of the multiple and continuing appeal of the man at the heart of the collection.

Much as Jacky Bratton has called for the imaginative use of autobiography, we need to feel free to make imaginative use of the archive. (Plus, it goes without saying, we

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need to agitate for more money to keep cataloguing up to date.) It's when an archive feels duty-bound to present itself as, or aspires to become, comprehensive that the problems of selection and of funding get real. A meeting of the London Theatre Seminar late last year was addressed by a panel of Dr. Kate Dorney of the Theatre Museum and two scholars, working on contemporary, or at least fairly recent, material. (How recent is recent not only depends upon how old you are, but upon how many mementoes you have preserved – and they can work in more than one way too.) I was struck by the pragmatism of all concerned. No one seemed to think that they could do more than was feasible, all seemed persuaded of the significance, and the limitations, of their specific projects. Although entirely *au fait* with digital and video resources and convinced of the importance of interviews with survivors, they were certainly not going to forget the fragility and possible distortion of individual recall. Yet, listening to these sensible and informed comments, I became silently, embarrassingly, conscious that my own main archive – perhaps because I often work on the nineteenth century, and despite having spent long productive hours at the Theatre Museum in several locations over more than 40 years – remains 'the library'. Which usually means the British Library itself, either on the Euston Road or, for newspapers, in Colindale.

This, ironically, is probably because I have always been preoccupied by two questions. What made up a particular performance? And, what did it look like, feel like, what did it mean to those who were there, the audience? Some would say that these questions are not so much closely related as inseparable. Perhaps. Yes, there are illustrations of many kinds, yes, there are prompt-books, texts of many kinds as Caroline Radcliffe and Kate Mattacks remind us, and these are obviously essential, but I still find that it is descriptions in books – biographies, autobiographies – and, above all, in periodicals that I return to most continually.

Is recreating performances still considered an important activity? I have a sense that, given the rise of postmodern historiography, it may seem a disturbingly old-fashioned idea, possibly dismissed as a positivist chimera. Yet, it still seems to me to be an end worth pursuing, even if it needs added care. Knowing that there is no such thing as pure transparency *vis-à-vis* any performance my main quandary remains how to treat reviews. I once proposed a model for their use which now seems to me to be naïve though I'm not sure that I can suggest many improvements. It depended on looking for common

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denominators and on making the common-sense assumption that what most people commented upon and thought to be significant did actually take place. It's not an ideal solution to the problem though since, as I have always known, a composite, which this method can easily lead to, is simply a reconstruction of an occasion that never happened.

I do know that I should pay more attention to the provenance of reviews, by which I mean not only the assumptions, prejudices, special talents of the reviewer (which are not easy to ascertain when most are anonymous). I feel that I have a handle on G. H. Lewes and one or two others, but the great mass of nineteenth-century journalists are a faceless, nameless, mystery. And what of the journals themselves? Who edited them? Who owned them? Who were the target readerships? How were the papers and journals distributed? We need to think about these basics. Is there a decent scholarly account or study of the *Era*, the theatrical journal that ran from 1838 until 1939, that is now blissfully but all too temptingly online, and to which we all constantly refer? If so, I need to know about it. Nineteenth-century theatre historians are learning how to read playbills; we have yet to learn how to read reviews.

Reconstruction is most worthwhile when it doesn't try to do too much. Hazel Water's *Racism on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) strikes me as an excellent example in that respect. Working with the Lord Chamberlain's collection, with some reviews and with biographical material, her determining aim is to relate theatrical performance to surrounding ideologies. We are given a broad and pioneering account of a protracted series of cultural moments that makes its valid and valuable points while sidestepping the deeper methodological quagmires. Another recent example of how to go about it is Tony Howard's brilliant *Women as Hamlet* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) which focuses not on a broad and porous topic but on a single role and a limited group of interpreters. Although this goes up to very recent times it does cover figures from the long nineteenth century such as Sarah Siddons, Charlotte Cushman, Alice Marriott and, of course, Sarah Bernhardt. Here I am prepared to be persuaded because of the precision, the detail, coupled with the intelligence of an author whose sense of how theatre works, experienced and instinctive, keeps the evidence nicely in check.

As a sometime reviewer myself, I always try, in Kenneth Tynan's admittedly rather self-important phrase, when dealing with contemporary performance, to 'write for posterity'. This means that I try to give as much detail as I can of all aspects of a

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production, while conscious that what I'm putting down may be precisely what a future scholarly readership has no interest in whatsoever. And that what I'm failing to note may be exactly what they will be desperate to know. As a reviewer – being paid to pay attention – I am bound to make a record of some kind. Which, of course, in the context of an audience, any audience, puts me in as distinct a minority today as it would have done in the nineteenth century.

Together with colleagues at King's College London I have recently been thinking about some of the 'shows of London' that were available in Victorian times, some of them conventionally 'theatrical', others far less so. Often we have found ourselves asking what people ('the people'? any old 'people'?) actually made of the entertainments that were all around them. We haven't been entirely successful in this enquiry, but our very failure may be salutary. It puts us in our place – our early twenty-first century, academic, RAE centred, goal-orientated place – in relation to that other place, the often haphazard place of the archive.

In the most searching critique of Derrida that I am aware of – the wonderfully titled *Dust* (Manchester University Press, 2001) – Carolyn Steedman argues that the Freudian psychoanalysis that Derrida explicitly draws upon is not so much an explanation of the dilemmas we feel in the face of the archive as their cause: 'psycho-analysis has been responsible for some of this trouble with archives, for it wants to get back: it manifests a desire for origins, to find the place where things started, before the regime of repetition and representation was inaugurated.'² According to Derrida this urge can allow sinister, coercive practices. Steedman summarises:

the *arkhe* – the archive – appears to represent the now of whatever kind of power is being exercised, anywhere, in any space or time. It represents a principle that, in Derrida's words, is 'in the order of commencement as well as in the order of commandment' (9). The fever, or sickness of the archive is to do with the very establishment, which is at one and the same time, the establishment of state power and authority.³

But Steedman goes beyond Derrida's questionable conclusions, asking what exactly we are up to when we visit the archive driven by our preconceived desires? What if, on one of our pilgrimages to the past, we don't find what we are looking for? What if in the search for something – for just about anything that would satisfy our immediate needs – we find precisely nothing. Steedman's conclusion, at which point she joins in an acutely ironic agreement with Derrida, is that 'if we find nothing, we will find nothing in a place; and

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then, that an absence is not nothing, but is rather the space left by what has gone: how the emptiness indicates how once it was filled and animated.⁴ That sounds rather like a collection of Victorian theatre material to me, a place where words, pictures, and sometimes noises, surround a palpable absence. The elephant in the archive is always the audience.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* [1995], trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 16–17.

² Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 7.

³ Steedman, p. 1.

⁴ Steedman, p. 11.