

FROM THE EDITOR

Performance Archives

What “counts” as a performance archive? How can we, as theatre historians and performance studies scholars, use archival evidence to “rescue” long-forgotten performances of the past? Finally, how do we theorize our relationship, including our critical labor, to the performance archive? As with many scholars, I began asking these significant questions throughout my graduate study. Researching the Black Arts movement (1965–76) taught me that Black women theatre artists rarely appear in scholarly narratives, and much of their work has been excluded from within traditional archival sites. If I wanted to help amplify their contributions and preserve their theoretical and artistic accomplishments, I would need to evaluate my preconceptions and *create* an archive. As I met with Black women artists, their colleagues, and their children, I discovered that a performance archive might take the form of a cardboard box filled with VHS tapes, personal scrapbooks stored in an attic, or even a memory captured in an oral history interview. This is but one example. The essays within this issue challenge us to continue to ask these questions as we gather traces of the past and reflect on our labor as theatre critics and historiographers.

Eric Mayer-García’s “Theorizing Performance Archives through the Critic’s Labor” invites readers on his journey to process theatre ephemera at the Photographic Archive of Tablas Alarcos Press in Havana, Cuba. In so doing, Mayer-García provides a glimpse into the (often) invisible yet vital labor of the theatre critic and historiographer in mediating the past. Through his reflections and the memories of his collaborator, actor-critic Roberto Gacio Suárez, Mayer-García encourages readers to situate the archive as a “living and impermanent form of memory” and understand the process of “reading the archive,” an interactive performance practice that generates knowledge.

“Rescuing *Richard Cœur de Lion*: Rivalry, Rehearsal, and Performance at Sheridan’s Drury Lane” explores the rival productions of *Richard Cœur de Lion* at Drury Lane and Covent Garden during the 1786–7 London season. Like Mayer-García, Robert W. Jones utilizes “residue” from the past—diaries, performance reviews, and Mary Tickell’s correspondence with her sister, Elizabeth Sheridan—to reconstruct a crucial moment within eighteenth-century commercial theatre. Jones’s historiographical labor, including his incredibly detailed descriptions of artistic choices and financial investments, persuasively demonstrates why Drury Lane’s production “eventually triumphed.”

Claudia Rene Wier also culls together fragments of the past to reconstruct the commercial world of seventeenth-century Italian opera. In her article, “Performing Celebrity and Anna Renzi’s Cross-Dressed Performance as Ergindo,” Wier beautifully weaves together primary descriptions of performance

with detailed contextual information about Venetian society into a rich tapestry that captures the onstage persona and gender politics of Anna Renzi (ca. 1620–after 1661), one of the first operatic prima donnas. She writes that “Renzi embodied sexually ambiguous characters onstage while subverting conventional gender codes within the cityscape to fashion a new social identity. . . . Her travels and success proved her ability to steer her career and business dealings deftly while pioneering a new profession for women.” By the conclusion of her study, Wier convincingly demonstrates how Renzi’s talent, intelligence, and cultivation of celebrity personality led to her success and blazed the trail for future professional women singers.

Finally, Sean F. Edgecomb’s “Performing Midsommar: Swedish Nationalism, Folkloric Pageantry, and the Political Power of Symbolic Divergence” finds new meaning in the centuries-old Swedish celebration of Midsommar. Beginning with a thick description of attending the three-day Midsommar festival in Leksand, Sweden, Edgecomb then details how a regionally specific event transformed over time into a national pastime, replete with traditional folk culture and seemingly politically neutral performance practices. However, as a spectator and theatre critic, Edgecomb reads moments in the performance that celebrate invented heritage and divergent symbolism rife for use by opposing political parties. Ultimately, he finds that “both cultural transformation and cultural continuity can be engaged toward political ends, whether paving the way for inclusion, diversity, or representation into established, precedented practices or attempting to reclaim or even weaponize historic traditions through the lens of an embodied nativist authority, promoting marginalization and intolerance.”

Collectively, these articles offer reflections on our labor as theatre critics and teach us that performance archives are much more than musty, old libraries or catacombs; they can live in our memories, are beautifully impermanent, open to interpretation, and constantly surround us.