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A TYRANNY OF DOCUMENTS:
THE PERFORMING ARTS HISTORIAN AS FILM NOIR DETECTIVE
ESSAYS DEDICATED TO BROOKS MCNAMARA

INTRODUCTION

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It makes sense that I would edit a volume dedicated to Brooks McNamara devoted to essays exploring personal encounters with archival documents. I first met Brooks when I was a prospective doctoral student, and interviewed for an internship at the Shubert Archive, then under his Directorship. I can't imagine how I managed to get the job; I had just left the bus station after an all-night ride from Toronto, and the very-early-morning Times Square clientele were avoiding *me* on my way to the interview. And yet hired I was, and my own personal, life-long encounter with archival documents began. I spent a year at that extraordinary collection re-cataloguing orchestral parts for touring musical theatre, a seemingly endless stream of telegrams reporting on touring productions, typescripts of plays that may or may not have been produced, and comic review sketches. I learned to tie a library knot (very useful), and breathed the air of eighty years of storage (not so useful). I became sensitive to the personal, physical investment in the creation of documents by individuals: the beauty of a costume design that was after all meant as a disposable model for a work of art, not a work of art in itself; and, in contrast, the plea telegraphed to head office by a troubled road manager, desperately requesting that it send a farce (he was touring Ibsen in 1910s Oregon, and it wasn't going well). I learned to appreciate the fragility of the content, the meaning of

which seemed so easily lost—revue sketches that were no longer funny, lyric references to long-forgotten once-important events. I also learned to appreciate the physical qualities of archival work, something incomprehensible to the uninitiated, but palpable to all the contributors to this volume—the texture of the paper, the smell of dust and disintegrating film stock, and most particularly the aura of a material object that is as physically precarious as the event to which it bore witness was ephemeral. Of course Brooks McNamara, as a Professor of Performance Studies at New York University, did much more for me. He was teacher, thesis supervisor, mentor—he and his wife Nan even loaned me the only furniture I had, during my first year of study, that wasn't scrounged from the streets. But the job at the archive had the greatest effect.

The "call" sent out for this volume provides its name. It is an old conceit that historians are detectives in the archives, following the "clues" to solve a "case." If polled, I have no doubt historians would provide a greater-than-average percentage of detective fiction enthusiasts. But that being the case, few "cases" are resolved neatly—and sometimes (often?) the historian is less Hercule Poirot than Mike Hammer in, for example, the late baroque film noir *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1955; dir. Robert Aldrich). Poor Mike, in that narrative, doesn't really understand the case, or why he's on it, but he can't stop following the clues because he's obsessed with the idea that there is something very important out there to find—"the Great Whatsit." He encounters wealthy playboys, opera lovers, foreign powers, corrupt coroners caring for corrupt bodies, atomic power, and Emily Dickinson—and he's ill prepared for any of it. The clues, the case, the victims and the "perps" all tyrannize him. But he is obsessed, so he blunders through, fists flying. This, sometimes, is what our research is like.

I understand this engagement in terms of that area of historiography called microhistory, which calls for a close re-examination of individual documents and events, questioning the preconceptions with which we approach them, looking among them for what has been called the "opaque document" or the "exceptional normal," the document or piece of information that clearly exists as a clue to the meaning of the event we are trying to understand, but just as clearly flies in the face of the easy answer.[i] It is history, as Thomas Postlewait (a contributor to this volume) usefully notes, "in the Chekhovian mode"—referring to:

> "that microhistorical moment in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* when that mysterious string breaks, sounding over the landscape. A ripple in time? A rupture? Something happened, but what? After a pause, the events of the play continue as if nothing had occurred, and yet, when viewing the play, we cannot but wonder about that mysterious sound. And we must speculate on its meanings, despite lack of evidence."[ii]

Postlewait elaborates on this "mode" in his indispensable *Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, calling to our attention its pitfalls as well as its advantages, and the importance of negotiating always between the close examination of particular documents and the variety of contexts within which they must be understood. Both the evocation of how we engage with documents, and the caution with which we should temper this engagement, describe the tenor of the essays in this volume.[iii]

The direction given to contributors was this: to focus on a personal experience with a "tyrannical" document from the archive, a document that would not allow for an otherwise apparent conclusion, that flew in the face of the evidence, or that carried embedded in it some aspect of the event that was incomprehensible, no matter how much additional research was brought to bear on it. Contributors were asked to reflect on the difficult balance sought among and between the historian's respect for documentary evidence, the need to generate significance from it, and the natural-but-dangerous tendency to smooth out the rough edges of evidence. For the historian and archivist of the performing arts those problems are intensified. It is one thing to examine the documents pertaining to a battle, an epidemic, or a famine; the effects of the event were palpable, measurable in some sense. It is quite another thing to try to read a document representing the detritus of a performance, the effects of which are far more difficult to measure. An audience is moved, and minds are changed forever.

In this volume you will find engagements with documents from late medieval Russia to the present-day digital cloud, referencing a broad range of performances, from commedia dell'arte to burlesque revival, from 18th century opera to South African drag, from *Mazeppa* to the desperate, life-or-death miming of a lost arctic explorer. You will find a range of writing styles here as well, including some engaged explicitly with the idea of the detective in manner and tone—cold cases, femme fatales, deep mysteries, trick endings and red herrings—and some more personal, more elegiac, lamenting the loss of certainty, the passage of time, the disintegration of any links to the ephemeral event. There is a good deal of hard-boiled detective work in this volume, invoking and interrogating the most recent scholarship in the field; and there is also poetry.

This volume draws together scholars and archivists specializing in theatre, film, dance, music, and popular and cultural performance, representing a cross-section of the academy from graduate students to some of our most recognized scholars and archivists emeritus. This is all as it should be in a volume dedicated to Brooks, who dealt as easily—and democratically—with those at the beginning of their careers as with seasoned "pros," with any and all attitudes toward the serious study of performance, with any and all potential audiences, and with the broadest possible definition of the discipline. For Brooks—to borrow, as he would have, a phrase from popular advertising—"there is no box."

The first person singular is the voice of choice in these essays, representing personal relationships with documents that, certainly in my reading of them, resonate with one another. You will find here discussions of:

- documents that should exist but do not (Frick), and that should not exist, at least not where they have been found—and yet there they are (Schweitzer, White)
- documents that—intentionally and unintentionally, through polemic, parody, or caricature—obscure their own capacity to provide tangible evidence about performances and performers (Hill, Scott, Smith, Fern)
- documents that are more than usually tempting to accept at face value, because if we do so the event is easier to understand, and more narratively satisfying (Sperdakos, Riley, Bryan)
- documents with information so inconsequential as to seem unworthy of attention, but that might—just might—in fact carry evidence of a relationship that will all but "close the case" (Hughes, Solomon, Harris)

- documents created by individuals whose relationship with the events in question seem unusually troubled—or unusually accepting (Curley, May, Venning)

Here are researchers:

- who discover uncharacteristic documents in unusual places, and consider the resulting effect on their understanding of events (Donohue, Blum)
- who re-evaluate the manipulations of documents by those who control their creation and dissemination, including the effects of "editing" on the writing of later history (Bovet, Colleary, Postlewait)
- who confront the limitations of extant documents to allow access to the original power of an event (Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin, Davis-Fisch)
- who discover that the most significant aspect of a document, after all, may rest in where it's travelled, and who has touched it (Couch, Bringardner)
- for whom new evidence comes to light that challenges and complicates what the authors thought they already knew (Ryder, Cook)
- who negotiate relationships with the creators and the "care-givers" of archives, in turn altering the way they interpret the documents (Vogt, Turner)
- who return to the evidence after some time, re-examining their own earlier work in the archive (Muse, Cohen-Stratyner), or the work of others (Fitzgerald, Crane), concluding that "cases" are never really "closed"
- who meditate on the physical act of being in the archive, of confronting and manipulating a document, of watching it disappear (Boyle, Harries, Brown)

- who go that extra distance to understand the way a performance was created, by re-creating the performance, only to discover that the stick won't slap the way it should, or that it simply isn't possible to "ride like Mazeppa" (Stoesser, Mayer)

Of course, even as I attempt to group these essays, I realize that all of them might be mentioned under several categories, and I risk stern emails from contributors; it is at this point that I long for the multiple keyword searches of an on-line publication. Even for the *Table of Contents*, there was no obvious choice. Organizing chronologically by the date of the document gives a sense of the passage of time; but they might just as productively been listed by region, type of document, the attitude of the researcher, or the kind of relationship with the document.

These essays are book-ended. At the outset, Don Wilmeth articulates just why, in fact, we should honor Brooks McNamara in a volume of *Performing Arts Resources*. If you have not been introduced to Brooks, this is your chance; afterwards, you can visit the library and continue the relationship. Odai Johnson provides the *coda*, reflecting eloquently on a number of issues that evoke the subject of this volume, both the tyranny of documents, and the deep sense of love and loss found in the archive. We live with the consequences of people making documents: people who commit deliberate acts of remembering, and of erasure, with a particular agenda in mind; as well as those who commit haphazard, careless and incompetent acts which can mean that we will never know what happened. We can suffer from amnesia; but we can also commit the act with deliberation.

ENDNOTES

[i] "Exceptional normal" is used by Edoardo Grendi, quoted in Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," from the now old *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, edited by Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) pp 93-113; reference p109. "Opaque document" is from Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (NY: Random House, 1984) p5. Carlo Ginzburg uses the word "dissonance," in *The Cheese and the Worms* (NY: Penguin, 1982) pxix. See also Ginzburg's "Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I Know About It" (*Critical Inquiry* 20:1 Autumn 93), 10-35.

[ii] From "Writing History Today" (*Theatre Survey* Nov 2000) pp83-106, reference p104: "If only we could write history in the Chekhovian mode, then, perhaps, we could see that documentary study and cultural speculation are two aspects of a complex yet united understanding." At the end of this article, we are admonished: "So, back to work, as Chekhov also urged in full ironic understanding of what it will deliver." (105) The mention of irony in the context of writing this kind of history is entirely appropriate, as many of the essays in this volume will illustrate.

[iii] Any reader of this volume will want to read two works released during its preparation, both involving Thomas Postlewait. The first is *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge, CUP 2009). I recommend in particular his "Introduction," pp8-20, in which he discusses the relationship between "event" and "context," and warns against the extreme stances of the "isolationist" and "universalist." Readers will also want to examine *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography*, edited by Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010).