

STEPHEN JOHNSON, ed.

A Tyranny of Documents: The Performing Arts Historian as Film Noir Detective

New York: Theatre Library Association, Performing Arts Resources 28, 2011. 353 pp.

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In this set of forty intriguing short essays, each contributor engages what Stephen Johnson calls a “tyrannical document” that is elusive of interpretation and narrates the process of thinking, searching, and connecting that leads theatre historians to inferences, further explorations, connections between data, and in some cases endpoints exasperatingly defiant of closure. As a fond homage to the great scholar of American performance, Brooks McNamara (1937-2009), the collection honours approaches that are as capacious, witty, and paradigm-shifting as this influential NYU scholar and founder of the Shubert Archive. McNamara’s generative scholarship on populist entertainment ranged from the Broadway mainstream to the culture-shaping minstrel shows, concert saloons, medicine shows, sketches, and pageants of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His protean interests are embraced by many contributors, while his legacy of paradigm-shifting writing and advocacy is abundantly evident in “the Great Whatsit” (2) that motives these essays. Odai Johnson, who is given the last word in this collection, provides an elegiac conclusion that turns upon the inebriated negligence of Mr. Wilson, parish clerk of St. Cuthbert’s (Edinburgh), who failed to register the birth of David Douglass in the 1720s and thus obscured any biographical narrative of the founder of the American stage. His adept bookending of this lacuna with Douglass’s Jamaican probate record – which includes a line about Bacchus, a slave in Douglass’s print works, “the invisible subject of an invisible subject” (343) – epitomizes how such hints intrigue historians and propel inquiries across time, place, and subject. Something was there – a birth – but was not marked, and as the contract of amnesty – the public agreement to forget – attests in the uninterpretable last will and testament, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Markedly discrepant circumstances reveal surprising similarities. Virginia Scott, who writes about a sixteenth-century quarrel in Paris, and Mark David Turner, who writes about a cache of video and film about Labrador found in a semi-abandoned building in Goose Bay, both ruminate that artefact and information are not synonymous. Interpretability rests partly on a scholar’s ingenuity, yet as Paula Sperdakos shows in her investigation of Ida Van Courtland’s early life, a good story is not necessarily a true story. Corroboration is a relational as well as interpretive act. When is an assertion sustainable? When is an artefact truly singular and when is a single-minded interpretation a credulous folly? These anecdotes are not indicative of the typical tales of investigation leading inexorably to insight, for shaggy dog stories outnumber eureka moments. That is the key to both the intrigue and the pedagogical utility of the volume.

These historians are enthralled by evidence – slapsticks, ground plans, typescripts, letters, and tombs – yet force themselves to be duly skeptical, to seek verification, to distinguish between circumstantial corroboration and counterfactual proof. This emphasis on the historians’ thought processes in the midst of compelling detective plots accounts for the charm in many of these essays. It also points to the essays’ readiness to serve as fables of discovery as well

as errancy. Marlis Schweitzer, for example, asks what it means that a piece of General Tom Thumb's (Charles Stratton's) wedding cake, which she serendipitously called forth at the Library of Congress, was given to Harrison Grey Fiske forty-two years after the marriage of P.T. Barnum's most lucrative sideshow act to Lavinia Warren. In any chain of evidence, what constitutes a link and what is adjudicated as verification is subject to question. In this spirit, Heather Davis-Fisch examines the fascinating "pantomimic" encounter between Charles Francis Hall, in search of evidence of the Franklin expedition in 1869, and Inuits who verbally passed on accounts of their encounters with survivors. The fragility of memory and memorialization across the caverns of cultural difference, historical time, and linguistic incommensurability is evocatively rendered in this and other essays.

In some cases, as in Chase Bringardner's focus on a trade card depicting *The Mikado*'s maids advertising a dental product, the artefact's ambiguity is embraced as a byproduct of commodification. In other cases, such as Amma Y. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin's analysis of a silent film fragment of the ninety-six-year-old Ben Ellington laughing for ten cents a minute at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, uncertainty about the representational status of evidence is called to account. Even if the laugh is genuine, what does Ellington—emancipated from slavery in the 1860s—laugh at? Cultural memory, whether on the individual or collective scale, changes over time and is elusive of definitive understanding. YouTube is Exhibit "A," as Andrew Brown points out. In some of these essays the author knows what is missing in a material sense yet—as in Rebecca Harries's tale of posters purloined from Bishop's University theatre lobby—the cultural value imbued in the object is indistinct. Sometimes the artefact is present but its relationship to a performative event is critically at issue—as Ann Folino White discusses in a description of the "Cotton Patch" scene interleaved in the Federal Theatre Project's typescript of *Triple-A Plowed Under*—in what is understood as "the progressive aesthetics and politics" of a form (250). Tantalizing contradictions, ambiguities, and mysteries abound.

In some cases the story begins with a quest. Elsewhere, as in essays by David Mayer and Paul J. Stoesser, experimentation is tried to explain the past, determine the likelihood of a practice, and relate experience to materiality. In many cases, authors conclude with well-articulated doubt. Discovery is never the endpoint, but rather a new beginning that might entail many more journeys to archives as historians ponder research as a process, not a destination.

**LAURENT GODBOUT, LOUISE LADOUCEUR,
GRATIEN ALLAIRE**

Plus d'un siècle sur scène! Histoire du théâtre francophone en Alberta de 1887 à 2008.

Edmonton : L'Institut pour le patrimoine, Campus Saint-Jean, 2012. 498 pp. + DVD.

NICOLE NOLETTE

Dans sa contribution au collectif *Théâtres québécois et canadiens-français au XXe siècle : trajectoires et territoires* datant de 2003, Joël Beddows fait état de deux pratiques divergentes du « modelage de l'histoire théâtrale » au Québec et au Canada francophone.