

## History Like Theatre: An Introduction to Three Essays on New Theatre Historiography

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A storm has battered the comfortable, settled communities of thought about literature, about writing it and reading it. The metacritical blasts have forced a thorough examination of the foundations upon which these communities are built. Assumptions about what ought to be known as well as assumptions about how that favored object is to be known have been excavated. Some have been strengthened and restored; others have been ripped out, and the structures of apparent knowledge above them have begun to crumble. In the past decade, those tiny islands in the river of time representing high consciousness of theatre of the past and of the present have been visited by the first, freshening breezes which presage a storm of change.

In the following essays, three exponents of an emerging theatre historiography have addressed fundamental issues regarding the substance of writing about history. Bruce McConachie proposes to modify the concept of "reading formation," an idea espoused by neo-Marxist historian and theorist Tony Bennett, into a "theatrical formation" and to argue that, in the analysis of theatrical events and their historical contexts, a search for "formations" might productively displace a search for "influences" operating within a "climate of opinion." Rosemarie Bank wants to create out of the concepts of "space of representation" and "heterotopia," ideas espoused by French historian-philosopher Michel Foucault, a spatially oriented theatre historiography as a dialogic counterpoint to the temporally oriented historiography of received tradition. Bank goes on to suggest that the "new" historian searches the space

of representation not for origins which impart meaning to subsequent events linked to those origins by a chain of causality, but for "functions in relationship with the space of representation," for "transformations," seen as "discontinuous phenomena," which become subject to "recurrent redistribution." Finally, Michel Kobialka discusses the mode of existence of an historiography seen as a "search . . . for multiple formations appearing and disappearing within it [the space of representation]," a "search not for consensus but for instabilities." Kobialka seeks, ultimately, as does Bank, to liberate history from ideology, and to create an "historiography which is an autonomous form governed by its own rules and paradigms."

Along the way, these discussions undermine some of the foundational polarities of modernist historiography. Context is "read into" the performance event and becomes a potentiality shaping the event from within. Progression and evolution give way to succession and radical rupture; origins and outcomes lose their singularity in processes; subject and object merge so that neither subject nor object is as important as the relationship between them. Everywhere in these essays, relationships become the fundament, dare one say the "substance," of history.

Kenneth Burke has observed that consciousness at its limits engages the moment, the point, at which A and not-A merge in the alembic of experience. In an effort to focus discourse on this most vital moment, Burke developed the concept of language as symbolic action, the discipline of logology to cope with language so conceived, and the method of dramatism. Burke recognized ritual drama as a window through which one could observe the molten scene of transubstantiation, the arena in which one could grasp the human motive to use symbols at its most profound.

Bank, Kobialka, and McConachie seem to advocate the adoption of concepts, operations, and strategies to situate the new theatre historian at this transformational point in historical experience. Their efforts are exciting for one very good reason, but their urgings are troublesome in some significant respects.

Bank suggests that the "metaphor of the mirror, into which I suggest theatre historiography, and hence, the theatre historian, have been propelled, is . . . a rippled mirror, like acting in the theatre." Further, the heterotopia that lies beyond the mirror is "a space of illusion. . .," where one can "identify the other." McConachie urges the theatre historian "to dive into the apparent chaos of theatrical events. . .," while Kobialka asks the historian to become "an observer/participant of the changes occurring in a given space of representation. . . ." These essays go far toward erasing the image of the scientific historian and replacing it with the image of the historian as an imaginative but principled artist.

But it is precisely this image of the new historian that might be most troubling as new theatre history struggles to secure its share of the academic market. Discourse about relationships, in the absence of the linguistic

equivalent of a geometry or a calculus, is perforce discourse about nothing, nothing. Study of relationships focuses the student outside the body, beyond materiality, on a metaphysical realm. Hence, new history is ontologically sited in a "space" beyond the reach of empirical, or even pseudo-empirical investigation. Discourse about relationships, formations, transformations, is like discourse about the burning bush through which Jehovah appeared to Moses. Such discourse will always be a species of "beating around the bush," no matter how sacred the bush, and history becomes an account of what can't be known. The epistemological problem arising out of the ontological dilemma of new history is pervasive. As one's quest projects one through the mirror to the verge of an "uncertainty," or into the heart of a "theatrical formation," *what* one can know changes. Moreover, *how* one knows changes as well. Discursive knowledge has been the aim of historical research since the emergence of historiography in the nineteenth century. It seems to me that new history of the sort proposed by Bank and Kobiakka, especially, aims at imaginative insight as well as discursive knowledge. The product resulting from the approaches suggested by these three essayists will be negotiable partially because of its inspirational power and its visionary intensity. New history would seem to be, once again, history like poetry.

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