

The Presence of the Recorded:
Theorizing and Developing
Theatrical History Exhibitions for the Museum

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In the opening scene of *Hamlet*, the entrance of a ghost is announced by various characters onstage (I, i, 43-45). Despite Horatio's pleas - "Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!" - the presence of the ghost is only confirmed in the written script of the scene, wherein a stage direction reads *Exit the Ghost* (I, i, 42-54).¹ Only upon his disappearance from the scene does the ghost become present. The documentation of theatrical performance straddles similar boundaries of presence and absence – a video record of a performance exists because of the immediate disappearance of the live act. This "wondrous strange" (I, v, 171) oscillation between present and absent complicates the display and interpretation of theatre history in the museum. The exhibition of theatre history has been only peripherally discussed by theorists and museum professionals in recent decades. As a result, theories of display and an understanding of the complications associated with displaying past performance in the museum must be pieced together from related discussions of memory, traces of history, and ephemera. This investigation will seek to expose the void of inquiry surrounding the display of theatre in the museum. This lack of discussion will then be supplemented with existing theories of presence, absence, trace, and memory, which can be employed through detailed documentation and interpretation to engage audiences with past performance. The goal here is to illustrate the need for discussion of theatre history in the museum, and offer a series of theoretical frames which can be employed to address the challenge of displaying the past in the present.

¹ Power, Cormac, *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2008), p. 117.

There is a noticeable lack of information and discussion of the display of theatrical history in museums amongst museum professionals and within museum literature. Texts as recognisable as Gail and Barry Lord's *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (2001) and David Dean's *Museum Exhibition* (1996), while covering a vast range of technical and logistical issues in exhibitions planning, completely bypass those surrounding the display of "live" events from the past. The vast majority of museum literature focuses on the inclusion of live performance in the museum as a pedagogical tool, referred to as museum theatre or "living history." As evidenced by popular living history sites such as Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, the use of theatre as an educational resource in the museum has been widely accepted by both the public and museum professionals. Even in those texts investigating museum theatre, the focus remains on the educational and interactive opportunities offered by living history and museum theatre.² There is a separation of performance in the museum and its depiction in the exhibition, as if theatre can only exist as learning-focused performance in the museum. The challenge of re-presenting theatre and engaging audiences with a past performance through documentation has limited the scope and content of theatre history exhibitions. This apprehension over the collection and display of remnants of past live performance is based on an

² Magelssen, Scott, *Living History Museums: Undoing History Through Performance* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), pp. 103-106.

academic confusion over the exact nature and scope of performance studies, which has yet to be explored in the museum.³

In *Professing Performance* (2004), author Shannon Jackson discusses the transformation of the academic recognition of performance studies from a peripheral and “special” field of literature and theatre studies in early 20th century academia to a hybridized field largely linked to emerging practices of performance art by the late 1960s.⁴ Performance theorist Richard Schechner provides a sociological framework for the study of performance, rejecting earlier Cambridge-based theories of performance as solely derived from ritual in favour of a lateral understanding of theatrical performance as simultaneously developed with sport, ritual, and play.⁵ Performance scholars, focusing on the historical origins of performance until the late 1960s, were soon faced with the multifaceted meaning of conceptual art happenings (later termed performance art). Theorists, critics, and artists debated and struggled to define the new art form, and a literature of confusion arose surrounding the presentation and meaning of performance art works.⁶ ‘Performance’ has come to signify such a variety of cultural events and processes, including entertainment, speech acts, and

³ Kratz, Corinne A. and Ciraj Rassool, “Remapping the Museum,” in *Museum Frictions*, (eds.) Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomas Ybarro-Frausto (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 355.

⁴ Jackson, Shannon, *Professing Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 40.

⁵ Schechner, R., “Approaches to Theory/Criticism,” in *Tulane Drama Review* Vol. 10(1966): 27.

⁶ Performance artist Eric Bogosian: “People from theater came and said, ‘that’s not theater...’ Performance artists came and said, ‘That’s not performance art.’ But I don’t really care what you call it. That’s not important. What’s important is effect.” In Howell, John, *Laurie Anderson* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press: 1992), p. 75.

behaviour, that it has become a convenient and overused term.⁷ Its meaning has become confused and politicised, as critics and theorists bend the act of performing to their needs.

The collection and display of performance history has, however, been largely bypassed in museum literature due to the complexities of presenting such an ephemeral event as a static display. While this may seem at odds with the general project of museums to display and interpret the past, it appears that the discussion and exhibition of such a fleeting past in the museum has yet to be addressed. I believe this difficulty arises in the museum's breaching of a relationship fundamental to the success of theatrical performance – that of performer and audience. Roselee Goldberg describes performance as “reducing the element of alienation between performer and viewer,” given that both spectator and performer experience the work simultaneously.⁸ Kevin Walsh's *The Representation of the Past* (1992) discusses the growing distance created between individuals and their histories since the Industrial Revolution, as a result of a separation of people from the processes which create places, and therefore their pasts.⁹ Visitors to the museum, many accustomed to encountering theatrical performances live onstage, are unable to connect with historic theatre photographs, video clips, and ephemera in the same way. This lack of connection with the past depicted has made the project of engaging audiences with performance history exceedingly difficult, as the familiar and immediate

⁷ Diamond, Elin. “Performance and Cultural Politics,” in *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, (ed.) Lizbeth Goodman (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 67.

⁸ Goldberg, Roselee, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), p. 152.

⁹ Walsh, Kevin, *The Representation of the Past* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 176.

theatre relationship of actor-audience is missing. No further interpretation or mediation is offered by the museum to reconcile the broken relationship of audience and performer. Curators of theatre history are unwilling or unable to move beyond simplified displays of their collections. In Jean Scott Rogers' *Stage by Stage: The Making of the Theatre Museum* (1985), which describes the creation of the Victoria & Albert Theatre Museum in London, nowhere are the difficulties associated with representing live performance through static collections discussed. The text illustrates the Board members' and curators' complete focus on tying collections to socio-political themes and biographical narratives. From 1964 to 1984, the British National Theatre Museum (later the V&A Theatre Museum) featured 17 exhibitions on famous individuals from theatre history, 13 exhibitions of costumes or costume designs, and three exhibitions of recent acquisitions.¹⁰ The overwhelming focus on props and persons in these exhibitions, instead of a discussion of specific performances or moments in theatre history, is evident. The challenge of tackling the display of and engagement with theatre history has limited the exhibition of theatrical artefacts to static arrangements of objects which focus on their aesthetic qualities or provenance. This is an instance in which the museum must reveal its limitations as a mediator of theatre history to audiences, and discuss that intangible quality of "live-ness" which makes performance difficult to collect.

Literature on the collection and use of theatre documentation has tended to focus on the categorisation of various types of theatre ephemera. John

¹⁰ Rogers, Jean Scott, *Stage by Stage: The Making of the Theatre Museum* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1985), pp. 65-67.

Kennedy Melling's *Discovering Theatre Ephemera* (1974) exemplifies this approach, focusing on the different types of theatre ephemera which can be collected and where to obtain them. This includes autographs, letters, books, cigarette cards, costumes, designs, music, newspaper clippings, personal items, photographs, postcards, posters and prints, programmes, props and scenery, records, scripts, souvenirs, and tickets.¹¹ Other texts on the subject focus on the definition of ephemera and its parameters, enabling collectors to determine what is of theatrical performance history value. In *Ephemera* (1985), Chris E. Makepeace translates Melling's list of ephemeral artefacts into a discussion of definition. Makepeace's ephemeral artefacts are transient in function, "flimsy," classified as a "special collection" within libraries, yet classifiable.¹² This definition straddles archive and museum functions, making theatre performance collections a liminal field of study difficult to display and interpret effectively.

The tendency to collect and categorise theatre performance history documentation in an archive setting contributes to its limited display in the museum. The nature and format of objects typically collected for theatre history collections predestines its home in an archive; posters, playbills, broadsheets, ticket stubs, pamphlets, programmes, and photographs are all two-dimensional objects which can be easily stored in an archive or library setting using minimal space, materials, and requiring little maintenance. The Harvard University Theatre Collection alone contains more than five million programs and playbills,

¹¹ Melling, John Kennedy, *Discovering Theatre Ephemera* (Essex: Shire Publications Ltd., 1974), p. 2.

¹² Makepeace, Chris E., *Ephemera: A Book on its Collection, Conservation and Use* (Hants, England: Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1985), p. 10.

one million photographs, 500,000 manuscripts and letters, 10,000 posters, and over 200 file cabinets of newspaper clippings.¹³ The L.W. Connolly Theatre Archives at the University of Guelph in Ontario contain similarly staggering quantities of artefacts from theatre history, comprising 130 individual collections in a single facility.¹⁴ Theatre collections are attached to major libraries and universities throughout North America, including the U.S. Library of Congress, The New York Public Library, and Library and Archives Canada.¹⁵ The overwhelming tendency to align theatre history materials with an archive or library immediately creates a barrier to the display of these objects in the museum. These objects are often stored in file cabinets and archival boxes, and are rarely digitised or photographed for staff reference. The collections of Theatre Museum Canada, for example, are spread between three separate storage facilities, with a scantily-detailed collections database that renders exhibition planning nearly impossible.¹⁶ While this is primarily due to a lack of resources to upgrade storage, the nature and format of theatre museum collections (i.e. primarily printed artefacts) has kept them in an archival setting. As Charles Mereweather writes, the archive acts as a container, while simultaneously burying the subject.¹⁷ By keeping theatre history collections stored in an archive,

¹³ Houghton Library, "Harvard Theatre Collection," Harvard College Library (2008), URL: <http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton/collections/htc.html> (Accessed March 23, 2009).

¹⁴ "L.W. Connolly Theatre Archives Preface," University of Guelph Library (2008), URL: http://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/resources/archival_&_special_collections/the_collections/digital_collections/theatre/theatre_preface.htm (Accessed March 23, 2009).

¹⁵ See Rachow, Louis A., "Theatre & Performing Arts Collections," in *Special Collections* Vol. 1, 1(Fall 1981): 121-128, for a complete listing of theatre collections in each American state and Canadian province or territory.

¹⁶ Theatre Museum Canada Director Michael Wallace email to author, October 23, 2008.

¹⁷ Mereweather, Charles, "Archives of the Fallen," (1997) in *The Archive*, (ed.) Charles Mereweather (London: Whitechapel Ventures Ltd., 2006), p. 160.

they exist for research rather than exhibition, and are relegated to the realm of “special collections” rather than given their own space and specialists to explore their re-presentation. Despite their banishment to the archive, theatre history collections and their exhibition share many of the same concerns of performance artists and curators. Thankfully, theorists have investigated the documentation and re-presentation of performance art, a valuable vantage point for our discussion of the exhibition of theatrical performance history in the museum.

Since the advent of performance art, recordings of these live events have been made and there has been considerable discussion amongst performance theorists on how to re-present and engage with the documentation. Issues of displaying and re-presenting past performance works in galleries and museums are highly relevant to our discussion of exhibiting performance history in the museum. In Peggy Phelan’s seminal text on performance art, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), she writes that once a performance is saved, recorded or documented, it becomes something else and enters the economy of reproduction.¹⁸ This statement easily applies to a theatrical performance, illustrating the inherent fallacy of recording and re-presenting performances in the museum. The original can never be recaptured. Art historian Amelia Jones argues that while the experience of viewing a performance art work first-hand is irreplaceable, knowledge obtained during this act by audiences should not automatically supersede that which can be gleaned from the examination of

¹⁸ Phelan, Peggy, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

documentation from the event.¹⁹ She asserts that immersing oneself in the records and documents of a performance has the advantage of distance from the act itself, in that it can be difficult to trace patterns and meaning from an event while one is embedded within them.²⁰ The use of theatre documentation within an exhibition must acknowledge the processes which made each record possible. In an exhibition at the Tate Gallery Liverpool in 2003 entitled *Art, Lies and Videotape: Exposing Performance*, the curators focused on the creation and use of visual records of performance art. In an accompanying catalogue essay, art historian Roselee Goldberg discussed the difficulties faced by curators exhibiting past performances, and the validity of documentation as a representation of these events.²¹ Goldberg and others conclude that an increasingly contextual approach to documentation and re-presentation of performance art is required to provide audiences with the widest lens possible on past events. While increased interpretation subverts modernist art gallery norms of the “white cube” aesthetic, further information on the recording of performance is necessary in order to make transparent the challenges presented by such ephemeral events. In its transition from theory to exhibition, the study of the documentation and presentation of performance art has become a valuable resource from which to formulate a display ethic for theatrical performance history which acknowledges and discusses its transient nature.

¹⁹ Jones, Amelia, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” in *Art Journal* Vol. 56, 4(1997): 12.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Goldberg, Roselee, “Hidden from History: Performance Art and the Imagination,” in *Art, Lies and Videotape*, (ed.) Adrian George (London: Tate Publications, 2003), p. 24.

Issues of presence and absence surrounding documentation and re-presentation are common to both performance artists and theatre history museums, as both deal with issues of presence and absence resulting from the recording and display of an ephemeral moment or event. In order to engage visitors with performance history and present affective exhibitions in the museum, the limitations of representing past performances through documentation must be acknowledged and explored. However, further theoretical grounding in theories of performance and presence, as applied to the museum setting, should be combined with an awareness of the mediatization of both records and audiences in order to develop a mode of display for theatre history. These theories have been written in the context of performance art and theatrical performance, but their transfer to the museum setting will add new layers of distance, mediation, and interpretation.

Objects displayed in the museum act as signs for events of the past – once they are removed from their original context or purpose and placed in an exhibition, their meaning changes. Though the object itself is present in the museum, it stands for something, an event, person, or concept, which is absent. Referring to a person being read by others as exemplary of a certain type, semiotician Umberto Eco describes a sign as a physical presence referencing something absent.²² This mark of the absence of a presence, an “always-already absent present,” is the crux of theorist Jacques Derrida’s notion of *trace*. In the museum, objects act as a trace of their context, creator, and type; a temporal

²² Eco, Umberto, “Semiotics of Theatrical Performance,” in *The Drama Review* Vol. 21, 1(1976): 110.

compression of their past, present, and future.²³ The presence of absence is emphasized with each artefact, as objects on display are often presented as representative of a type or class, regardless of their unique features, provenance, or intended function. A single object in an exhibition can be made to speak volumes about other, absent, artefacts. But what of objects created with their function as a sign in mind – recordings, photographs, and documentation? The display of an absence of presence in the museum occurs daily, but is rarely acknowledged. When a theatrical history artefact is intended as a sign of performance upon its creation, it follows that on display the object acts as a sign of its creation – a remnant of the recording of performance. To ignore this reference is to deny the creation of the record, creating a spectre-like presence of documentation; the record is present, yet continuously absent in favour of its content. Artist and lecturer Alice Maude-Roxby suggests a conflation of record and performance can happen, as if the documentation of an event just *occurs*, or that the record itself is the same as the performance.²⁴ In reality, the creation of a record of performance innately divides its presence across the past, present, and future. The presence of the object is continuously divided between its past (creation), present (display), and future (signification). Derrida has termed this the “myth of presence,” in that an artefact in the museum is never truly and “purely” present – there is always the presence of absence.²⁵ This critique of presence as a pure and uninterrupted aspect of an object calls into question the

²³ Marrati, Paola, *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 125.

²⁴ Maude-Roxby, Alice, “The Delicate Art of Documenting Performance,” in *Art, Lies and Videotape: Exposing Performance*, (ed.) Adrian George (London: Tate Publications, 2003): p. 68.

²⁵ Power, p. 119.

concept of “live” performance in the theatre, and its privileging over recorded forms of performance.

There is a bias towards the importance and superiority of live performance over all other forms of engagement with theatre history. However, if theatre museums are to make effective use of their primarily print-based collections, the value of written and recorded artefacts must be established. In the museum, the display of audio and video recordings of performance is privileged over many other artefacts. The illusion of direct interaction between audience and performer, as mentioned earlier in this paper, is key to many people’s privileging of live theatre over recorded. However, the very notion and appreciation of the live over the document is an opposition which arose with the advent of recording technologies.²⁶ The creation of a binary perpetuates Derrida’s myth of presence, as the recorded performance exists in the absence of the live, and vice versa.²⁷ The notion that spoken text is inherently superior to written texts, called *phonocentrism*, is critiqued by Derrida as fallible in its dependence on the purity of spoken text as inherently spontaneous, present, and “live.”²⁸ The performer onstage has in fact rehearsed with a pre-written text or script, and their actions are informed by the narrative laid out therein. As a result, the action seen onstage is continuously infiltrated by the past and less of a spontaneous or pure presence than imagined by audiences.²⁹ In the museum, theatre history artefacts are no more present than the performances they re-present. While these objects

²⁶ Auslander, Philip, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 51.

²⁷ Power, p. 148.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

and records are physically included in an exhibition, their meaning and presence are constantly informed by their past. Audio and video recordings, costumes, and props of past theatre performance in museum displays merely provide an illusion of action and presence which transforms visitors into passive spectators. The display of theatre history artefacts in the museum must acknowledge issues of presence and absence, while recognising that written documents are valuable resources for remembering performance.

It is through contextualization and increased interpretation that these objects can communicate the complexity of their presence, and ultimately engage viewers in a valuable discussion of what can be remembered from a performance. But what context can be offered for the records of performance, and how can they be framed in a way that speaks to a wide variety of audiences? The key to presenting engaging and effective displays of theatre history may lie in audiences' overwhelming familiarity with both live and recorded forms of performance (i.e.: theatre and television). By speaking to visitors' pre-existing understanding of the live and the recorded, curators can raise questions of what, in fact, constitute "live-ness," signs, and presence in theatre. In his essay *Simulations* (1983), theorist Jean Baudrillard argues that since the Industrial Revolution and the ability mass reproduce and copy, simulations have replaced the real as audiences become conditioned to recognise and interpret common signs.³⁰ Philip Auslander translates this concept into a theatrical setting, writing that audiences increasingly experience onstage performances through various

³⁰ Baudrillard, Jean, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1981), pp. 175-176.

media (ie: special effects, video projections, and computer technology), creating a *mediatized* exchanged between performer and audience.³¹ This is based on a concept of mediatization developed by Baudrillard, which describes the process by which reality becomes increasingly separated from us through technical and institutional mechanisms.³² This can be seen in the display of theatre history in the museum, wherein curators rely on video and audio recordings to engage and interest visitors familiar with live performance, yet fail to acknowledge the mediation and mediatization which occurs during these recordings. By acknowledging that institutional and technological filters alter the way in which curators and visitors read and interpret artefacts, the theatre museum can confront its own presence as an institution and call into question the mechanisms of power which keep it afloat. This transparency can begin with the creation and collection of theatre performance artefacts, including recordings, transcripts, photographs, and new acquisitions to an institution. As much information as possible must be sought about each object and record, not least on its content or cultural importance, but also its provenance, function, creator, and their motivations for making the artefact. Theatre Museum Canada's online *Legend Library* initiative, a series of recorded video interviews with Canadian theatre professionals, makes fully visible its motivation, participants, and intended role as an educational and interpretive tool.³³ The processes ongoing during a theatrical

³¹ Auslander, p. 36.

³² Power, p. 151.

³³ "The Legend Library," Theatre Museum Canada (2005), URL: <http://www.theatremuseumcanada.ca/legendlibrary.asp> (Accessed March 31, 2009).

performance, including mediation of the performance through recording, are valuable to understanding or engaging with said performance after the fact.

In addition to the contextualisation and increased detailing of recordings and artefacts collected by theatre museums, individual memory of those involved in a performance must be documented and recorded. This form of record also acts as a sign of the absent original performance, but has the advantage of individual perspective, which adds a new and exciting layer of interpretation to past performances. The alteration of a performance within the memory of a viewer is a unique and highly illustrative record of the knowledge and associations held by that person and used in the production of memories. The urge to save an exact copy of a performance is misguided, and should be directed towards understanding the mediations made by individual witnesses and thus effectively represent the changing nature of theatre.³⁴ It is through these transformations, rather than objects associated with an actor or production, that a performance can live on past its creation and take on new life as interpreted through individual memories. Theatre historian Eugenio Barba writes that in the age of mechanical reproduction and of “electronic memory,” theatrical performance can also be defined and reinvigorated through the metamorphosis of human memory.³⁵ It is acknowledged that exactly replicating a performance is impossible – we can, however, strive to preserve and present the experience of a

³⁴ Reason, Matthew, “Archive or Memory? The Detritus of Live Performance,” in *New Theatre Quarterly* Vol. 19, 1(February 2003): 88.

³⁵ Barba, Eugenio, ‘Efermaele: “That Which Will Be Said Afterwards,”’ in *The Drama Review*, Vol. 36, 2(1992): 78.

performance.³⁶ This strategy could include the use of an event-centric approach to documentation, which emphasizes the processes ongoing during a performance, rather than the final product or individual moments onstage. Records of audience reactions beyond media reviews and interviews (i.e. theatre journals, personal correspondence), and notation of alterations, improvisations, or changes made to performed texts would greatly expand the representation of performance in a museum. In this way the experience of a live performance can be explored and discussed in the context of memory. In addition, the creation and collection of detailed records of performance memory would provide a substantial basis for discussion from which a literature of theatre performance history in the museum can be developed.

As we have seen, the discussion of displaying theatre history in the museum must be gleaned from literature on ephemera, the archive, performance, deconstructivist theory, and memory. The need for specific study on the complications and intricacies of exhibiting theatre performance history is evident, based on the number of theatre history collections relegated to research purposes with little opportunity for display. The designation as a “special collection,” while guaranteeing unique consideration and mention in many library and archive catalogues, nonetheless overlooks the potential for a theatre collection to operate effectively within the museum. Theatre museums, including the V&A Theatre Museum in London and Theatre Museum Canada in Toronto, continue to privilege aesthetic displays of costume and design and audio visual recordings of performances over written records. While the display of props and

³⁶ Reason, p. 87.

videos gives the illusion of recreating a performance, this overlooks the subtle issues of live-ness and presence which weave throughout a visitor's understanding of theatrical performance. Further interpretation and transparency is required to render a simplified understanding of Derrida's trace visible to audiences, and expose the level of mediatization which a record or artefact undergoes from creation to display. By imposing new acquisition procedures which emphasize the collection of both provenance and contextual detail, theatre history-collecting institutions can establish a basis of information from which to develop thoughtful and engaging exhibitions. Theories of display and understanding theatrical performance have largely skirted their presence in the museum, but in combination with notions of presence/absence, "live-ness, and memory, critically informed collection and display strategies can be developed. Much like the ghost of Hamlet's father, theatre history "wishes to be spoken to," but it remains to museum professionals to arm themselves with relevant theory of presence, absence, and memory in the theatre (I, i, 48).

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