
INTRODUCTION: EARLY MODERN THEATER HISTORY: WHERE WE ARE NOW, HOW WE GOT HERE, WHERE WE GO NEXT

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I

Most working historians tend to be impatient of anything which looks like methodological discussion.

Keith Thomas, 'An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II'

My epigraph says less about methodology than about Keith Thomas's own sense of his discipline's aversion to it, at least before 1975, when these words were published. His generalization, which was probably not true even then, is surely not true now, thirty years on, when 'methodological discussion'—the discussion of both procedural and theoretical questions—is a staple of the discipline of history. A few years

later, in 1979, the editorial board of *Past and Present* stated that it ‘has long been conscious of the need to initiate discussion of general points of historical inquiry, theory and method’, and declared its intent to publish essays on such topics at regular intervals, beginning with an essay by Lawrence Stone on the revival of narrative in the writing of history (Stone 1979). But this was catch-up rather than innovative; the editorial board’s move may have been prompted by the success of another journal, *History and Theory*, founded two decades earlier and devoted entirely to the issues whose importance *Past and Present* was belatedly acknowledging.

Since that time, judging from recent books by historians with titles like *Practicing History*, or *The Methodology of History*, or *History and Tropology*, or *Historical Representation*, or *Language and Historical Representation*, or *The Writing of History*, or *New Methodologies in History Writing*, most historians nowadays are quite ready to see ‘What is history?’ as a complex question, meriting serious conversation rather than what Keith Thomas took to be impatient tolerance. The absence of books with similar titles or themes in the field of theater history¹ may be evidence of a perceived absence of interest by theater historians in such issues, or perhaps just evidence of the continuing smallness of our field relative to history in general. Perhaps a critical mass has to be reached before theoretical questions become pressing. Whatever the reason, the void suggests that we lag behind our historian colleagues in finding such questions important. In that sense, we theater historians have until recently given the impression of being more impatient of these matters than Thomas declared historians themselves to be.

So I begin with two questions intended to measure the impatience levels of the readers of this volume. My first question: Is theater history a form of social or cultural history, and if so, do those disciplines have theoretical underpinnings (however contested) that should be of interest to theater historians? My second question is more impertinent: Where is the boundary between theater history and fiction? This latter question is not frivolous, though it has, like all questions we ask, an agenda already embedded in it (Martindale 1993: 15). Nor is this latter question even original with me; it’s merely my version of a larger question about history in general, a question that has engaged historians at various times, such as James West Davidson, who asked in 1984 if there was a boundary between history and fiction, while acknowledging that the question was not original with him either. Some years earlier it had engaged Nancy Partner, who wondered if the question had ‘not been much explored’ because it—falsely—seemed so self-evident, and who, two decades later, concluded that in order to write history at all one needed ‘to call on the fiction-making capacity of the mind’ to such an extent that the real question is how history ‘can separate itself out from fiction at all’ (J. Davidson 1984: 332; Partner 1977: 195; 1995: 33).

Thucydides would have understood such arguments, as he would have understood E. L. Doctorow’s generalization that ‘There’s no fiction or nonfiction now, there’s only narrative’ (J. Davidson 1984: 332). Certainly the dominant mode in the writing of theater history nowadays—indeed, of history in general, despite the *Annales*

¹ The rare exceptions are noted below.

school—is narrative, and much writing in theater history today is not unlike the final chapters of a good mystery novel, where the seemingly insoluble problems to which the reader was introduced at the beginning prove in the end to be susceptible to solution after all.

Problems and solutions are the stuff of narrative, whether fictional or historical. Whether this is because we have a ‘culturally conditioned need’ to represent the past ‘in some kind of narrative logic’, or whether fictional strategies are our own consciously preferred choices for structuring historical narratives, or whether the boundaries between the humanities and the social sciences in general are more porous and problematized than we acknowledge, the fact remains, as Hayden White has told us, that historical writings, like fictional writings, are constructed ‘around particular narrative and rhetorical strategies’ even when they are ‘most rigorously bound to the rules of evidence and scientific methodology’ (Spiegel 2005: 23; Otter 2005; Eley 1996: 207).

Plus ça change, one might be tempted to think as one reflects upon the history of our own discipline as well as upon that of the historians. A principal impetus for the revolution in historical thinking in the nineteenth century was a desire to discredit the then current belief that history was a branch of literature—or of rhetoric, as Lawrence Stone would have it (Stone 1979: 3)—and that ‘mere history’ could have little utility until linked with some more noble or virtuous discipline. Macaulay and Carlyle, perhaps the last of their breed in a line stretching from Clarendon or even from Camden, wrote their works in the face of new movements and ideologies that by the middle of the nineteenth century had rejected the notion that the sensibilities of the cultivated mind, linked with a persuasive prose style, were a sufficient guarantor of historical value, and had replaced that notion with a new paradigm, less committed to a search for the ‘moral lessons’ history might afford than to an emphasis upon its own internal coherence and to a new focus upon primary research among documents (Otter 2005: 109).

These attitudes, revolutionary in their day, are the background noise of our own thinking, and the entailment is that we see history today almost reflexively as a scholarly discipline devoted without question to archival research and documentation. But this notion, now almost two centuries old, has been under attack by historians for some time. Leopold von Ranke’s dictum (Ranke 1824, p. vii) that the task of the historian was not to produce universal truths but simply to show how things actually were—‘Er will blos zeigen wie es eigentlich gewesen’, a claim generally understood to have initiated the ‘documentary turn’ that followed—has now been disassembled, the recovery of ‘how things actually were’ being one of the casualties of the recent turn by historians to theory and methodology.

The activity we call theater history, which was born of a literary impulse in the midst of this nineteenth-century historiographic transition, was for a long time uncertain of its own status. For most of its early practitioners, despite the new energizing of historical studies at large, theater history seemed inescapably a branch of literature, more about theater than about history, fathered by a devotion to the plays of Shakespeare, and centered upon—or at least sheltered within—an activity

whose closest affinity was with poetry rather than with social or cultural or political affairs. It was sometimes viewed by those outside the discipline as a regrettable distraction from the proper study of dramatic poesy.

There was, of course, no question about the attractiveness of the plays themselves (that is, of Shakespeare's plays); their popularity from the eighteenth century onward was one of the enabling forces in the shifting of literary studies in general from a narrow foundation in philology at its earlier extreme to a later interest in reflecting upon aesthetic, moral, and spiritual concerns. This attack upon philology was a kindred manifestation of the Romantic spirit at work among the historians; as history was to be untethered from literature, so literary study was to be untethered from philology.

But now we're back where we started, with literature and history once more converging, undoing their divorce and rediscovering old commonalities, including a new awareness of the importance of language, with historians discussing 'practice theory' and 'the linguistic turn', finding new interest in the work of Saussure and Derrida and Foucault, or in such nearer narrativist contemporaries as Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Frank Ankersmit, Hans Kellner, Nancy Partner, or Allan Megill. Joining the chorus, Stephen Orgel has usefully reminded us that theater history 'is no different from any other kind of history', which ideally would mean (though it doesn't yet seem to) that theater historians engage in the same kinds of methodological debates as do other historians (Orgel 2004: 1).

This turn of events would have alarmed our predecessors, early twentieth-century theater historians such as E. K. Chambers or W. W. Greg, scholars whose labors still anchor much of our own work, if only subliminally. Greg did indeed urge the importance of 'the development of method' (Greg 1904–8, vol. ii, p. ix), but what he meant by that is best embodied in Chambers's own great works, especially the four-volume *Elizabethan Stage*, where 'method'—or a 'linguistic turn', could he have known the phrase—meant getting as far away from the literary as possible. Anyone who has read Chambers knows that he succeeded.

Even by the middle of the twentieth century this gap was still apparent, as was the clear distinction between *dramatic* history, a subset of literary history, and *theater* history, still a kind of handmaid or orphan. One pursued dramatic history at mid-century (as I did in graduate school) by reading widely outside the Shakespearean box, urged on by the critical essays of T. S. Eliot, and by the exhortations of F. R. Leavis that the verbal was a gateway to the moral. But we didn't read theater history, nor did our professors lecture on it; for them, theater history had only a little more value than it had had a century earlier; it still lacked a foothold and a rationale.

My graduate school professors would have been as perplexed as Greg and Chambers could they have seen where current thinking now stands. They would wonder not merely at the increasing centrality of theater history, but even more at historians concerning themselves with 'linguistic turn historiography', or at serious scholars like White or LaCapra or Ankersmit or Spiegel analysing narrativist strategies and asserting that 'no historical account is possible without some form of troping or emplotment' (Spiegel 2005: 23). They would wonder even more at Hans Kellner's

redefining of history as ‘a discourse that is fundamentally rhetorical’, or his claim that representing the past requires ‘the creation of powerful, persuasive images’ best understood as ‘metaphors or proposals about reality’ (Kellner 1995: 2). This would have seemed to them a serious confusion of history with literature, that is, with fiction.

But those are the issues historians are wrestling with today. And yet, despite Doctorow’s insight, the traditional distinction between the genres of literature and history continues to govern our assumptions about the difference between fiction and fact. Fictional narratives do not form the basis of our factual research in theater history because fictional accounts do not serve us as evidence. Yet it is becoming increasingly difficult to assume that the texts we label as ‘historical’ have any greater value as evidence. What theater historians lack, according to Peter Holland, is any ‘assumed and shared methodology based on an acceptance of what constitutes evidence’, nor have they manifested any agreement on ‘how that evidence generates the potential for meaning’. He also reminds us, almost as an aside, that engaging in the practice of theater history ‘is not the same as understanding or theorizing’ it (Holland 2004a, pp. xiii, xii).

Nancy Partner concurs, reminding us that everything regarded as ‘evidence’ is of course *evident* simply by virtue of its existence, but it is not thereby ‘evidence’. Only when we transform it into a meaningful piece of a past whole—however we may conceive that ‘whole’—does it become ‘evidence’. In this sense, she says, ‘all of historical evidence is a major trope, a figure of speech and thought’. Since no collocation of pieces of ‘evidence’, however large, can reproduce the whole of the past, she argues that ‘the trope of metonymy, which extrapolates a whole thing from its contiguous part, is the organizing concept and argument of even the driest and most cautious historical construct’. Partner, like Hans Kellner, is as much a rhetorician as a historian, and insights like theirs are beginning to be shared by theater historians as well, for example by Peter Holland, who voices concern about the ‘remarkably little investigation of the methodological bases’ upon which so much of our previous and even current scholarship is based, or on ‘the theoretical bases’ on which theater history ‘has been or might be constructed’ (Partner 1986: 105–6; Holland 2004a, p. xii).

If our preferred practice is positivist or essentialist, our only defense against such uncongenial assertions about our failure to be theoretical will probably be to go back into the archives and find more documents; in other words, to add to our discipline’s ‘traditionally positivist accumulation of data’, in Holland’s words. Ronald Vince echoes Holland in describing the largely unexamined ‘documentary imperative’ that ‘continues to characterize most theatre history’; and Joseph Donohue finds the ‘gathering and labeling of evidence’ without a consideration of the assumptions and values underlying such activity to be ‘an excessively narrow’ notion of the discipline (Holland 2003, p. xvi; Vince 1989: 7; Donohue 1989: 177).

On the other hand, Virginia Scott hopes ‘to see more of us in the archives, because unknown treasures live there’, though she concurrently hopes we will ‘seek wisdom’ about our enterprise ‘from other historians and historiographers and not always

from anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers' (Scott 2004: 191–2). She's right about archives; for some of us, archives are magnets, and documents unquestionably comforting, a tangible physical substantiation of a past reality. But they are not without their problems. Christopher Hill learned many years ago that 'Their apparent objectivity is frequently spurious' (Hill 1977: 17). Two things, and only two, can be said unambiguously about surviving documents: one, that they have somehow survived where other similar documents often have not (for conspiracy theorists this alone may be grounds for suspicion), and two, that they contain particularized information set down by a particular writer, with greater or lesser coherence depending upon the writer's command of syntax. One cannot go further than this; one cannot demonstrate a concord between the contents of a documentary account and the actual circumstances it purports to record. Nor can one presume, even subliminally, that the documents that have not survived would, if found, strengthen the narratives we perceive to be implicit in the ones we already have. It has been traditional practice to give surviving documents the benefit of the doubt, to presume that the information they give us forms the proper backbone of whatever narrative we may wish to construct. Perhaps we have no choice but to begin this way with any document. But we must never forget that this is a choice we make, not a requirement of our discourse. So we should practice skepticism whenever we can. Indeed, Christopher Hill has warned us emphatically that a historian must be skeptical of '*all* his sources' (Hill 1977: 18).

I would extend that skepticism to include whatever narrative construct those sources seduce us into preferring. Like our children, our sources often achieve unearned perfection in our eyes simply because they are ours, and we tend to resist when our preferred narratives for them are upset by new data. But we should expect such upsets and should welcome them, and skepticism of our existing sources is the first step. We might begin by being skeptical of second-party documents, that is, documents written by someone other than the provider of the information. One example would be the depositions of witnesses in a court case, where a person summoned by the court would respond orally to a set of prepared questions while the court transcriber wrote down what he believed or understood the deponent to be saying. Depositions in theatrical cases are a major source of data for theater historians, yet such depositions present problems of their own, probably insoluble ones. Not simply that two deponents may disagree over the same matter, but the deeper question of whether the depositions as written represent unambiguously what the deponents actually said or meant to say.

Another familiar form of second-party document is the will, sometimes written with care and deliberation by a scrivener in consultation with a testator in good health, but more usually written by the parish clerk at the bedside of a terminally ill testator surrounded by potential beneficiaries. Our assumption that the final written and signed document reflected the testator's actual desires is often an act of faith. While some stage players remembered their fellow players in their wills, others did not; we devise our own explanations for these inclusions or omissions, which often reflect no more than our desire to write the kind of narrative we want to write. Nor

did a testator's signature upon a will necessarily reflect authenticity; Alan Nelson has recently discovered, among the State Papers, a lawsuit contesting the 1625 will of one John Busby, in which the complainant argued, with seemingly strong evidence, that Busby's signature on his will was written by his mother, Busby himself being too weak to write his name and (so the complainant averred) too insensibly near death even to understand what he was signing (or not signing).

We should keep the Busby case in mind as we do our research. We cannot with assurance presume that the contents of second-party documents like parish vestry minutes, livery company records, privy council minutes, and the like—or even of first-party documents like letters—furnish us with 'evidence' reflecting the truth about the circumstances they purport to describe. They reflect, as do our own letters and diaries and notes, one way of seeing the world, and not the only way. Though we try to find our sources meaningful, they may nonetheless be in some degree fictional. Indeed, 'the central fictionality of history', according to Partner, is 'its unrelenting meaningfulness'; the one thing that reliably separates history from novels is that 'histories are relentlessly overplotted'. While a good novelist will withhold information, a historian (she says) must tell all, withhold nothing, offer any explanation that will allow the source, the information, to acquire significance (Partner 1986: 102).

Robert Stein carries the point further; for him, nothing is inherently a source. A piece of information becomes a source 'only as it enters into a transaction with a historian to serve the historian's purposes, when it is used, in other words, as "a document"'. Historians, he notes, regularly use sources 'for purposes other than those for which they were intended'—our own use of Shakespeare's will is probably the best-known instance of this—because history is an activity in the present. Stein posits a triangular relation among 'a present entity' (a surviving text), a present reader of that text, and a present 'disciplinary structure (in this case, history) that supplies the reader with an interpretive context, a purpose for reading and a protocol for interpretation'. So, for Stein, the mere presentation of data, however accurate, is not yet history, not without the 'disciplinary structure' and the 'protocol' that are the key mediating factors between the historian and the document (Stein 2005: 69).

But do we have those keys? Until very recently, many theater historians would have had difficulty describing the disciplinary structure and protocols governing their own work. As an escape from such a requirement, some of us might have been tempted to say, 'Of course there's a theoretical basis for my work, but I don't need to explicate it because it's implicit in what I do'; but that's imprecise, evasive, and in some cases perhaps not entirely honest. Andrew Gurr tells us that the appeal of anecdotalism—itself a specialized form of fiction—to New Historicists and others is 'precisely because it is so imprecise'. However, he believes we theater historians have little better to show, because 'Our knowledge and our use of the texts and contexts of early modern drama are as imprecise as any anecdote' (Gurr 2004a: 71). For Gurr, protocol and disciplinary structure are not yet in evidence, though fiction may be.

II

Geschichte beginnt mit Chronik und endigt mit Essay.

Leopold von Ranke

Although I don't believe causal arguments are useless, I would certainly maintain that the attribution of causes is a construction, one manner of being historical, and it ought not to be privileged over functional historical narratives.

Albert H. Tricomi, *Reading Tudor–Stuart Texts through Cultural Historicism*

Theater history certainly began with chronicle, as Ranke said it would. Early theater history practitioners such as F. J. Furnivall and F. G. Fleay provided us with the beginnings of our discipline in chronicle form, and chronicle remained a powerful influence upon E. K. Chambers and G. E. Bentley. Even in the late 1970s Lawrence Stone declared the narrative mode in history unambiguously to be 'the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order' (Stone 1979: 3). And despite Ranke's prediction that it would transmute into something else, chronicle seems to be with us still, like Osric, forever leaving but never gone. Ranke's end point, which I understand to be the reflective essay—as opposed to the demonstrative essay, which often has chronicle at its heart—has only recently found practitioners in our discipline. Mostly, when we write, we describe events or happenings and aim for explanations of their causes. Albert Tricomi thinks causes are overrated (my second epigraph), and events as well, finding fault with 'positivist proponents of event-based analyses', or indeed with anyone—this presumably would include Stone, just cited—who claims 'categorically that event-based arguments of the sequential sort are *the* way to write history' (Tricomi 1996: 12–13).

The 'event' has been for some time a vexed category in historical thinking. Almost two decades ago William Sewell said, 'most historians take the effectivity of events so much for granted that their accounts of events tend to lack a theoretical edge'. Marshall Sahlins, an anthropologist rather than a historian, had earlier observed that most historians 'live in the narrative element' and as a result lacked any sense of the event as a theoretical category. Sewell, considering these remarks, found them a fair description of his own earlier practice, and concluded that only after exploring the methodologies of other disciplines did he 'recognize events as a category in need of theoretical work' (Sewell 1996: 264; Sahlins 1991: 15).

Peter Holland has observed, in his assessment of the ongoing REED project, that London-centric theater historians have not 'theorized the position within the central strategies of theatre history of almost any form of event that is non-metropolitan and/or non-professional' (Holland 2004b: 53–4). But this doesn't go nearly far enough. Sahlins and Sewell would no doubt tell us that 'within the central strategies of theatre history' (whatever those may be) we have not theorized the notion of events at all, of events as a category, whether or not professional, whether metropolitan or rural.

Jaques, a metropolitan turned rural, was untroubled by such concerns. His Seven Ages speech in *As You Like It*—a ‘strange eventful history’ in his view—exemplifies the notion that life is apprehended not as a continuum but as a series of stations, each emblemizing a pivotal moment in an uncertain progress. Later in the play, Touchstone parodies this step-by-step view of life’s progress with his disquisition on the seven stages of a quarrel. Perhaps Ganymede does so as well in her anatomy of Oliver and Aliena, who ‘no sooner met but they looked; no sooner looked but they loved’, and so on, passing swiftly from one marker to the next, ‘and in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage’.

We theater historians have until recently tended reflexively to make the same assumptions. We would be likely to note the first appearance of a text, or playing company, or playhouse, or critical stance, or the first major modification of any of these, as an event, while the subsequent continuing existence of the same entity would be not an event, but rather some other kind of phenomenon. Though we all publicly agree that the subsequent continuity is as important as the first appearance, in practice we have tended to scant it in our narratives, finding change more interesting than continuity. Early researchers in the archives like Malone or Halliwell would emerge from their documentary rummagings with evidence for some event or occasion, much like Little Jack Horner with his plum, and the assembling of such evidence, often in books called *Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the English Stage* or *Chronicle History of the London Stage* or *Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama*, solidified the ‘eventful history’ approach. (W. W. Greg praised the ‘careful chronicling’ of the last two of these works, both by F. G. Fleay, saying they had ‘revolutionized the methods of theatrical history’; Greg 1904–8, vol. ii, p. ix.) We are the heirs of this tradition, and we have built our own stairs to marriage out of the same materials. The older among us were taught that the seven ages of the theater began in 1576 and ended in 1642, and a survey of current texts on theater history will show this to be a still current trope, along with surprising agreement about what the most important intervening eventful dates were as well. Like Jaques, modern practitioners of the discipline have been charmed by Touchstone’s methodology; event by event we develop and develop, and thereby we hang our tale. It’s only a short step to believing that motley is the only wear.

But even our dependence upon ‘events’ does not make them equivalent to (or reducible to) what surviving documents tell us about them. Monika Otter finds ‘the truly important referents’ of historical narrative nowadays to be ‘not things, people, or places but “events”; and “events” are arguably already an abstraction from reality—someone’s attempt to order and emplot raw data into a before/after, cause/effect’ arrangement. Such an arrangement is inescapably narrative, as Nancy Partner has noted: even ‘The most rigorously eventless, characterless, “non-narrative” history has to tell something, has to begin somewhere and proceed and conclude’ (Otter 2005: 125–6; Partner 1986: 93). Frank Ankersmit has explored narrative as one way a historian might ‘attempt to give an acceptable account of part of the past’; but John Zammito found problems even in this formulation, asking ‘what makes something an “account?”’ What makes it “acceptable?”’ Shannon Jackson raises similar queries: ‘What counts as an argument? What kind of work must be done to support it? What is rigor? What is research?’ (Ankersmit 1983: 207; Zammito 2005: 156; Jackson 2004: 242).

These are new kinds of questions, and healthy ones. Otter reminds us that the traditional event-centered narrative had for centuries been spared such interrogation; she instances Isidore of Seville's 'historia est narratio rei gestae, per quam ea quae in praeterito facta sunt dinoscuntur' ('history is a narration of events, through which that which occurred in the past is known'). This formulation generally prevailed through the twentieth century—witness Stone—despite its being assaulted (though not killed) in France by the *Annales* school, which rejected it for being overly concerned with such trivial and insignificant issues as individual events; it was dismissed as 'l'histoire événementielle', inferior to their own preferred narrative mode, 'l'histoire de la longue durée' (Otter 2005: 113; Stone 1979: 3).

Gareth Stedman Jones offered a further twist, telling us we must get beyond the Isidorean (and Rankean) identification of history with pre-given past events. History, in his view, is 'an entirely intellectual operation which takes place in the present and in the head. The fact that the "past" in some sense "happened" is not of primary significance since the past is in no sense synonymous with history.' He reasserted what is by now a mainstream position in historical study, namely that the historian doesn't reconstruct the past, but rather constructs something else from the residues of the past which have survived into the present. Louis Montrose has echoed this view, claiming that we have no access to the past unmediated by 'surviving textual traces'. Frank Ankersmit noted that the texts we ourselves produce add a further layer of mediation, and he faulted those who believe 'that nothing of any interest happens' on the trajectory from the initial evidence to the text we ourselves write. Geoff Eley, sounding the same note, saw history as not 'the archival reconstruction of what happened' but rather 'the continuous contest over how the past is approached or invoked'. All saw as dangerous the assumption that the structure of a historical narrative reflects some presumed structure inherent in the past itself, and all agreed that procedural protocols are needed. 'The distinction', wrote Stedman Jones, 'is not that between theory and non-theory, but between the adequacy or inadequacy of the theory brought to bear' (Stedman Jones 1976: 296; Ankersmit 2001: 51; Montrose 1996: 6; Eley 1996: 214).

But what theories are commonly brought to bear in theater history, and how might we determine their adequacy or inadequacy?

III

History, it has been well said, offers a series of answers to which we do not know the questions. The historian's difficult job is to reconstruct the questions from the recorded answers.

Christopher Hill, *History and Culture*

History is perhaps the most thoroughly hermeneutic creation of all culture: from the 'inside' because historians begin by creating a text, the Past,

through the interpretive creation of and with evidence; and from the 'outside' because they then proceed to explain it.

Nancy Partner, 'Making Up Lost Time'

One can hardly imagine two more divergent views of the historian's work than those of my two epigraphs, by an older and a younger member of the profession, the perhaps unconscious positivism of the former deftly encircled by the linguistic turn of the latter. In the spirit of such circling, and with my second epigraph as an exemplar, let me now return to the first of my opening questions: Is theater history a form of social or cultural history, and if so, do those disciplines have theoretical underpinnings (however contested) that ought to be of interest to theater historians? For Ronald Vince, theater is without question 'a sociocultural phenomenon', and its study 'in some major aspects a branch of social history' (Vince 1989: 14). And social historians, in turn, are major players in the ongoing debate over the place of theory in historical writing, according to Gabrielle Spiegel, because 'the deepest challenge posed by the "linguistic turn" was to the practice of social history'. Spiegel sees 'the rise of cultural history (and its socio-cultural cognates in anthropology and sociology)' as having been governed by 'discontents arising from the then dominant practice of social history, Marxist and non-Marxist alike' (Spiegel 2005: 4). If this is the case, then we may have a fairly straightforward answer to the first part of the question: those social historians and cultural historians who were trained as historians are quite likely as caught up in the questions I've already addressed, as are any other group of historians; perhaps more so. And if Vince is right about theater history being a kind of social history, then the answer to the second part of my question is yes.

But persons who come to the study of society and culture from some other point of origin than graduate study in history—for example, from graduate study in literature (as I do)—may find themselves less well trained and therefore less engaged with these issues, or less alert to their importance. And, until recently, despite Vince (whose background is also in literature), theater historians have tended to fall into this latter category.

There are exceptions, of course. *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, a ground-breaking collection of essays published in 1989, raised a number of cogent questions about the theoretical underpinnings of our discipline, questions that remain healthily unresolved, and continue to be discussed in ever widening circles, as evidenced by the publication in 2003 of another collection of essays, entitled *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History*, with a largely different set of contributors. Fifteen years after co-editing the earlier volume, Thomas Postlewait asked—and not for the first time—if we can 'specify a vital academic rationale' for theater history, 'distinct from the definitions and rationales that shape each of the other disciplines in the arts' such as humanities and social sciences. He wondered if 'we, like musicology, have distinct features as an academic field' (Postlewait 2004: 184). The implication of his query was that we do not, and that we should. Ronald Vince had earlier proposed the 'axiom' that the boundaries of the discipline of theater history 'tend to expand in direct ratio

to the intensity of the efforts to define and confine it', and predicted that any effort to restrict the definition of theater history 'as a precondition of study' would prove 'both arbitrary and self-defeating'. For Vince, a home for theater history that encompassed both literary study and theater practice was the desideratum. Postlewait, perhaps reflecting on these assumptions, offered a quiet disagreement, confessing his own belief—like Virginia Scott's—in the prior centrality of 'historical study, historical training, and historical understanding'. But then, in a moment of introspection, he asked, 'But am I merely announcing my preference for what I happen to do? If so, I am part of the problem—one more person with a special interest that substitutes for a disciplinary program, one more earnest teacher who proclaims an academic mission on the basis of what I see in the mirror' (Postlewait 2004: 184–5; Vince 1989: 13–14).

This is bravely stated, and is a central conundrum. Is theater history a distinct and definable field, with a set of commonly agreed—or at least energetically debated—methodological premises, or is it merely the uncritical sum of what practicing theater historians happen to be doing at any given time? If the latter, then does its definition change whenever people change what they're doing? Where on the continuum between a free-floating, methodologically empty cluster of individual researchers and a circumscribed, overdetermined, ideologically rigid group project does our discipline now stand?

One answer might be that it stands everywhere along that continuum, and thus has no center. Among the common charges levied against theater historians by those who are not their friends are the following: that they are anti-theoretical; that they are overawed by 'facts'; that they believe documentary evidence always trumps imaginative hypotheses; that their discourse remains linear while the discourse of those around them grows richer and more complex; that they are more interested in the questions for which they have answers than in those 'other' questions, and that they are often scornful of colleagues who, lacking data, nonetheless tackle the other questions; that there is an unconscious Bardic teleology in their premises, shown by their valuation of the origins of Shakespearean associations—the Globe, the Blackfriars, the King's players, Stratford—above those phenomena that led elsewhere, e.g. to the Red Bull or to the children's companies or to the provinces; and that the books and essays they themselves write easily support the above charges. Until recently, there would have been some truth in each of these observations. But increasingly such opinions may be viewed as assessments of who we were rather than who we are. The work we're doing now, as reflected in the essays in this volume, furnish ample material for a response to these charges.

But it's also true that, for scholars of the early modern period, it's harder to write proper theater history today than it has ever been before. In part this is true because there exists no general agreement among theater historians about what 'proper' theater history looks like. Setting aside those studies of social or cultural history that appear to be 'theater history' because they are dressed up with references to play-acting and playgoing, one is still left with a broad range of perspectives among practitioners of the discipline. One scholar will argue that the proper center of

interest for theater historians is the play-text in performance upon the stage; another will insist it is research in the archives; still another will claim it embraces anything performative, wherever and however performed; yet another will say theater must be set in its social and political context; still another will see economics as the key to all mysteries; and so on. But these differing opinions haven't yet become starting points for a debate. Theater history has, for a very long time now, resembled golf more than tennis.

But even when done right—and there's scant consensus on what that phrase might mean—the writing of theater history is difficult. Theater history is, properly, the writing of theater history. The accumulation of data, while commendable, requires intervention before it can become history. Our predecessors, having had far fewer documents to work with than we do, and knowing far less about the early theater than we do, had an easier time of it, because they were freer to construct narratives to fit their meager data. We have more data now, but more data means more contradictions, more inconsistencies, more evidence that is incommensurate with other evidence, and a greater awareness of what kinds of data are still missing. As a result we are forced into more confusions than our predecessors could have imagined. It's no longer easy—in addition to being no longer fashionable—to write the master narrative that commands general assent; there are too many opportunities for other narratives, other points of view.

And so to the first procedural dilemma for a theater historian. Are ambiguities and contradictions in our data problems to be solved, requiring a selective narrative supporting one preferred interpretation against others and offering that as 'what really happened'? Or are they a condition inherent in the data and in the nature of our own scholarship, requiring a fuller and more accommodating narrative with room for ambiguity and contradiction and alternative versions? All questions do indeed have agendas already written into them, and by now mine must be clear.

Clifford Geertz maintained that the anthropologist's task was principally interpretive, and for Frank Ankersmit the same was true of the historian, but Ankersmit complicated the issue by noting that interpretations are 'under-determined', because 'only an infinite number of interpretations could account for all the known data'. The entailment of this position is that anyone interested in accounting for the data must be hospitable, even welcoming, to more than simply his or her own interpretation. Or in his words, 'a maximum of clarity can only be obtained [by] a *proliferation* of historical interpretations and not by attempting to *reduce* their number'. This proliferation is one way to avoid what Hans Kellner describes as our tendency 'to eliminate rather than to entertain possibilities'. Geertz, were he still alive, might have termed Ankersmit's protocol 'thick interpretation' (Ankersmit 1994: 33, 72; Kellner 1989: 45).

Allan Megill's essay on grand narratives in history focuses more on theory than on interpretation, and concludes with a section entitled 'The Theory Postulate: Always Theorize'. But how do we theater historians make sense of such a requisite? Megill's premise is that we live in 'a world that no longer believes in a single History', but this is not so clear in the world of theater history, where fresh instances of the grand,

all-explaining narrative are still to be found. Megill does envisage ‘a greater attentiveness of historians to theory’, yet acknowledges that ‘there are different theories and different ways of being attentive to them’. Echoing Ankersmit, he suggests we approach our work ‘having a greater humility and reflexiveness concerning its own assumptions and conclusions’. In the same vein, Shannon Jackson urges us to ‘resist singularity’, by which she means ‘learning to value varieties of thinking that you do not share and (even more to the point) varieties of practice in which you do not excel’. Geertz would likely have recognized this as another way of saying ‘thick’ (Megill 1995: 172; Jackson 2004: 241).

We may call these arguments theorizing if we wish, or we may simply understand them as proposals for ways of proceeding. The terminology is irrelevant. But self-awareness seems to be part of the mix, much as it was for the economist J. M. Keynes when he remarked of his fellow economists (as Terry Eagleton has reminded us) that those who disliked theory, or claimed to get along better without it, were simply in the grip of an older theory.

IV

Even in the most austere scholarly report from the archives, the inventive faculty—selecting, pruning, editing, commenting, interpreting, delivering judgements—is in full play. [Thus] claims for historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator.

Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties*

A year after Schama’s remarks were published, David Perkins proposed that narrative history could not make use of the techniques and strategies of modernist and postmodernist fiction, because such techniques had been consciously developed ‘in opposition to traditional, linear narrative and closure’. In Perkins’s view they ‘problematize such narratives, expose them as mere artifice, deny their claim to be explanatory. And they do this on the basis of an interpretation of life that emphasizes the truth of incoherence and inexplicability.’ Perkins found it typical of postmodernist cultural criticism to emphasize ‘that historical reality is an array of particulars, heterogeneous and unstructurable’ (Perkins 1992: 48, 59).

But what Perkins found inappropriate for historical narrative, Hans Kellner found desirable, approvingly calling such strategies ‘crooked readings’, that is, readings that ‘unfocus the texts they examine in order to put into the foreground the constructed, rhetorical nature of the past, and to bring out the purposes, often hidden and unrecognized, in our retrospective creations’ (Kellner 1989: 7). Kellner described with disparaging amusement the common if mistaken belief—perhaps Perkins’s

belief—that the ‘first duty of the historian’ is to follow the ‘influential tradition of scholarship, which presumes (a) that there *is* a “story” out there waiting to be told, and (b) that this story can be told straight by an honest, industrious historian using the right methods’ (Kellner 1989, p. vii).

But the master narrative is no longer in fashion, as Kellner well knows; it has been called in question with increasing vigor in recent years by scholars in a variety of fields. The classical scholar Charles Martindale tells us, ‘there is nothing outside the discourses of history by which accounts of the past can be tested or checked. There is no independent access to historical “reality” outside the discourses which constitute it’ (Martindale 1993: 19–20). W. W. Greg was beginning to think along these lines a hundred years ago, when he told us there was ‘no such thing as a clearly defined historical field’, that ‘facts are linked to other facts in all directions, and investigation merely leads to further and yet further questions’ (Greg 1904–8, vol. ii, p. ix). The ‘further questions’, and our welcoming of them, still remain the key. The physicist Niels Bohr, rejecting essentialism, famously remarked in 1927 that physics was not about things but about the results of experiments. Perhaps theater history too will one day be less focused upon things and more upon the various ways of dealing with those things; not ‘Here’s my narrative’ but ‘What various narratives are potential here, and how can I do them all justice, even if I find some of them uncongenial?’

We will never know all we wish to know, we will never fill all the gaps in our information, and we will always have more questions. But those questions are a sign of health in our discipline, not a sign of inadequacy. Questions are always more important than answers; as Socrates well knew, anyone can come up with an answer. Coming up with the right question is far more valuable, for the right question keeps reminding us that there are other answers in play that may be as useful as the one we favor. ‘All historians know’—Nancy Partner risks a generalization here, but it’s a good one to conclude with—‘all historians know that history is no longer the discipline busily fulfilling its positivistic promise to tell it all as it really happened. And, in fact, that cultural moment, of naïve assertions about splicing together an entire, indubitable, objectively once-existing Past, was a very brief digression in history’s longer, more richly compromised life’ (Partner 1986: 117).

We have survived that digression, and are now experiencing what Herbert Blau calls ‘the swift accrual of history affecting theatre history’ (Blau 2004: 253). If this ‘accrual’ brings with it a heightened interest in methodological issues of the kind historians themselves see as important, then we should be pleased that we’re at such an interesting juncture in the development of our own discipline.

