

Performing the Archive.

A Report on the IFTR-Conference «Presenting the Theatrical Past» (Stockholm 2016)

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[T]he past is not that which vanishes at every second that passes, but rather that which presents itself in the present as a forceful absence, a set of references, signs, lines of forces, all traversing the body on stage, and defining the ground on where dance (all of us) stands.

André Lepecki

This year's annual conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) was hosted by Stockholm University in Sweden. Under the direction of Lena Hammergren, Rikard Hoogland, Erik Mattsson, Willmar Sauter and Meike Wagner from the Department of Culture and Aesthetics at Stockholm University the seven-day conference, held from June 12 to 18, 2016, was dedicated to questions of performance and history. It was titled 'Presenting the Theatrical Past. Interplays of Artefacts, Discourses and Practices' and addressed questions concerning 'our relationship to theatre history and the relation between past and present.'¹ In today's times of political, social and ecological crisis, with its gloomy forecasts, the subject of historical research feels as urgently meaningful as analysing the present or speculating about the future: What are the 'troubled pasts' coproducing the complex situations today?² What kind of 'hauntology' do we need to understand the ghostly relations between then and now? (Derrida 1994).

Dance-related topics and the perspective on body practices and corporeality took a central position at the conference. The recurrent issues of the discussions

were the ephemerality of (dance) performance and notation; questions of dance historiography and the status of sources and documents for historical research in relation to body knowledge; relations between tradition, institution, repertoire and training; the aging body in dance; and concepts of re-enactment, recreations or restagings.

Performance as Ephemeral Event

At the conference, located right on the campus, about 900 researchers from all over the world focused on critical perspectives on theatre and dance history in different formats, such as panels, working groups, roundtable discussions, a New Scholar's Forum and special events. The conference programme offered versatile approaches to theatre history spanning panels (partly organised by working groups) like 'Intermediality in Theatre and Performance', 'Arabic Theatre', 'Caribbean and African Theatre', 'Queer Futures', 'Performance and Religion', 'Music Theatre', 'Political Performance'. Some of these panels were explicitly historiographical, such as those arranged by the working group 'Theatre Historiography'. This collaborative group, with transnational faculty members including Mechele Leon, Nora Probst and Jo Robinson (current conveners of the group), was established in 1993 and held an open discussion workshop at the conference with short presentations discussing methods of theatre historical research.

In her introduction at the opening ceremony, where Jean Graham-Jones (president of the IFTR) also gave a warm welcome, Meike Wagner raised the



Keynote Gabriele Brandstetter. Photo: Erik Mattsson

leading questions of the conference: How do we deal with (theatre) history, what do we do with it? To what extent is historical research an exploration of the present? What methods can be used to (re)construct the theatrical past – can it ever be? Since its rise in the early 20th century, the discipline of theatre studies has been occupied with researching the relation between the more ‘sustaining’ materials like textual sources and the ephemeral event. Every performance unfolds transitory action; it is fleeting and is passed from one moment to another. As Peggy Phelan famously wrote

in 1993 in the context of performance art and media in the 20th century, ‘Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented (...) Performance’s being (...) becomes itself through disappearance’ (Phelan 1993, 7).

Writing Theatre History from the Peripheries

As researchers, we must deal with the consequences of this ‘disappearance’, but theatre’s past could be accessible via artefacts or historical objects, like archive materials, sites, venues, documents, costumes, in relation to their contexts, historical ideas and discourses (IFTR 2016, 4). Every theatre scholar is familiar with the ‘processes of assembling, choosing and interpreting the sources’, pulling the ‘many sources, many voices’ into a unified (hi)story (Hammergren 2004, 20). The IFTR conference reconsidered the status of sources and this process of ‘writing history’, following Hayden White’s idea that all narratives include interpretation (Carter 2004, 3). And Lena Hammergren, one of the conference’s organisers, had emphasised before that sources and their interpretation depend on their media availability and must be characterised as ‘social construction’ changing through time and with each use – there cannot be an objective truth (Hammergren 2004, 22). As usual and constitutive to IFTR conventions, the multitude of speakers from different continents and countries, from Iceland to India, provided multiple histories and heterogeneous contexts undermining any kind of ‘Western’ or Eurocentric canon. The conference opened up spaces for micro-histories and encounters. The papers introduced local and incoherent pasts with inner shifts and gaps of their own, historiography from the margins and peripheries. As one of many examples, in her paper ‘Mind the Gaps. Evidencing Performance and Performing Evidence in Oral Histories of Performance Art’, Heike Roms (Aberystwyth University, Wales) introduced a perspective on Cardiff’s very specific

history of performance art based on ethnological field studies (interpersonal exchanges and interviews). As another example, in his paper 'Memory, Rhetorics and Remembering in the Post Colony', Pedzisai Maezda (University of Cape Town, South Africa) analysed the traumatic political event of mass murder in Zimbabwe code-named Gukurahundi (1982–1987) in relation to the performative practices of its remembering that are performed and transmitted today considering practices of memorialisation through the annual public holiday known as Unity Day (22 December) and artistic interventions and counter-histories.

Bodies in Movement. The Persistence of Performative Acts

One of the major concerns of the conference's critical confrontation with historiography was to discuss how performative practices despite their ephemerality 'keep traditions alive or engage in re-enactments of theatre events and representations' (IFTR 2016, 4). How do body practices, rituals, trainings and everyday actions produce a transfer of knowledge beyond a textual one? In her seminal book on the relation between performance and history, Diane Taylor characterised this transfer of knowledge in 2003 as 'repertoire' or lived archive, a performative set of actions which produces knowledge by enacting memory.³ Performative acts (in oral or semi-oral to digital societies) usually are seen as ephemeral and nonreproducible, and therefore, they often have been neglected or despised in their political meaning or impact (Taylor 2003). Implicitly and explicitly revisiting Taylor's argument, the conference focused on these repeating acts and explored a 'persistence' of performing acts (Taylor 2003, XVII). It enabled participants to rethink the hierarchy or dominance between the more enduring text materials and the *act* focusing on the physical experience, corporeality and embodiment – and its meaning for theatre historical research. The restaging

of Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion – A Melodrama*, which was performed at the Riddarhuset Stockholm at the conference by a group of researchers and performers from Stockholm (Mark Tatlow, Laila Cathleen Neumann and João Luís Paixão, supported by Willmar Sauter), was one of the convention's highlights. It deeply demonstrated the benefits of bodily enactment for research. Performer João Luís Paixão had practiced the gestures and intonations of *Pygmalion* for months, considering historical image materials and instructions by Rousseau and constantly trying out with his own body what happens and what could have happened. This historically informed performance (HIP) again affected the research about Rousseau, and it enabled the audience to form an impression of the acting styles, practices of embodiment and the pace, rhythm and dramaturgical logic. In this practice as research, the historical and the contemporary bodies' can 'encounter': In her seminal book *Choreographing History* dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster proposes a kind of historiography that is departing from the physical experience and suggests a 'kinaesthetic empathy'⁴ with the past. This incorporated perspective was attained in many of the papers and presented research projects during the conference. They probed an empathy with bodies of the past. Bodies were not understood in an essentialist or ontological way but as procedural materialisations or sedimentations of practices. They themselves were thought and discussed to be in movement; construed and determined by their own cultural contexts, their techniques (in the sense of sociologist Marcel Mauss) and by the repetitive acts of gender, sexuality and identity (Judith Butler); as well as regulated by discourses, (hetero-)normative regulations and racial politics. Many of the papers reflected this in their explorations considering everyday practices, habits of clothing and relations to objects and architecture, as well as artistic practices of dance-technique, training and skilling. Bodies of the



Wiles at Drottningholm. Photo: Erik Mattsson

past and bodies of the present produce meaning in complex and multifaceted constellations which have to be considered in an incorporated historiography. The IFTR conference allowed its participants to rethink body concepts and to de-hierarchise the relation between textual and physically based historiographical approaches.

A very productive session for this interrogation with regard to dance were the meetings of the working group 'Choreography and Corporeality' (organised by Aoife McGrath, Philipa Rothfield and Lena Hamnergren), a platform for sharing research on dance, performance and the body, in an international context.⁵ The essays and discussions introduced specific body-related topics like liminality; Indian dance history; queer, black popular culture; dance and phenomenology; dance

and cognitive learning practices; reconstructions of Pina Bausch; and questions of habit and improvisation in dance. Further panels on dance and dance history reconsidered ballet as dominant narrative (Jean Lee, Goldsmiths University London) or new contexts that shed different light on the history of dance (e.g., the paper by Alexander Schwan, Free University Berlin) about the reperformances of works by Trisha Brown in museums, 'Redoing Postmodern Dance and Rewriting Dance History', or by Johanna Laakko (University of Helsinki) titled 'Sehr verehrte Frau Eckstein! Letters as Source Material in Dance History'.



Welcome sign. Photo: Erik Mattsson

performances in museum spaces, like the showing of collected works by Trisha Brown at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and is characterised by words combining the prefix ‘re-’: re-enactment, reperformance, restaging, recreation and so on.⁶ In her keynote, Brandstetter sensitised for the *mal d’archive* (in the sense of Jacques Derrida) in historiography and at the museum: What is found, what is presented, what becomes representative for the history of mankind, for the history of dance? What is the official (national, global, power-compliant) narrative of history, and what is excluded? ‘Who is afraid of representation?’, Brandstetter asked, quoting Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué. For example, the German Goethe Institute website, she explained, presents 50 pieces to represent contemporary German dance and implicitly and unintentionally claims canonical authority. In 2009, French choreographer Boris Charmatz created a different approach. He developed a ‘Museum in transition’ as a space for exchange and encounter. He transformed the Centre Choréographique National de Rennes et de Bretagne into the more open and neutral Musée de la Danse, where choreographers, dancers and audiences can interact with pieces from the past – a living archive. This nonhierarchical and nonrepresentative model of historiography is based on the physical encounter and on an archaeological exploration and recreation of movements from the past transferred to the present (body). The body as archive, as André Lepecki also has argued (Lepecki 2010) is a central metaphor for dancers; they seem to be interested in the ‘access routes’ to the past via the body, which is never just a body but a complex set of relations with history written into it; it is disciplined, trained and used in specific ways. What happens when this body dies, Brandstetter asked referring to a choreographic project by Deborah Hay about the transmittance of movement. Also, Brandstetter referred

Museum, Representation and the Body as Archive

The keynote presented at the opening ceremony by Gabriele Brandstetter, professor of dance studies from the Free University Berlin, unfolded a line of thought along tendencies of contemporary dance and choreography that influenced many of the discussions and the vocabulary in the following days. It was titled ‘The Museum in Transition’ and asked whether and how performing artists have affected historiography. It explored the relation between the museum (as an archival space for the representation of history) and performative acts. Brandstetter referred to the so-called *archival turn* in dance and performance art that approximately began with Marina Abramović’s exhibition and performance piece *The Biography* (1992/99), followed by a number of exhibitions and

to a work by Mette Ingvarsen: *69 Positions* (2014), in which the choreographer presents a guided tour through a performative exhibition about the history of performance art and dance with a focus on pieces concerned with nudity and sexuality. Ingvarsen displays source materials, such as photographs and a letter from Carolee Schneeman from a recent correspondence with her. But she also lets history flow through her body when she re-enacts fragments of the pieces herself (like the scene in Anne Halprin's *Parades as Changes* from 1965 where the performers undress in front of the audience), permanently commenting on what she is doing, letting oral history and anecdotes disrupt what the audience knows about performance history and allowing them to experience something in between past and present. Brandstetter defined these anecdotes as 'petite histoires' and as an alternative kind of historiography. To escape the *mal d'archive* and of representation, Brandstetter demanded a focus on the points of encounter, a micro-perspective on the micro-movements of exchange, a museum or historiography of transition. This also means reading historiographical traditions against the grain, minding the margins and peripheries by concentrating on anecdotes, which Reinhart Koselleck, Stephen Greenblatt and Joel Fineman have characterised as 'chance' or 'motivation rest', a spot, a blemish in history that can cross out and reorder the *grand récit* (coherent narrative) of the integrative, progressive historiography.

A Visit to Drottningholm Theatre: Kinaesthetic Encounters with the Past

The keynote and paper sessions were complemented by a rich variety of social activities, including a joint learning of a baroque social dance (led by music-theatre scholar Silvia Bier, University of Bayreuth) and different organised visits of historical venues in and around Stockholm, for example, tours to the

Theatrum Anatomicum in Uppsala, Gripsholm Castle and Strindberg's island, Kymmendö. Participants of the conference also were invited to visit curated and site-specific performances by Nikhil Chopra about drawing as a memory technique, a performance installation by Elisabeth Belgrano and Björn Ross with elements of baroque singing, and others. But the core, or 'heart', of the conference programme was a joint visit to the grounds of Drottningholm with castle, gardens and a recently renovated Baroque theatre outside the city of Stockholm. The historical building held its 250th anniversary this year. It has been a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage site since 1991 and is an astonishing example of historical theatrical architecture which is still in operation. Ballets and operas are still being performed there. It was built by Swedish autocrat of the European Enlightenment, King Gustav III, and it presented its first performance in 1766. It retains not only the original architectural shape (with an auditorium containing 454 seats in ascending rows) but also backdrops, stage machinery (for example, the effect of curling ocean waves by horizontally rotating blue-painted scrolls) and props. David Wiles, professor of Drama at the University of Exeter, presented a keynote in the midst of the scenography, illuminated by candelabra. He presented insights into the history and the use of the architecture in which there is being performed today and yet feels like a ghost from the past with a context of its own. Interwoven with a performance demonstration under the musical direction of Mark Tatlow with singer Laila Cathleen Neumann and actor João Luís Paixão again, Wiles asked: What is the use of historical research? He made palpable that the presence of the Drottningholm Court theatre is so 'powerful that work on the stage always feels awkward unless it engages with the unique environment' (IFTR 2016, 8). Then, this happened: Neumann presented a baroque style aria and a Händel cantata while engaging and interacting



Visit at Drottningholm. Photo: Erik Mattsson

with the scenography on different levels, trying out directions of the voice and kinaesthetic changes in posture and distance. Wiles pled for engaging in the historical 'otherness' and remained sceptical about the 'mythical goal of historical authenticity' (IFTR 2016, 8). 'We cannot replicate the past', he smiled, 'but we can experiment on the basis of different historical premises' (IFTR 2016, 8). In an extra panel the next day, Drottningholm was celebrated again, with Wiles and Marvin Carlson, Mark Franko and others. Here, the participants could take up the discussion about the 'recreation by experiment' and more general thoughts about the value of preserving aspects of the past for purposes of making theatre in the present and about the possible difficulty for us to think outside the parameters of modernism (IFTR 2016, 8).

The conference was an inspiring, challenging and rich – as well as a well-organised – event. It challenged participants to rethink and discuss questions about the relation between the past and present from a specific angle. It explored the

interactions between now and an unfinished then by interweaving theoretical and practical approaches. Or as the conference's title had anticipated, it played with these entanglements as 'presenting' could mean both presenting as displaying a perspective on the past and PRESENTing as again 'bringing into now'. This indicated the living archive of embodied practices and their endurance by repetition and reperformance. It clearly challenged a linear idea of time; the model of *past – present – future* became transformed into a circular or iterative concept of history: a 'theatre of repetition and recurrence'.⁷

Notes:

- 1 About the conference's concept, compare to the introduction in the Conference Programme, Stockholm University 2016, p. 4.
- 2 Compare Reinhold Görling: *Troubled Pasts – Transition and Repetition*, concept of the Master Programme Medienkulturanalyse at the Heinrich Heine-Universität Düsseldorf (<https://www.phil-fak.uni-duesseldorf.de/mka/>, accessed 09/09/2016).
- 3 Diane Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, London / New York: Routledge 2003, esp. pp. 16, 19, 20. 'Embodied performances have always played a central role in conserving memory and consolidating identities in literate, semi-literate, and digital societies.' Ibid., p. XVIII.
- 4 Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History*, Bloomington: Indiana UP 1995, p. 7. In her introduction, Foster asks how historians could 'consort with dead bodies' and how this affects or constitutes an alternative way of writing the bodies which are constantly writing and choreographing themselves, producing meaning. Ibid., p. 6, 8.
- 5 In September 2016, a publication will be released in this context: Thomas DeFrantz and Philipa Rothfield (Eds.), *Choreography and Corporeality: Relay in Motion*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2016.
- 6 Brandstetter aligns these practices of repetition with the delimitation of postmodernism and with the effects of postmigration by referring to an early article by Mark Franko from 1989 about the 'Repeatability, Reconstruction and Beyond' (in: *Theatre Journal* 41 (1) 1989, pp. 56–74) where he actively rethinks historical sources.
- 7 That was the title of the curated panel from the University of Leipzig about theatre and historicism in 19th century Europe by Patrick Primavesi, Micha Braun, Andrea Hensel and Günther Heeg; see also conference programme, p. 55.

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