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(Re)constructed Spaces for Early Modern Drama: Research in Practice

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This special issue concerns the joining and intertwining of practice and research in early drama. Undertaking such work brings us to a complicated intersection of disciplines and traditions, concerned variously with literary analysis, performance strategies, the materiality of space, and fleeting encounters with the past, which allow us to tell the story of the medieval and early modern stage. This special issue questions the nature of the relationship between practice and research, and asks how, between the gaps and the unknowns and the contradictions of surviving evidence, as well as the temporal distance between moderns and our forebears, the act of doing and making in the present enables us to develop informed understandings of the past. The essays presented here attempt to tease out such questions. As editors we did not wish to impose a single framework for engaging in this kind of work, but rather to bring together discussions of projects that investigate common problems across a wider range of periods and geography than is often the case. Thus we hope that what follows offers readers the chance to compare similarities and differences in methodology and interpretations, and explore the kinds of questions and claims practice-as-research (hereafter PaR) can ask and make about early drama.

The projects and performances explored in this special issue are drawn from a wide range of periods, companies and approaches. The essays take us from the medieval Mystery cycles of York and Beverley to the Scottish Court and late-sixteenth-century provincial guildhalls, from performances in spaces newly built to those staged in ruins and modern university halls. The scope is therefore unusual in breadth, covering a period that stretches from c.1199 to

1621, and situating what might be considered “mainstream” commercial performances, as might be found at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, alongside those developed from more esoteric projects. What soon becomes clear, however, is that there is a common and shared concern with the ways in which performance can be used not just as an end illustration of literary and historical criticism, but as an analytical tool and as a provocation. Furthermore, for the majority of our contributors, it is the dialogue between performance and performance space which becomes particularly resonant, anticipating more ambitious modes of research in practice. In this short introduction, therefore, we consider intersections between practice, research, and reconstructed and recovered early modern spaces, as well as the kinds of claim such practice might make.

(Re)construction

The desire to resituate early drama in the contexts of its original performance spaces has a long history. Since Edmond Malone wrote the first significant account of the Globe’s architecture in 1790, scholars and practitioners have recognized the potential a reconstructed theater might have, in the words of William Poel, “to obtain a more faithful representation of Shakespeare’s plays upon the stage” (qtd. in O’ Connor 77). From Poel’s early simulacra sets built for the Elizabethan Stage Society productions at the turn of the 20th century, to the range of replica playhouses constructed in the United States, Germany, Japan, and Australia, commercial enterprise has driven the construction of theaters in the Elizabethan mode. However, with the building of the Globe and Sam Wanamaker theaters in London and the Blackfriars at the American Shakespeare Center, the past twenty years have offered a flourishing of debate amongst researchers and practitioners concerning what we might learn about early playtexts, performance practices, and culture when drama is played out in reconstructed playhouses.¹

It is worth reflecting how initial cynicism towards the Globe project reminds us of the dangers of reconstruction. For many academics, an “authentically” “reconstructed” Globe is an unattainable goal and the reconstruction of early modern theatrical practice an inherently flawed activity. Creating an accurate and authentic version of the first Globe is an impossibility because the evidence does not survive and the analysis of extant evidence is always a subjective and interpretative exercise. As John Drakakis argues, “to engage in the business of reconstruction is to engage in a process of inevitable distortion” (14), while Martin White warns that a reconstruction risks presenting a false sense of correctness and of early modern reality (167). Furthermore, as James C. Bulman points out, even if it were possible to recreate accurately the physical conditions, the “material conditions of performance are not the same today as they were in 1600”; for example, “actors are differently trained” and modern “audiences bring vastly different assumptions with them about family, courtship, and social class as well as gender” (78). These critiques of the Globe project take us to the heart of the difficulty of the ways in which the present—in the form of audience, actors and culture—always haunts any reconstruction project. The reconstructed space inevitably exists in and is experienced through modernity. It is also, of course, only one factor in the moment of performance. However, these theoretical problems, we suggest, are part of the work such reconstructed spaces demand of us as scholars: it is necessary to pick apart and analyze the frameworks of time (present, modern, early modern, medieval) and the elements of performance (space, actor, audience) that inform reconstructed theatre. Writing about historical reenactments of the American and English Civil Wars, Rebecca Schneider makes a case for “cross-temporal slippage”; the possibility that “despite or perhaps because of the error-ridden mayhem of trying to touch the past, something other than the discrete ‘now’ of everyday life can be said to occasionally occur—or recur” (14). Modern productions

are not direct evidence for anything, but they unquestionably provide useful speculative starting points for the analysis of early drama.

Schneider's words encourage reflection upon the way that “reconstruction” offers itself as a process, rather than a finished thing. Where “replica” suggests a copy of an original (OED, “replica” n. 3)—now impossible to retrieve—and “simulacrum” a thing lacking substance or proper qualities (OED, “simulacrum” n. 2.a.), “reconstruction” is the process of rebuilding (OED, “reconstruction” n. 1.a.). The term does not necessarily demand replication, rather it allows and requires filling in the gaps, and it suggests that it is as much in the act of doing as in the finished article that we make discoveries. Early modern performance research thus becomes a kind of experiential archaeology. In this, we invoke one of the fundamental principles of PaR, where the act of rebuilding is itself another type of practice.

The Globe remains the focus of much of the work on reconstruction and its implications. However, in this special issue, we offer contributors the chance to move beyond a mainstream and well-studied project; to use the Globe as a springboard for exploring other, often overlooked, questions about early drama. In our first article, Clare Wright begins with “Globe performativity”—the dynamic and playful relationship between actor and audience at Shakespeare’s Globe—in order to challenge the ontological relationship between audience and play. In doing so she asks us to re-assess some of the silent assumptions about actor-audience and “real” world and “fictional” world that has dominated the critical paradigm of early drama, in part fueled by the Globe project. Next, Sally Barnden’s article on the Rose Bankside homes in on the problematic temporality of reconstructed spaces. Barnden examines the Globe’s unusual neighbor theatre, a studio space beside the excavated site of

Henslowe's sixteenth-century Rose, considering ideas of architectural mimicry (a criticism levelled at Wanamaker's project) and theatrical haunting. Sarah Dustagheer's article offers an analysis of the latest addition to the Globe project: the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, an "archetype" of a Jacobean indoor playhouse opened in 2014. Noting that the word "intimacy" has been frequently associated with this new playhouse, Dustagheer explores what theatrical intimacy means in terms of sensory experience and actor-audience interaction. However, in acknowledgment of the methodological problems of reconstruction, she also analyzes the place of this "Jacobean archetype" in London's contemporary theaterscape. While all three articles draw on existing work on reconstruction, we hope that together they introduce readers to some new avenues of thought and new voices emerging from this well-established area.

Research and Practice: towards Practice-as-Research?

Reconstructed buildings offer a stable, if imperfect, arena in which early drama can be explored. The practices and methodologies of such exploration may be shaped by such a building, but they cannot be generated by architecture alone: actors may use and respond to the architecture, but the moment-by-moment performance must be made by other means. This inevitably introduces the challenge of deploying modern, creative practice to illuminate the past. With three of our articles (Rycroft, Jones, Whipday and Jensen) addressing creative practice in their research, it behoves us to examine here what such practice can claim to achieve in a broader sense.

Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean offer a broad definition of research which draws on, engages with, and comprises creative practice, noting the multiple terms used for such work:

Creative work within the university environment is now often referred to as practice-led-research, practice-based-research, creative research or practice as research. These terminologies are a means to characterise the way in which practice can result in research insights, such as those that arise out of making a creative work and/or in the documentation and theorisation of that work (Smith and Dean 2).

Thus performance informs and shapes research. However, more challengingly, the practice and research relationship is one predicated, in Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson's words, on "imaginative uses of methods that trouble the boundaries between creative practice and critical analysis, between epistemology and ontology" (2). That together practice and research can actively "trouble" conventional wisdoms and assumptions is attractive; but it also suggests that the relationship is itself one which resists easy categorization.

The emergence of practice-as-research in early drama was driven by medieval theater scholars such as Neville Denny, Meg Twycross, John McKinnell, and John Marshall from the mid-1960s onwards, all of whom posed research questions only deemed answerable through practice.² These included the investigation of the role of rhetorical gesture in performance, for instance; or audience involvement in pageant wagon playing; the deployment of dramatic action in great hall or cathedral space; and a number of explorations into masking, costume, and scenery conducted through reconstructive research. Such experiments did not seek to offer conclusive answers, but rather help calibrate and ask a new set of questions. Similar experiments are not unfamiliar at the Globe: for example, Farah Karim-Cooper points out that experiments with stage make-up at the reconstructed Globe have "not necessarily answered [her] questions" about early modern cosmetics, but they have "helped to reshape [her] thinking and forced [her] to ask more focused questions about the practical application of

cosmetics during the Renaissance period” (68). For early modernists, the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project, which since the late 1970s has systematically expanded our horizons beyond London, has prompted projects including “Performing the Queen’s Men” (McMaster University, University of Toronto) and, most recently, “The Three Ladies of London in Context” (Ostovich et al.). For these, questions about preparation and performance of early modern drama are considered in the context of multiple performance spaces, and their methodologies attempt to address the challenges raised by Bulman above.

PaR in early drama has produced a variety of responses from academics, but most scholarship has been driven by the opportunity that moving away from the dominance of the printed text into a creative research practice invites. In such an approach, performance is privileged as a form of knowledge and the text is not necessarily (though it might be) the origin of the scholarly investigation. The emphasis is instead placed on the collaborative skills of theater—writing, acting, directing, designing, lighting, staging—to investigate the questions that arise from theater history. Performance-led researchers argue that theatrical techniques are as good, if not better, methodological keys with which to unlock texts that are theatrical in nature; while also insisting that viewing text-based scholarship as “non-creative” and performance-based scholarship as “non-academic” stymies the development of the field. While the relationship between performance and publication is complicated, it is still the case that many of the texts transmitted through either print or manuscript were originally performed.³ Therefore, many of the texts that survive from early modern theater are products of collaborations between writers, actors, and other stage personnel. Using the skills of contemporary theater practitioners would therefore seem a valid way of unpicking and understanding the theater of the past today.

The methodological danger lies in universalizing theater practice, however. The implication that the methods that we use to stage a text “now” were the same methods that were used “then” is profoundly problematic. On the other hand, if performance-based researchers are unable fully to reconstruct the theatrical worlds in which performances took place, so traditional textual scholarship is similarly hamstrung by its inability to completely historicize reading practices. And as presentists such as Terence Hawkes and Hugh Grady have suggested, historical gaps are not necessarily a problem if they instigate a fruitful dialogue between past and present. Arguably, performance and literary criticism collapse historical distance as much as they highlight its existence, especially when viewed through an archaeological lens as “a process of cultural production—a form of active apprehension, a particular sensibility to material traces—that takes the remains of the past and makes something out of them in the present” (Pearson 44).

Simon Jones’s assertion that PaR “flees textual practices” is perhaps a more vexed assertion with regard to medieval and early modern theater when frequently all that remains is the text (30). The theoretical frame of site-specificity provides a way of countering the authority of the text by rebalancing the elements of the theatrical matrix. Identifying two sets of architectures in site-specific performance, the host—or extant building—and the ghost—the temporary scenography brought to and overlaying this site—Cliff McLucas claims, “Within those two the performers are then guided into what they should do, because there are ways to move in all that stuff” (qtd. in McLucas and Pearson 221). While there is a danger of a spatial essentialism here, all of the essays collected in this volume assume that space helps to determine performance, and that performing within surviving historical constructs or reconstructed historical venues reveals much about how early drama communicated meaning.

The difference is centered in approaches that emphasize the word “-as” compared to those which emphasize the words “-based” or “-led,” indicating a secondary stage of investigation. One of the advantages of the former scenario is that there is no need to translate the theatrical findings into a recognizable academic form (an article, chapter, critical review, or monograph): the performance stands in and of itself as the culmination of the research process (Haseman 148-49). The disadvantage is that performance is still viewed warily by some universities or university departments as too fleeting, immeasurable, or radical a research outcome. Other means of concretizing what is seen as troublingly ephemeral emerge—films, archives, websites, blogs, minutes of production meetings, images of set and costume designs, performance documentation, post-show exhibitions and, in the UK, proof of “impact,” perhaps in the form of audience statistics, interviews, or public engagement events. While it is usually in researchers’ interests for projects to be documented for future reference—not least to continue the critical dialogue in which the performance participates—outside of the realms of theater and performance studies there frequently remains an assumption that performance itself is too insubstantial to be counted as a critical scholarly output in its own right. Hopefully the kinds of projects and performances considered in this volume will go some way to countering this suspicion, and towards promoting PaR as a valid form of scholarly encounter with the past.

Throughout this special issue, contributors use an array of terminology to describe their work or the work of others, from performance-as-research, practice-as-research, research-through-practice, and practice-based-research. Some of the newer incarnations of this terminology, such as performance-led research or research-led performance, have not been used by the authors, but are also used to define projects which privilege theatrical techniques in the scholarly investigation of dramatic texts. As editors, we have deliberately

not imposed a single term for the research methodologies invoked by contributors in the belief that, in this shifting field of early modern studies, each of these similar but subtly different terms indicates a balance of concerns, or a precise approach to the interaction between performance and writing, whether this is weighted towards text-into-performance, or to using performance to think through and around the text. The terms invoked are therefore individual to both particular scholars and particular projects. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that there is either a methodological tendency to see performance as the ultimate destination of the research—an attempt to capture and disseminate the research questions, uncertainties, and discoveries in a final piece of theater—or, more usually, of seeing performance as the first stage of discovering which questions to ask of dramatic texts; a way of contouring research concerns that will then usually be developed through further writing, reports, or other forms of critical reflection as a more durable means of dissemination. We would hope that, as the field develops, we will see more interchange and reciprocity between practice and research; that publication and performance can become mutually informative and generative; and that different projects can be perceived and understood in dialogue with one another.

This special issue is less concerned with joining the debates on definitions of practice-as or practice-based research—especially when such debates tend to reveal just how far these are “contested terms that resist close definition” (Piccini)—as it is with presenting a range of practical projects that have sought to explore types of performance currently under-represented in accounts of early modern PaR—from guildhall and outdoor playing, to the influence of medieval performance conventions on early modern practice, to contemporary performance in playhouses beyond the Globe. These projects use spaces to understand performance, but they also use performances to understand space—whether arenas of

monarchical power, religious devotion, mercantilism, or contemporary theatre. The term “reconstruction” has been applied with deliberate breadth across the volume to encompass a wide array of spaces: imagined or appropriated (Whipday and Jensen, Wright), rebuilt (Dustagheer, Rycroft, Seremet), surviving (Barnden, Jones, Rycroft), or altered or ruined (Barnden, Dustagheer, Jones, Seremet). A number of articles are concerned with the material conditions that affect performance, including the dimensions of or effects produced by reconstructed buildings (Dustagheer, Seremet) as well as how the architectural features of extant sites influence both reconstructed and modern commercial performance (Barnden, Dustagheer, Whipday and Jensen, Jones, Rycroft). While no claims are made that the research discoveries enabled through the PaR projects assembled here directly replicate the performances of the past, our contributors do assert that their experiments help to delineate the range of choices available to past performers and dramatists. They also insist that part of this delineation involves a historicized understanding of the seemingly self-evident words and concepts that are found in theater history—be it the slippage of the term “place” in early theatrical vocabulary, a fallacious distinction between “play worlds” and “real worlds,” or the anachronistic application of contemporary terminology to revived early modern texts (Dustagheer, Rycroft, Wright).

The use of the idea of “play worlds” and ‘real worlds’ highlights that several of our contributors are indebted to the work of Robert Weimann for a conceptual framework of space, and it is worth outlining his theories in this introduction so that the reader may refer back to them as necessary. Weimann’s initial conception of locus and platea appears in *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition* (1978), in which he draws on place and scaffold staging of the medieval era to define a spatial differential consisting of the platea, a “platform-like acting area,” and loci, “fixed, symbolic locations ... that tend to define a more

particular kind of action,” such as thrones (Popular Tradition 74). Thus while, broadly, the locus enables “a heightened level of mimetic representation and, perhaps, rudimentary elements of the illusion of actuality” (Popular Tradition 78), the platea serves as a conduit between audience and actor where the latter can directly engage the former, and also address other characters. It is where, for instance, in French miracle plays, the fool “speaks to soldiers, servants and beggars, and to the audience, while the serious or high-born persons in the play seem unaware of his existence” (Popular Tradition 78). As the quotation suggests, the spaces of locus and platea can be stratified along lines of class. As theatre moves into the Tudor era, the platea functions as a place where “lower characters” such as clowns, vices, and fools can “move about in a neutral area rubbing shoulders with the plebeian audience” (Popular Tradition 79).

Sometimes the division between locus and platea can be drawn rather absolutely by scholars when they mobilize it, and yet Weimann forwards his theory with tentativeness, writing that the “flexible dramaturgy” enabled by the interplay of these spaces was “complex and variable” making it “ultimately impossible to assign to platea and locus any consistent and exclusive mode of acting” (Popular Tradition 73, 79, 81). Nevertheless, his return to and further elaboration of locus and platea in *Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice* (2000) tends to reinscribe their essential difference, particularly in the fixed, regular playhouses of the early modern era where “the imaginary space in representation has absorbed and become near-identical with the site of performance” (*Author’s Pen* 186). If the locus has become more embedded in both the imaginative spaces of the text and the material space of performance, then the platea remains the open domain of “the marginal, the visceral, the liminal, the otherwise nonrepresentable” (*Author’s Pen* 196). Weimann writes that it “normally refused to submit to the pictorial mode of symbolizing, and thereby unifying, place; rather by assimilating thresholds between the imaginary world-in-the-play and the stage-as-stage, it

tended to preclude closure” (*Author’s Pen* 192). Critics of Weimann, such as Erika T. Lin, have questioned the extent to which his idea maps onto the layout of the early modern stage, questioning the upstage/downstage location of locus and platea given the stage geography of an audience arrayed on at least three sides of the playhouse (287-89). Nonetheless, the repeated reference made to Weimann’s scheme by contributors in this special issue demonstrates just how influential his work has become. Readers can find a more detailed exploration of how locus and platea relate to assumptions about illusion, verisimilitude, and representation in the first contribution to this special issue, by Clare Wright.

In order to generate a dialogue between diverse projects fundamentally concerned with space, the second half of the special issue collates three recent PaR projects alongside one another for readers to consider. In our fourth article, Eleanor Rycroft reflects on “Staging the Henrician Court,” which staged John Heywood’s *The Play of the Weather* at Hampton Court Palace, and “Staging and Representing the Scottish Renaissance Court,” which staged Sir David Lyndsay’s *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* at Linlithgow Palace. Rycroft draws on both of these performances in order to examine theories of place and space in relation to historic sites and sixteenth-century drama. Next, Oliver Jones is similarly engaged in questions of site. His article argues that Stratford Guildhall, and similar buildings throughout the country, offer a unique resource for historians and practitioners of early modern drama, setting out evidence from his staging of extract from the Queen’s Men’s *The Troublesome Reign of King John*. In our final article, Emma Whipday and Freyja Cox Jensen examine their staging of a “lost” play, “*The Tragedy of Merry*,” excerpted from an existing Rose play. Whipday and Jensen thus used performance to navigate the complexities of multiple texts and “lost” plays, and argue that their re-imagining of an apparently forgotten play enables a fresh perspective on questions of early modern genre and theatrical practice.

The six articles that—along with Molly Seremet’s review of the American Shakespeare Center—comprise this special issue, then, attempt to chart the state of the field in research where performance, playhouses and practice are central to the conversation. This introduction has begun the discussion of the meaning, value and purpose of complex terms such as “reconstruction” and “PaR”: what follows continues this discussion in a variety of different ways, and demonstrates the productivity, challenges, and excitement of doing so.

Notes

¹ Reflections on the Globe, which opened in 1997, include (in approximate chronological order) Egan, Kiernan, Worthen, Silverstone, Conkie, Gurr, Carson and Karim-Cooper, and Falocco. The American Shakespeare Center’s Blackfriars playhouse has received attention from Menzer, Cohen, Weingust and Lenhardt.

² The full extent of work is too extensive to detail here, but key work by the Poculi Ludique Societas in Toronto can be found at groups.chass.utoronto.ca/plspls/front-page/, while a rich repository of projects led by Meg Twycross can be found at her “Cabinet of Curiosities” website at meg-twycross.co.uk/.

³ For a useful challenge to this argument, see Dillon.

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