

A HISTORY OF A THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE HISTORIOGRAPHIC PROJECT

Interview with Tracy C. Davis and Peter W. Marx

Pavel Drábek

The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography (Routledge, 2020) was published over five years ago. On the occasion of the special issue of *Divadelní revue* (*Theatre Revue*), Pavel Drábek has interviewed the *Companion*'s general editors, Tracy C. Davis and Peter W. Marx, and asked them to reflect on the volume, its agenda, and its impact.



prof. Tracy C. Davis, Ph.D. (Barber Professor of Performing Arts, Northwestern University) specializes in the historiography and methodologies of TaPS research, 19th-century theatre history, economics and business history of theatre, performance theory, and gender and theatre. Her most recent book, *The Cambridge Guide to Mixed Methods Research for Theatre and Performance Studies* (edited with Paul Rae), won ATHE's Edited Works Award, ADSA's Joanne Tompkins Prize for Excellence in Editing, and TaPRA's Special Mention Award for an Edited Collection.



prof. Dr. Peter W. Marx holds the professorial Chair for Media and Theatre Studies at the University of Cologne. He is also director of the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung Cologne. His focus of research is theatre historiography, Shakespeare in Performance and the formation of theatre as a cultural practice in the Early Modern Period. In 2024, *Early Modern Media Culture* has appeared with Cambridge UP and the English translation of his book *Max Reinhardt: From Bourgeois Art to Metropolitan Culture* appeared with Northwestern University Press.

First, what had been your motivation in starting the book project almost 10 years ago? Why did you feel the need for such an expansive and, in many ways, radical rethinking of theatre and performance historiography?

Peter W. Marx (PWM): The project started about ten years ago with a proposal from Routledge to produce a volume of theatre history, and we both felt that the world doesn't need another history in one volume, but that this was a moment in time when it was worth rethinking some of the categories by which we write theatre history and try to open the field in other directions. So to me one of the most inspiring, and also lasting, consequences of that project was to build not only a group of authors for the different chapters but also a group of contributing editors with whom we sat together repeatedly to get a sense of what are the most urgent questions – or what do we feel are the next coming questions. So it's less trying to register fulfilled achievements but rather trying to project further where the field would go. And on a more personal note, coming from the German background, I felt that, on the one hand, the question of the social and cultural position of theatre and performance, especially in its historical dimensions, needs some revision and rethinking. In particular, we recognized the limitations of a narrow and poststructurally inspired view of T&P; instead we regarded T&P as totally different, as a form of media (and mediating) representation.

Tracy C. Davis (TCD): Peter gives a very elegant answer, and mine is both less elegant and on a longer time scale. Some of the generative impetus for this happened at the Stockholm IFTR in 2016, because that's when Routledge approached us, or around that time. So we were discussing it then. And I was on the first of several spring terms staying at the TWS and having opportunities to explore potential collaborations with Peter. That afforded us the pleasure of thinking together and the pleasure of, frankly, grumbling together and having thought partners who were similarly minded. At first, however, we didn't know what the common ground was, and needed to find it. Just the fact of being in Stockholm took me back to the previous Stockholm IFTR, in 1989, for the first convening of the historiography working group. We didn't really know it was a working group at that time – it was a new concept for the IFTR – but it was a convening in a new format. I remember feeling excited about the prospect of being in a format to discuss theatre historiography because there was barely any theatre historiography to read at that time. But over the years, as I attended sporadically, I kept being reminded that few participants were really getting at theatre historiography. They were writing on theatre history, conflating theatre history with historiography, and not making what I consider to be the extra steps to theorize their practice and relate it to other developments in historical research. I was always excited in reading Peter's work because he did take the extra steps. So there we were, in the mid-2010 s, and we each had networks of colleagues whom we thought were primed to be additional thought partners. We started to brainstorm about how to bring people together. We were thinking not only about the advantage of bringing people together in one volume but what comes from face-to-face conversations that can empower and liberate thought while significantly advancing insights. That just wasn't happening with conferences' 90-minute panels.

I could say more about why we think advancing conversations about theatre historiography is important. By the mid-2010 s, we were pretty clear as a field about what the impact of performance studies has been in relation to theatre history, and in relation to historical inquiry more broadly, and looking for ways to reckon with that. By 2016 I felt that both in North America and in Europe we were pretty much past the „turf wars“ between theatre studies and performance studies.

PWM: I remember, in 2016, this was the moment when you were in the process of completing the Bloomsbury *Cultural History of Theatre* 5-volume set, co-edited with Christopher Balme. I think that was a very interesting project because it honoured a certain pattern that the Cultural History of [whatever] series offer, but I remember that Chris and you had given quite a lot of thought to what it means to write „cultural history.“¹ I think that having this project in the bag, or just coming out of that project also inspired the turn to the more methodological, categorical questions. It's also worth mentioning that this was a major collaborative project that the two of you have just organised and orchestrated, but this contributed to the question of what is next and where do we go from here.

TCD: Thanks for that reminder; that,s really apt. Chris and I had to work with the publisher,s constraints about temporality and there was no way of getting around it. Yet, in another sense, Bloomsbury gave licence, indicating „OK, do whatever you want with that.“ We had come to a fairly easy consensus after several rounds of debate about what categories we thought the field was working with. Yet that didn,t really include what we are now configuring as Critical Media History. So it,s as if everything but media was handled in a summative way in that series. Because it covered every period from the classical times to the present, it was a way to see what colleagues very broadly were positing and also how the cutting edge was constituted. And then Peter and I could think: okay, what else?

I would like to highlight an important point you made. Routledge approached you saying: „We would like another history“. But you contradicted: „No. What we would like now is the historiography.“ That's an important shift, from „we are writing a narrative, a history“ to „we are now reflecting on how we approach history.“ And you decided to invite a group of thinking partners – or „grumbling partners,“ as you called it – to meet in a series of seminars. What once used to be the writing of a monological historical narrative became a collective thinking process, at least in part. How does this dialogic mode of working change or re-define the practice of history?

PWM: I've been thinking a lot about this over the last one and a half years. This project really came out of a long-standing collaboration between Tracy and myself. One aspect was the experience with the [sic!] Summer Institute that we conducted annually in Cologne 2013–2019; international students would sit with us around a table, challenging every pedagogical concept we had developed over the past ten years. This experience, I think, was also a privileged moment in time when Tracy could come over to Germany as a Humboldt awardee; when Northwestern University and the University of Cologne made a serious investment to the summer school. I'm mentioning this because it's something that is significantly threatened by contemporary political and financial circumstances. Also, in 2016, we went to New Delhi for a joint workshop at the Jawaharlal Nehru University.

All these experiences lent intellectual momentum: we felt that this was no longer the time when the omniscient armchair scholar could declare their wisdom *ex cathedra*, but rather a moment that called for dialogic situations where a genuine

1 See Christopher Balme and Tracy C. Davis, „A Cultural History of Theatre: A Prospectus,“ *Theatre Survey* 56.3 (2015): 1–20; and „A Cultural History of Theatre: A Desideratum,“ *Theatre Survey* 57.3 (2016): 459–70.

effort to listen to different voices and different opinions was needed. In the course of the process we were also able to organise together in Cologne the Theater Without Borders conference, so there were truly a lot of colleagues involved. Some of them don't appear in the volume but their voices and arguments and what they brought to the table had a lasting impact on the *Companion* for sure.

I am saying this because I feel that since 2020 the academic landscape has so dramatically changed its centres of gravity that I am sometimes afraid that this might have been a historical moment that is about to close if we don't make an effort to keep these channels and these collaborative forms of dialogue and encounter open.

I remember our first meeting in Evanston when we spent three days overlooking the frozen Lake Michigan tossing truly wild ideas around about where theatre and performance might go. I think this was productive because we didn't try to make an account of the achievements but rather to explore the intellectual space where the questions of theatre and performance could lead us.

TCD: I can't remember anymore what prompt we had for the meeting over the frozen lake –

I believe it was categories. I remember reflecting at length on periodization and why it matters. I eventually talked myself out of it, concluding that we need to be time-conscious but not prescriptive about dividing material by historic periods. Weren't you presenting on the history as a story of changes?

PWM: I remember giving a paper on cross-pollination and on questions of how different cultures interact, attempting to think differently than the more conventional inter- and transcultural relations. And if I look at the chapter on the history of changes that I eventually contributed to the volume, it has a very different focus and outline. But, still, I can see how it was inspired by these early provocations to think differently about cultural interactions.

TCD: We started with categories that Thomas Postlewait, in particular, had been exercising: change, continuity, periodicity, exchange, interaction across space, how do ideas move, etc. And in a sense we were rejecting theatre and performance historiography as a matter of a history of ideas in favour of a history of practices. Because it's practices by which this can be traced. Also, we were trying to reckon with the very real issue of lacunae (of evidence, of continuities) in most theatre and performance history. Sometimes transculturalism is posited to address the impossibility of tracing consistency within one locus or culture; when we can identify transmission because a practice shows up somewhere new, we can theorise back to points of contact and exchange. That happened on a very large timescale and not necessarily on a human timescale, but through thinking about other, object-based performances – such as the now famous conversation about *do rocks perform?* – which Margaret Werry instigated for us and which was a fascinating moment of division across the group of advisory editors. That stuck with us and I think and hope everybody came out of it challenged about what they had gone into it with. Then there was another round of reflection regarding what we wanted to commission for the book. Basically, we were trying to figure out, as an editorial board, what were the right questions for the project. The best questions to be posing are not always the recognizable categories: that is, not the categories we'd just been using up until this point, such as the categories in the *Cultural History* series. And then, of course, there was the question of who to commission to write. That was the process where we wanted to work extensively with the editorial board.

I think many other collections on theatre historiography were much more closed conversations, as if asking „what do we think we know“ rather than „what do we think we might be able to broach?“

I remember that heated discussion with Margaret Werry about whether rocks perform and how they do it, but drawing also on what you've just said, I believe that was the turning point when we, as a collective, bridged the gap between theatre history and performance studies. Until that point, it seems to me, much of the misunderstanding had been in the terms and terminology rather than necessarily in the matter itself. Margaret eventually wrote a fantastic chapter for the *Companion* that still sticks to the idea that rocks (and other objects) perform, and she did so in a very convincing as well as in an „ecumenical“ way that does not only cater to performance studies. That's at least how I understood the process we went through at the time.

TCD: Margaret's insight came from an entirely distinct episteme of knowledge, which is Indigenous, rather than the academic post-Enlightenment thought that the rest of us were coming from. I think that in the ensuing decade we've seen more impact of Indigenous epistemes in higher education, at least certainly in North America. I hope we'll feel those impacts more and more as we go forward because they profoundly challenge not just ideas of kinship but what the consequences are of kinship and ecology in the transmission and obligations towards forms of understanding. This acknowledges that performance is not just a category to think about and with, but that it is absolutely indispensable and integral to that experience.

PWM: Perhaps this is just to feed our joint nostalgia: What I found very productive about the process – although it was occasionally a little bit painful – was that, eventually, we did not try to smooth out the differences between the various approaches. I have three cases in point.

One of our colleagues never wrote a chapter although he was probably one who was most provoked by the performing rocks, and I remember seeing him after a long night, and probably after various phone conversations, as he described, with his wife and his daughter, who were on the side of the performing rocks, it seems. I also remember that another very dear colleague wrote a contribution that was so controversial that we didn't include it in the volume because she was, in a very artistic way, providing an intellectual collage. So these are the two cases that are not in the volume. And, thirdly, our discussion about Vicki Ann Cremona and Mahmoud Mejri's contribution on theatre and modernization in Tunisia. Our first response was that this essay seemed to do less to obviously address categorical and methodological questions, but Vicki made a very convincing point that, in a postcolonial world, there are different needs and different requests for writing history, and it also is a part of a social and cultural acknowledgement. So we went through quite a learning curve during this process – at least I did – of not trying to provide the next, high-polished academic super-system but rather work with a bricolage of different perspectives that don't entirely add up to a harmonious, joint theory at the end.

TCD: I think it's absolutely true that as editors – and I hope, as editors *and* the editorial board² – we were learning constantly through this process. We were not imposing

2 The editorial board, or contributing editors, were Leo Cabranes-Grant, Pavel Drábek, Robert Henke, Odoi Johnson, Heike Roms, Liz Son, and Margaret Werry.

a paradigm but we were exploring the possibilities of multiple and contrasting paradigms of historiographic work. That process took Peter and myself to insights that we subsequently decided to keep developing. In writing the introduction to the *Companion* we were trying to make sense of the panoply of contributions in the sense of „Where are we now?“, „What can be next?“, and „What are the lessons learned out of this?“

How did you approach the individual contributors and how did you commission them? What was your process of gathering that collective?

PWM: As with the several meetings with the contributing editors, we also had a series of three chamber conferences (in Seattle, Santa Barbara, and Cologne). The choice of the contributors came out of the discussions with the contributing editors (when we were looking for as many different perspectives as possible), and commissions grew out of those discussions. But what makes the volume so special is that we were able to gather almost all of the authors at one or another occasion around one table to read and discuss early drafts of their chapters. I think it's this very slow process of cooking up ideas that makes the *Companion* so rare. I can barely think of any author who finished their chapter in line with the first draft that they brought to the chamber conference. It also has to do with understanding the networks – be it of learned societies like the IFTR; be it of initiatives like Theater Without Borders; be it the Summer School – as occasions for genuine encounters and probing dialogues. We partly carried this to the symposia with the contributing editors and the chamber conferences with authors, but it also informed the way we approached the authors, i.e. not just by giving them a prompt and asking them for X-thousand words on A, B or C, but truly developing their questions, and sometimes even turning initial ideas, through the course of the joint discussion, into something rather different than what they had been in the first place.

TCD: That's a perfect way to put it. It meant that it wasn't just a dialogue between the two of us as editors with a given contributor, but contributors were responding to each other. In this case, more cooks adding to the broth put more ideas in play, and it was genuinely generative.

PWM: Sometimes it also helped authors' discovery. I remember more than one such discussion. For example, when we were discussing Sharon Aronson-Lehavi's piece on the visual archive of Rina Yerushalmi, someone said: „I never thought of VHS as a different medium [than digital], and this is super interesting because it's not just another way of audiovisual recording.“ And this became the central argument to Sharon's chapter. I believe that's something we haven't seen at other points in our field. I think it speaks to the virtue of meeting, discussing, and properly listening to each other rather than presenting „results.“

It seems to me that what you called the shift from a history of ideas to a history of practices – but also the attention paid to the *medium*, eventually formulated as Critical Media History – is also a way of listening to the rocks or to elements that previous categories – which were very clearly rationalist, or post-Enlightenment, as you called it – simply ignored. Peter, this is also in line with our continuing discussion about Amitav Ghosh and his cultural historical work that pays attention to non-human agency. Would you say that this is a step that theatre studies are making towards performance studies – or perhaps towards anthropology? As you said, Tracy, in the intervening years, there has been much more attention paid to these non-human categories and we could think of such works as Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* and similar developments in ecology, anthropology, and other disciplines that acknowledge non-human agency in defining human environment and society.

TCD: We were working on this volume at the moment of confluence of interesting object-oriented ontologies, affect theory, genealogy, and the decentering of humanistic analysis toward a more ecologically based paradigm. And in so doing I wouldn't say that we ended up anywhere closer to anthropology, but rather to Baz Kershaw's later work.

Around the time the book was published, or perhaps just before it was out, I worked on a small symposium in Malaysia with another Cologne-based Humboldt Fellow and Berlin-based Jonas Tinius, both anthropologists, where we tried to restart the conversations between anthropology and performance studies. We worked for years and years to pick the right people whom we thought would be open to this, and yet at the symposium we realised that anthropologists had their own version of performance that they wanted to stick with and they really didn't care what the broader field of performance studies had developed since the 1980 s. Basically, we were (still) learning from them but they weren't learning from us. A few of us – by which I mean Jonas Tinius, Paul Rae and myself – came away realising that so much time had passed since the 1970 s and 80 s moment of intersection between Victor Turner and performance studies – as performance studies was emerging – that we didn't need to rekindle anything; that in fact we had our own methods, we had our own pantheon of theorists, and that that kind of disciplinary dependency was not what we needed to go back to. Instead, we realised we needed to think about the consequences of this confluence, and to think about it in historical ways, because when you add history into the mix the complications of researching performance anthropology and ethnography are considerably more interesting than being able to do, say, in-person observation-based, participant observation-based, or autoethnographic-based research. More interesting, that is, at least to me. The problems of sources and interpretability are tremendously complicated.

We included the anthropological paradigms in the *Companion* but then we really wanted to think about historical consequentiality. I don't think we need to stress about what is performance studies and what is theatre studies but rather what are historical studies – and what does the challenge of researching something historically present to the present about the past.

What particularly interests me in theatre and performance historiography is the histories of what you, Tracy, called „setasidedness,” or the histories of the propositional rather than histories of facts. It’s not even histories of possibilities but of enacted, ludic, playful, potential, propositional realities, rather than of something that has a substantive basis.

TCD: That’s what is so special and distinct about performance research: the thing we are researching is propositional but it also has a social, transactional element to it – of the people, or the people and objects, or the rocks or whatever make and constitute it. And that is not a set of circumstances that pertains to any other kind of history, as far as I know. So it is the most complicated kind of history I can think of – apart from, perhaps, extraterrestrial geology, where you can’t go and look...yet. (*Laughter*)
PWM: But they still have the rock at least somewhere and they know what they would do with it...

Unless it’s been swallowed by some black hole or other and doesn’t exist anymore... You both mentioned the futuristic, forward-looking aspect of the *Companion*: looking at what might come next, what the possible developments are in the field, or what the field would look like and where it would go in the future. Have your expectations come true in the intervening time, or were these some kind of self-fulfilling prophecies in that the questioning was also setting the agenda? Or, in other words, how do you see the *Companion’s* agenda developing? How has it aged and how has it influenced your own work?

PWM: I would like to share two observations on this because in hindsight it’s interesting that Tracy and I have been working during this period on larger monographic projects – Tracy working on the Amelia and Frederick Chesson diaries, published as *Liberal Lives and Activist Repertoires: Political Performance and Victorian Social Reform* (Cambridge, 2023), and I was finishing the book on the reception of *Hamlet* in the Germanies, published as *Hamlets Reise nach Deutschland: Eine Kulturgeschichte* (Berlin, 2018).³ To me it always felt that these more abstract and theoretical observations had their counterparts in the very practical scholarly work that we were conducting simultaneously. And that helped in not turning the *Companion* into a „messianic” project – I would contradict that attribution because our project does not stop with the rhetorical claim to bring the future. But rather, it came out of a process that, for both Tracy and myself, had to do with working with archives, with the sense of what is left and what is not even considered for preservation, and where certain notions of theatre and performance are not complicated enough when speaking about the cultural position.

And here is an interesting glitch in the translation because the word for cultural history, *Kulturgeschichte*, is a very evocative, broad concept that is more or less lost in the English translation. Perhaps this also helps explain the relation to anthropology because Critical Media History is, in this stubborn European sense, a project of *Kulturgeschichte* in the broadest sense of the word. It has become clearer and clearer to me only in hindsight that such concepts as the *collective imaginary* – which is positioned in social life and which gains a *Sitz im Leben* through performance and theatre – are a centre of reflection that makes theatre and performance history so interesting but also so difficult.

3 Reviewed by Pavel Drábek in *Theatralia* 24 (2021): 2. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2021-2-12>.

That also prevents T&P from becoming another niche of general history. Critical Media History studies how societies project images of the world and of themselves, and then act accordingly. And that is also what makes the project so fascinating and so complicated.

TCD: At the Summer Institute in Cologne we had an annual theme, the first of which was „Imagination.“ We would agree on the theme and we would then have a year to determine the students’ readings. In Cologne, we’d have a week or two to discuss the work with students—and then see what we made of what they made of it. Essentially, we were trying out categories. Where I have arrived is that rather than the intellectual project of establishing different kinds of history to match different art forms – musicology, art history, theatre history – we stubbornly thought about performance in history. We’re now refocussing the centrality of performance, so instead of performance being entertainment, ephemeral or incidental, we’ve used scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt to put it at the centre of life and at the centre of societies. Nevertheless, archives don’t always help us locate this centre: we have to think with many kinds of archival remnants to recognize how performance is a way that societies not only communicate to themselves but how it also does the work of empire, of resistance to empire, of cultural blending, and of transitioning across a longer period of time in the way that there is the as yet unending chronology of domination and synthesis. Performance is a way to predicate how that works.

This for me was a really important intellectual turning in the succession of topics.

Maybe one has to have a really good background in history – or of some other discipline – to be able to recognize how performance works in this way but it not only profoundly changes the ontology of histories but also recognizes how many kinds of historians keep turning to performance.

Just to add one more thing on that point: because the Summer Institute met at an archive, we kept trying to get the students to work with archival materials in the ways we were collectively fostering, but that kept failing. Time after time after time, that kept failing. And we kept asking each other: why did that fail again? And that was part of our learning curve.

Have you come up with a tentative answer why it kept failing?

TCD: Yes, and I think that is the premise we are now working with and are calling Critical Media History. Basically, if we can use the twenty-first-century mindset about media and mediation as a way to recognize patterning in the past – that in human culture there are historically specific forms of media that are dominant or recessive, but they carry certain kinds of information and that they utilize certain techniques and practices – we believe that this will help us reflect on where and how to locate performance. We believe this is a way to predicate historical inquiry and to understand historically the many different people from very different backgrounds working in this way. Media and mediation help make patterns of thought and activity recognizable. So the *media* part of the name Critical Media History insists that performance is one of these media.

PWM: Just to embellish on that argument: Tracy’s recurring provocation – which is more than a beautiful rhetorical figure – is the question about our „superpower“ as theatre scholars. I think that’s an important question because it makes clear that what we are dealing with is not just a facet of the larger history of events, of political events or structures, but to point at the importance of these small processes of performance-making in which these ideas, concepts and narratives are implemented or generated. That is to show how cultures create an image of the world according to which they act.

This encompasses another very interesting fact – which probably has to do with some of the students' reaction. We came to realize that Critical Media History requires the skills of formalist analysis. One needs to be able to be very specific with one's sources, with the performance one is trying to talk about – and not just implement large general ideas about gender, class, social development, peace, etc. Accounting for this is genuinely one of the superpowers: that dealing with the ambiguity, the pedestrianness, and the material specificity of performance really helps us to see how societies work with ideas; how they create the *Sitz im Leben*; and how debated and controversial this can be within a culture. Working this way may sometimes be seen as unfashionable, for it combines the discussion of large ideas with very specific and microscopic small steps. As Tracy said, it's not an accident that this project met so often in archives and so often went to specific resources and objects. As historians, this is what we can contribute to the larger discourse about history, offering a much clearer sense how certain things developed and how to account for them *as performance*. This is how, in Tracy's work, the diary of an almost forgotten English journalist [Amelia Chesson] turns into a case study on the development of activism in the nineteenth century, on the idea of the public sphere that exists between the theatre, the political arena and the private home, and how practices of performance evaluating pervade lives.

And if I may add a footnote on the term *media* – and I am saying this as someone who is teaching in a department that is *of media and theatre*. In the theoretical discourse we have become very comfortable with there is an almost ontological distinction between performance and media as being completely separate. The entire discourse about intermediality gains a lot of momentum when it comes to this clear-cut dichotomy. In contrast, what we are pleading for is to complicate this distinction by considering performance as one of the media through which societies work. This gives a completely different picture from what conventional histories try to draw. On a more substantial level, we get to the point where we can question evolutionary or teleological logics of historical narratives. In the end I would hope this allows for attentiveness to a polyphony of different voices and of different experiences that are usually cut out or tuned down by the *grand récits* of history that we are so often confronted with.

As far as I remember, the notion of *Presentism* never clearly registered in our discussions. But it probably begs the question how Critical Media History relates or comes to term with Presentism. From what I am hearing the critical study of history through media is less a way of writing history but it uses the concept of media as a catalyst to understand how people historically worked with and thought with the specific „media“ they had at their disposal. That seems to be a wildly different approach to the Presentist position of using (admittedly present-day) thoughts about historical realities. Is that your understanding? How would you handle the two approaches that appear to be in the same territory?

TCD: I think that the key category for us in working this through has been *repertoires*. Instead of just thinking of repertoires existing, say, in a theatre company, across a culture, or as a way for cultures to communicate with each other and disseminate forms and genres, we've also recognized that repertoires also exist in general populations. Repertoires are forms of knowledge that are fairly widely dispersed, but they can be highly localized as well, and they are what make performance intelligible. Imagine there is a Venn diagram showing the overlap between the repertoires of a given set of artists and the repertoires of a given reception community. That overlap provides for

mutual intelligibility. Neither artists nor general reception communities have a horizon of understanding that is limited to theatrical performance; they are also knowledgeable about other kinds of performance as well as other kinds of media, whether it's painting on the walls of a cave, or printed books, or billboards on the street, or video games. (I've intentionally given examples that cover a broad span of history.) The producers of these other media are also conscious of what's happening in theatre and performance, to some degree, and will work with the free market of ideas – even once legal copyright is a reality, they work with this free market of ideas recombinatively. And it's this recombination that can lead to historical traces – sometimes objects, discourses, scripts, or stories, and sometimes spatial arrangements – that provide a theatre and performance historian with the opportunity to do the formalist work (often in a structuralist manner) that gets us away from genius-based theatre history and company-based theatre history that have dominated for so long, and instead understand teleologies of social organization based on this kind of circulation.

It's not just a history-from-below idea because it's below, above, sideways – it's multidirectional – about performance as knowledge.

This is not dissimilar from Jan Mukařovský's theory of aesthetic function, norm and value as social facts. Mukařovský builds on Otakar Zich and his assertion of aesthetic education, without which we would lack the repertoires necessary to understand performance.

TCD: Yes, but with Critical Media History we assume that every echelon of society has an aesthetic education, though not the same one. This implies a free-for-all rather than a hierarchy of aesthetics. If we think about early modern performances, it's really evident.

PWM: The direction of our discussion of Critical Media History also responds to a frustration one can easily have with media studies. So, for instance, concepts like *remediation*, which propose to cover such aspects as anachronism or obsolescence, still operate on the assumption that realism is the inner logic of any form of representation. Whereas the approach we are suggesting offers genuine space for the fantastic, for different forms of presentation, as well as for different forms of reading and understanding. Instead of assuming that people were tricked into believing something they were shown or took it for reality, our approach also embraces a much more playful element, applying different grammars to make sense of what we see. This volatility for producers as well as for recipients genuinely helps to deconstruct certain power hierarchies that are otherwise so often wired into these historical models. I believe this helps with the historical perspective, but it also helps with an understanding of different cultural logics coexisting at the same time. I deliberately try to avoid the term *decolonization* because that's too narrow a concept, but in this case it helps to hone attentiveness towards different forms of producing and receiving forms of representation.

I would add – and this is not a contradiction, Tracy, just an addition: the question of legibility is as fascinating as the question of failure – because our approach makes the claim that we also can read the failure of performances as something that is very symptomatic in the conflict of different repertoires, at the same time. I think this is a very interesting potential because it also makes a genuine contribution to the discussion of media.

So far I've focused mainly on how Critical Media History enriches the discussion of theatre and performance, but I would argue it also makes a very innovative contribution to how we discuss media and how we read them.

TCD: Failure is highly informative: it's very interesting when historians ask „Why did it fail?“

Peter mentioned volatility: volatility is a very different way of predicating the category that had been so prominent, and remains so, which is *innovation*. I maintain that true innovation is extremely rare. It's like lightning striking three times in the same place. Innovation is not the category that I find constructive. I started off as a historian of Modernism, so I was supposed to be interested in innovation, but instead I found a great deal of constructive impetus in looking at what failed, for whom, when, and looking at not just what sparked controversy, but what didn't fit with preferred – or emergent – paradigms. Something might „fit“ for the artists but not fit for audiences, or vice versa. Audiences might be hybrid – and that might be class-based, ethnically based, racially based, etc. – so certain things could „fit“ for some but not others. Now *that's* interesting! I think that's where a lot of theatre and performance historiography has been going in the last twenty to thirty years, for example in Black studies, Asian studies, Latin American studies and other related fields.

Have you seen the *Companion* having impact? You mentioned that it has influenced your own work; it has immensely influenced mine. Have you seen some change, impact, or kick-back in response to the book over the last five years?

PWM: I'll try to give a two-step answer. The first step would be that it's too early to tell. The second answer is perhaps a little broader: when the *Companion* came out we were in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and that was a very difficult moment in time. We held the Summer Institute as a digital-only event for two years, and by that time it had expanded to include six institutions. When we resumed meeting in person in Cologne in 2023, I was struck that many of the students were very interested in the concept of Critical Media History – particularly as a provocation. This suggests that, as their dissertations are completed, we'll see impact in the coming years.

I think it's interesting how differently the book – and also what came afterwards – is received in general. Very slowly, it seems, people discover the potential of this approach in organizing symposia or in invitations for further discussions. In that way I like to think of the *Companion* as a work in progress – something that is shifting and changing in very different directions. In that sense it's too early to tell.

We have also seen the impact of some scholars being seriously unnerved and voicing it very loudly. It's also interesting that there is resistance from media studies as well as from theatre and performance studies – which I think is indicative that we are doing something right.

TCD: I agree that it's too soon because even graduate students who would have read the *Companion* during the pandemic will produce books in the coming years. I had hoped that it would have had more momentum, but there are certain essays in it that are being picked up a lot, and others being undeservedly a little more sidelined. In the meantime, I've worked with Paul Rae and we've issued the *Cambridge Companion to Mixed Methods Research for Theatre and Performance Studies* (Cambridge, 2024), which I see as a companion teaching volume for historiography and methods – and I know that book is being used a lot in graduate teaching.

The *Companion* was not predicated on Critical Media History as a co-opted point of departure for the contributors; that was the ending point that Peter and

I reached as a result of those collaborations and contributions. One outcome has been that we were able to persuade Bloomsbury to commission a series called „Critical Media Histories.“ We are commissioning 35,000–40,000-word monographs that show the implications of how the concepts can be worked out with a given topic. I hope when there are a dozen or so monographs out in circulation we'll be able to point to how Critical Media History can be operationalized as a historiography. It's also fascinating to see what different scholars pick up and make of the approach.

So far we have spoken mostly about the first half of the word *historiography* – the history. I am also interested in the latter half, the *graphy* – the writing part of historiography. How has it changed, developed, morphed or transformed in your eyes over the last ten or fifteen years? It's not just a matter of the grand récit and the hegemonic take on a subject eroding, but also the question of what is valency or ontology of writing.

TCD: I don't see it as separate from thinking and analysis. I see writing simply as a way to convey it but also to get there. We have literally more approaches and more things articulated that we can think of as tools.

PWM: Let me add two footnotes: Something is changing in academic writing in general and I believe we are seeing a return of the small form. The 40,000-word monograph – be it the Cambridge Elements series, be it Bloomsbury's Critical Media History series – seems to be quite organic for this approach. At the moment, this is not the time to think in big, multi-volume monographs that give a definitive, ultimate answer, but rather to add pieces of a puzzle that are in dialogue with others. That's an interesting facet, although I hope that the multi-volume monograph will transmogrify into a new form.

I have noticed with students – and again, perhaps to do with Cologne being also a media department – that a different form of *graphein* has emerged: for instance, „digital explorations of objects“. We have a department of digital humanities and the students are not really interested in theatre and performance per se but they are interested in exploring historical objects by digital means. One of my favourite examples is a student who created a 3D simulation of an Oskar Schlemmer figurine from a 1927 production of *Nutcracker*: the figurine is called *der Radio-Zauberer*, a typical Schlemmeresque, highly geometrical, harsh form. But the student found out that the material Schlemmer had envisioned was a form of textile. With the 3D simulation she could posit how this figure would have moved – and suddenly this very abstract, clear-cut and non-anthropological form of the Schlemmer figurine turned into something with very elegant, interesting and smooth movements.

Perhaps this is also a way to think differently. If we insist on formalist precision in working with the objects, the digital tools might provide us with an opportunity to explore what the media archaeologists call the objects' *tacit knowledge*. And that might be a level of the *graphein* that we are moving towards and that is different from the earlier approaches.

TCD: Notably, that's not digital humanities as an accumulative project but an analytical project in the true sense.

What is the temporality, or the *durée* of historiographic writing? In natural sciences, if you don't get cited within the first five years, you are pretty much done. Whereas in the humanities, and especially in the theoretical humanities, which is where we are located now, five years is too soon to gauge impact. You've given one perspective: graduate students are now working on their PhD dissertations – if they haven't taken a gap or haven't been impacted by Covid-19 or other life adventures, that is. That's one perspective. I think the other is that we are probably working with a slightly different beast – and I think it's important that we acknowledge it for the sake of knowing our own disciplines and their temporal dynamics.

TCD: I think a decade out would be a good timeframe to revisit the topic and see how it's doing. In the meantime, there is the institutional factor of departments being recombined, subject fields being brought together, which formerly were neighbours, not cohabitants. In North America, we talk about the crisis of the humanities, which comes with very noticeable declines in enrolments in humanities programmes – except theatre studies(!) – and yet, theatre studies is still equally prone to the structural recombinations and redefinitions. I am relatively optimistic that Critical Media History will survive because media studies are not going to go away. This is down to the perception that media (that is to say, digital media) is here to stay and remains a growth area economically, and therefore a growth area for education. This is not to say that we are hitching the wagon onto that specifically but that theatre will remain teachable within that paradigm and that theatre history in particular – which is the first casualty of performance studies in some cases, and of the new recombinations in others – will be explainable.

If we are talking about transferable skills, then the superpowers will help: being able to operate with collective knowledge, the collective imaginary, with society dynamics, and additionally with the propositional and with a special attention to the medium/media that is historically situated. One may also point to the ability to engage with the histories of theatre and performance, which are considerably longer than those of digital media, game studies, and gaming culture, as a further strength.

PWM: I would like to offer two small additions on the question of the *durée*. As Tracy said, Critical Media History arrived at the end of the process of creating the *Companion*; it was not the starting point. One thing has become clear to me, partly due to being located in Cologne at the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung (TWS), is that for many of these questions we simply lack the archives and the libraries. Many of the phenomena that Critical Media History is currently interested in are located in areas where we must build the research archives of resources first. Showing the full potential of the Critical Media History approach will partly come with developing the resources and discovering certain sources anew. This also calls for new concepts and categories. Actually, many of these phenomena have not yet been properly considered as part of theatre and performance studies in the narrow sense; in art history for instance. In overcoming certain categories or pointing out the spheres of intersection – for example between puppetry and certain statues with movable parts in the early modern period – we get a more complex understanding of performance and media. Or, to give another example, categorizing certain practices as „pre-cinematographic“ put them

in an evolutionary perspective towards film but also obscured their entanglement with the field of theatre and performance. But in fact, these were not just deficient precursors of film but a facet of performance practices. That shift in perspective will entail a significant change in the field.

So the promise of Critical Media History will partly also be that, once it's been discovered by art historians, musicologists, and literary scholars, it will also offer a perspective that opens up to new interdisciplinary questions. In other words, it has more potential than just a single facet.

TCD: Or perhaps those questions have only been posited by solitary scholars in different fields, and Critical Media History will facilitate bringing those ideas forward.

PWM: Some of the potential Critical Media History provides comes from proximity to digital humanities, such as a different way to work with cultural data or exploring objects in different ways. This is not what we had intended at any point but it seems to me very clear that Critical Media History comes in at an interesting historical moment when the questions of the availability of resources, of the way we deal with objects and with data, offer new perspectives.

TCD: Nor is it as limited as New Historicism was, in thinking between the cultural field and the textual field. As impactful as it was, we now realize that New Historicism was a rather limited collective project.

You've touched upon this already but let me ask again: how has the landscape of theatre and performance historiography – its objectives, lacunae, blanks and blind spots, and the field itself – changed over the last decade? Of course, we have seen what you refer to as the crisis of the humanities affecting the Anglophone sphere – though I can't say to what extent it has affected other regions, Germany, etc.; I don't think it has affected the Czech Republic so much.

TCD: When I go to listen to the discussions in IFTR's historiography working group, I actually hear people talking about historiography sometimes. That's new. My more recent graduate students who, granted, have taken classes of historiography with me – but they were doing it in the early 1990s too – want to know how to incorporate historiography into their projects, rather than me saying: „Remember, not just theory, but theories of history!“ That's a highly local example but a field needs to be teachable in order to have those kinds of impacts.

PWM: I would agree. It's worth mentioning that along with the *Routledge Companion*, there appeared at least two other major companions on the questions of writing history.⁴ *Theatre Research International* ran a special issue last year on the question of historiography, so I think theatre historiography is in the air. And in the broader horizon of the crisis of the humanities, Critical Media History offers many fields to think differently about interdisciplinarity and the contribution the humanities can make to the larger discourse. That's why I believe this approach has great potential.

TCD: The vast number of theatre and performance scholars are interested in the contemporary, or the very near contemporary, scene. By articulating Critical Media History as more generally engaging with history, what we are interested in as historians becomes more legible to colleagues who do not identify as historians. I hope it may

4 Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson's *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth* (Palgrave, 2016) and their *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

help them see the stakes of engaging with history related to their projects in these novel ways because the querying of innovation, of paradigm shifts, and the highlighting of repertoires or of knowledge circulation is so relevant to contemporary work. Its recombinative nature is so evident and interesting to us as historians that maybe we'll be able to have impact across the board, and not just by a few of us butting in and saying: „Somebody should do history!“ That approach is not working!

PWM: The *Companion* emerged dialogically, and dialogue is also part of what Critical Media History offers. I would hope that it's a paradigm that helps us to negotiate access to a genuine polyphony of contrasting epistemologies as well as to different approaches to history. Given the political circumstances and the crises in higher education, what we are seeing is that the idea of paradigms that claim a „Grand Récit“ of defining the historical moment is over. Tracy and I have been in several situations where we felt the need to develop a new language to understand different approaches and needs, and not just to judge them by one measure. Therefore I think that the attentiveness and the sensitivity are what we have tried to build into the concept of Critical Media History. In other words, we did not want to create another hegemonic project that tries to conquer the world but rather to provide a platform to challenge thought on many different levels. And I believe the *Companion*, in different facets, combined articles that might seem inconsistent in the compilation but the whole is interesting in exploring different layers and corners of intercultural encounter. As a result, we need to make much more of an effort, as scholars, to sustain this global discourse – and I think this will become increasingly more important in the years to come.

Just to echo what you've said and add my own examples. For me personally, there have been at least three points of the *Companion's* impact. In 2022, I was invited to Masaryk University to teach a course on theatre and performance historiography, and we used the *Companion* as the groundwork of our discussion. It was exactly this polyphony or inter-epistemological connections and contrasts that you speak about, rather than one hegemonic narrative, that the students greatly appreciated. Secondly, and weirdly perhaps, the Covid-19 pandemic accentuated it, with it being such a transformative moment of redefining and renegotiating our social lives, and asking ourselves what is it that gives us continuity when most of the social habits we have practised are gone. I think that the new theory of history, as well as a theory of one's own history, becomes extremely relevant. I believe that the media changes we are now going through are still being processed and theorized. Finally, we are carrying out this interview on the occasion of a special issue of *Theatre Review (Divadelní revue)* that is thematically dedicated to theatre and performance historiography – because it is a topic that is in the air, as you say, and its relevance keeps bringing up crucial questions.

prof. doc. Pavel Drábek, Ph.D. is a researcher in the Theatre Institute (Czech Cultural Institute) in Prague and Associate Professor of English Literature and Culture at the University of Hradec Králové. He is Emeritus Professor of Drama and Theatre Practice at the University of Hull. He is a theatre scholar, dramatist, librettist and translator. His interests are in early modern theatre, music theatre, translation and adaptation. He is the programme dramaturg of the Authors' Reading Month literary festival and a curator of Prague Quadrennial 2027.