

## 12. Performing in Historic Theatre Sites: Frames, Potentials, Challenges

*Meike Wagner*

The two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Drottningholm Palace Theatre fell in 2016, coinciding with the Performing Premodernity research project. In June of that year the team organised a panel debate about performance paradigms, and about how different approaches and practices represent alternative ways of ‘realising’ cultural heritage. A group of theatre scholars and theatre practitioners were invited to talk about the challenges and potentials of performing in historic theatre sites, as part of the International Federation for Theatre Research conference, with the theme ‘Presenting the Theatrical Past: Interplays of Artefacts, Discourses and Practices’. Theatre scholar Willmar Sauter (Stockholm University) and theatre historian Marvin Carlson (New York) chaired the discussion. The panel was made up of dance historian and practitioner of historical dances Mark Franko (Philadelphia); managing director of the Drottningholm Palace Theatre, Sofi Lerström (Stockholm); singer and president of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music, Susanne Rydén (Stockholm); president of Perspektiv, the Association of Historic Theatres in Europe, Carsten Jung who is also project manager of the European Routes of Historic Theatres (Berlin); architect Erland Montgomery who is responsible for the maintenance of the Drottningholm Palace Theatre (Stockholm); and choreographer and opera director Sigrid T’Hooft, a specialist of historically informed performance (Ghent).

When preparing the panel discussion, the research group based their questions on an issue that had been central to the Performing Premodernity project from the outset, that is, the relationship between the historical past and the performative present. How do the past of

---

### How to cite this book chapter:

Wagner, M. 2023. Performing in Historic Theatre Sites: Frames, Potentials, Challenges. In: Tessing Schneider, M. & Wagner, M. (Eds.). *Performing the Eighteenth Century: Theatrical Discourses, Practices, and Artefacts*, pp. 253–261. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bce.m>. License: CC BY-NC 4.0.



**Figure 1.** Panel debate at the conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research, 'Presenting the Theatrical Past: Interplays of Artefacts, Discourses, and Practices'. Stockholm University, 2016. From left to right: Willmar Sauter, Marvin Carlson, Susanne Rydén, Sigrid T'Hooft, Sofi Lerström, Mark Franko, Carsten Jung. Photo: Petra Dotlačilová ©. License: CC BY-NC.

history and the present of performance collide, coincide, or collate when historical spaces and artefacts are brought to life through practice? Historic artefacts have to be preserved for a future past – but how about historical practices? Nowadays performance practices tend to be discussed mainly in terms of their novelty, relevance, and impact, but what if we regard them as living history, or as oral traditions? If we do that, we need then to consider the ways in which those oral traditions are altered and modified when passed down through the generations. This applies to a lesser degree to the theatrical artefacts involved in the performance practices, because dramatic texts and scores remain the same in their printed or written forms, and historical theatre sites continue to exist in the same form as in the past, even though they are subject to the tear and wear of time. Due to these different kinds of historicity, it can be difficult to connect performance practices to historical artefacts. However, historiographical discourses enable us to bridge the gaps, making performative encounters possible, as the interplay of historical artefacts and practices have the potential to enhance our understanding of the theatrical past.

These were the questions we put to the panellists:

- How can we preserve historic theatres as artefacts for the future and, at the same time, use them for today's performances?
- What are the challenges of performing in historic theatres?
- What kind of performances should historic theatres present?
- What is best practice for exploring the theatrical past?
- How should commercial, educational, and artistic interests relate to each other where historic theatres are concerned?
- What can scholars and artists learn from performance in historical spaces?

Carsten Jung presented the Perspectiv<sup>1</sup> database of historic theatres in Europe in which between 3,000 and 3,500 historic buildings are registered. Immediately, the question as to what defines a historic theatre was raised. The association Perspectiv decided to regard as 'historic' all theatre buildings that are more than one hundred years old. As is well known, most of these theatres have a long history of renovation and modernisation, and so Marvin Carlson wondered whether we shouldn't reflect on the history of these theatres, rather than investing in attempts to treat them as 'original'. Carsten Jung replied that, of course, theatre buildings are changed by the wear and tear of continued use, and therefore decisions regarding safety measures and modernisation must be made when renovations are planned. The theatres that are part of the European Route of Historic Theatres, though, do represent a specific historical period.<sup>2</sup> Marvin Carlson emphasised that there needs to be a distinction between different categories of historic theatres. Whereas experimental architecture like Shakespeare's Globe in London constitutes a 'mere fantasy', other buildings such as the Semperoper in Dresden or the theatres in Warsaw have been faithfully reconstructed after being razed to the ground in wartime. These meticulous reconstructions were possible because of the availability of copious detailed documentation and archival sources.

1. <https://www.theatre-architecture.eu/en/> (accessed 21 March 2023).

2. <http://www.perspectiv-online.org/pages/en/european-route.php?lang=E> (accessed 21 March 2023).

Sofi Lerström pointed to the impact of daily wear and tear for the Drottningholm Palace Theatre, where 40,000 visitors attend guided tours annually, and where forty performances are held, each attended by 450 people. Every year, there is an inspection and assessment of the building and its spaces, after which decisions are made about restoration work. According to Erland Montgomery, today's safeguarding of cultural heritage is based on a principle of preservation rather than restoration. From today's perspective, we see it as a major loss that in the 1920s, when the theatre was reopened, Agne Beijer decided to remove the theatre's nineteenth-century wallpapers and to replace them with wallpapers with the 'original' eighteenth-century designs. Recently, there has been much more focus on the material aspects of preservation. When the windows were repainted, for example, the preservation team chose a colour close to the original and even created window paint using original eighteenth-century recipes. The idea was to preserve the material quality of the window paint, not just its visual resemblance.

Turning to the question of performance, Susanne Rydén insisted that it is also important to treat the Drottningholm Palace Theatre as a 'living space'. On the one hand, the repertoire should be guided by the fact that eighteenth-century works were written for specific spaces, including for the Drottningholm theatre itself. Not all works fit in here. On the other hand, each performance in the historic theatre is always a moment in the present that involves different levels of communication: the performing body communicates with the historical space, and it communicates with an audience. Mark Franko elaborated on this issue, stating that within present-day performance we are in fact dealing with the paradox of a 'historical experience'. The performance articulates the historical space for an audience in the now.

But historians also constitute a specific type of audience for such performances. What can a historian learn from attending historically informed performances in historic theatres? Speaking from personal experience, Marvin Carlson mentioned that, even though we are

aware today that we experience things differently from the historical audiences, we are nonetheless sensitive to both the visual and the audial conditions of the historical space. For example, a performance lit by candlelight was a completely new experience to him, whereas for the historical audience these were the regular visual conditions. However exciting this experience is for the historian, we must stay attuned to the historical dimension. In other words, rather than giving us real access to those historical theatre practices, such situations teach us more about our own preconditions and assumptions.

The second part of the panel discussion focused on the challenges of performing in historic theatre sites, and specifically on the relationship between historical sources and the process of performing. Mark Franko started out with an example from a dance workshop he had organised, devoted to Jean-Georges Noverre's ballet *Agamemnon vengé* (1772). He found that the greatest challenge of the historically informed performance was to negotiate between focusing on the narrative aspects of the *ballet d'action* and on making Noverre's reform ideas accessible to a modern audience, i.e. on the dancer's ability to 'paint the movements of the soul with gesture'. The historical representation (or reconstruction) should not be an end in itself: the overall aim is rather to find ways of enabling today's audience to grasp the experimental dimension of the historical work. In the case of the Noverre ballet, musical phrasing helped create an affective language for the bodies of the dancers.

Sigrid T'Hooft agreed about the negotiation between historical sources and the practice of rehearsing and performing. When directing historically informed productions, she always begins with extensive historical research, and the documents she studies then have a very important influence upon the rehearsal approach. On the other hand, as an artist, she wants to animate, rather than reanimate, the past. At some point the books need to be closed, and the communication with the performers, the musicians, and then with the audience, must begin. For the director, this is a process of translating historical

knowledge into performative expertise and into an experience that is accessible for the audience. If the rehearsal and the performance are well balanced something new will happen, albeit in a very old language. At this point Mark Franko referred back to the experimental aspect of performance, commenting that enticing moments in a performance can work as a trapdoor through which the audience falls into the experience of the historical experimentation.

Marvin Carlson said that in recent decades there has been more focus on finding adequate means of relating to the experimental as well as to the affective dimensions of historical theatre works. There has been an interest in historical performance since the nineteenth century, but nowadays we demand more than attempted reconstructions of the past: we want the contemporary performance to create an affect identical or akin to the affect created in the historical performance. German director Thomas Ostermeier has tried to find ways of translating affective moments of the past into the present: for example, how today does one stage Ibsen's Nora slamming the door adequately? And Branden Jacobs-Jenkins has adapted Dion Boucicault's melodrama *The Octoroon* from 1859 into a contemporary drama: what is today's affective equivalent of the spectacular scenes of nineteenth-century melodrama?<sup>3</sup>

Sofi Lerström talked about the challenges of performing in the historic site of the Drottningholm Palace Theatre from the perspective of a managing director. She demands that the invited artists think in terms of site-specific performances. The fact that both the repertoire is restricted to works from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and that the orchestra plays on period instruments has an impact on the artistic decisions. The productions should be inspired by historical practices; they should not be required to follow strict rules dictated by historical sources. Historical knowledge provides the stage director with the means to communicate in a satisfactory way with the audience.

Willmar Sauter raised another issue relating to historically informed performance. The practices of the Early Music movement are well

3. *An Octoroon* was performed in 2010 in a workshop production at Performance Space 122, New York. The first fully staged modern production was at Soho Rep in New York in 2014.

established, but is there a theatrical equivalent when it comes to the visual aspects of performance? Is there something like an 'Early Staging' movement? Sigrid T'Hooft responded that she did not feel acknowledged as a historically informed practitioner. People often want to know if she feels inhibited as an artist when working with historical sources as a basis for performance, a question she assumes is never asked of conductors within the Early Music movement, such as Nikolaus Harnoncourt and John Eliot Gardiner who are always regarded as artists in their own right. When it comes to the theatrical side of the Historically Informed Performance movement people tend to engage more in fact-checking, searching for errors in the interpretation of the historical sources, and looking for the culprit. Sometimes it is a shortcoming of the musical performance, and sometimes it is because the time for stage rehearsals is too limited, and in such cases, it is not the historically informed staging per se that is the problem, but general challenges that face all theatre productions. One big difference between the practice of early music and historically informed productions, however, is the basic absence of education in historical acting. While Early Music departments at the conservatories do attempt to stage Baroque operas with their students, there are no regular courses or workshops that teach students eighteenth-century acting. Sigrid T'Hooft teaches regularly at academies in Leipzig, Karlsruhe, and The Hague, but none of these institutions has a complete study program in historical acting. When working as a stage director, therefore, she often has to act as a teacher. Moreover, of the six weeks allocated for rehearsals, four do not take place in the historical site, which means she always needs to reassure performers that the odd gestures will feel natural once they are on stage. Of course, such logistical and institutional limitations have an impact on the work.

Susanne Rydén said that as a singer she has always striven for a holistic approach that relies on the interaction between the music, the text, and the performance to tell one story rather than multiple stories. Also, the audience should not be underestimated: one has to

decide whether to provide mere entertainment or to pose an aesthetic challenge. She sees a potential in composing new works for historic theatre sites. As most of the works performed in the eighteenth century were newly composed, some of them written specifically for the space, why should we not create new works for the historical site today, showing the same respect, and using our knowledge of the space?

Sigrid T'Hooft said that the world of Baroque performance was dominated by rules. She explained that she is fascinated with the potential of the mechanical rules to create an emotional impact. When one knows these rules well, playing with them can contribute to the performance. For example, one can create comical effects by deliberately breaking the rules. In the eighteenth century, knowledge of the rules made it possible to mount productions after very few rehearsals, and enabled actors, musicians, costume designers, and set designers to adapt quickly to different spaces and contexts, such as those of a court theatre or of a commercial theatre. As an example of this, Willmar Sauter pointed to the year 1786 when the French acting troupe residing at the Drottningholm theatre produced eighty different plays between March and December. Under such working conditions it was convenient to have some rules to rely on, not forgetting that the prompter's box was an important tool as well.

The organisational context of historic theatres had and still have a major impact on what is produced and performed within them. It makes a difference whether a theatre is run by the state, whether it receives some limited state funding, whether it is run on a completely private basis, or whether the reigning monarch is involved, as is still the case with the Drottningholm Palace Theatre. As Sofi Lerström explained, Drottningholm is run by permission of the Swedish king. The royal family has been very satisfied with the productions so far, but if they changed their minds, it might not be possible to continue to use the theatre as a performance space. The theatre has the status of a national institution, which means that it receives subsidies from the Swedish Cultural Department on a par with the Royal Opera and the



Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. This status brings with it the obligation to follow certain rules and national cultural policies, including on accessibility, diversity, intercultural exchange, interaction with civil society, etc. The government has little understanding of the significance of the Drottningholm Palace Theatre as a historic theatre site. While they have fully endorsed the concept of cultural heritage, they have no grasp of what it means to maintain an orchestra of freelance instrumentalists playing on period instruments. It is a major challenge to raise the necessary funds for the orchestra, to retain the performers, and to maintain a high quality of performance. The present working structure does not allow for sustainable development nor for the education of the next generation, so the orchestra struggles to transmit their expertise to young musicians. As the annual state subsidies cover the costs for only one production per year, and for the guided tours of the theatre, the other productions and activities of the theatre rely on external funding and collaboration with sponsors and associations, such as the Friends of the Drottningholm Theatre, which enabled the commissioning of the anniversary opera, *Rokokomaskineriet*.<sup>4</sup>

This illustrates yet again how performances in historic theatre sites claiming to be ‘living theatres’ always involve a negotiation with the historical conditions of any given time.

4. *Rokokomaskineriet* (The Rococo Machinery), with a libretto by Tuvalisa Rangström and music by Jan Sandström, premiered on 7 June 2016.