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# The Archive, the Historian, and the Relationships of Change

## **Abstract**

Archives come into existence through human agency driven by individual and/or collective philosophical and ideological value systems and priorities. As such, they are sites of power and usually controlled access. They continue to grow through the acquisition of more materials and maintain vigilance in the face of the constant threat of damage, decay, and loss. Out of the relationships formed between their material resources and historians, history is made and remade. This article draws on the archive of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company, one of the most substantial collections dedicated to a regional theatre in the UK, with which the author has had a particularly intense relationship. In the course of decades of engagement, firstly through doctoral research and then subsequent publications, Rep's archive produced the author as a theatre historian.

The article also problematizes the relationships formed by other individuals: new young academic researchers and volunteering enthusiasts, untroubled by academic restraints, keen to delve and select material which speaks to their preferences. Out of both constituencies of interest, more new histories are made, some of which directly challenge previous assumptions and priorities, provoking new questions. If a key ontological question concerns the nature of reality, which is more real: the archive and its contents or the histories which are made? How do the relationships forged through material archival encounters—relationships which generate feelings of ownership or potentially loss—function historiographically as the historical record is made and remade?

### Keywords

theatre archive, theatre historiography, Birmingham Repertory Theatre

### Abstrakt

#### Archiwum, historyczka i relacje jako katalizator zmiany

Archiwa powstają dzięki ludzkiej aktywności, której siłą napędową są indywidualne i/lub zbiorowe filozoficzne i ideologiczne systemy wartości i priorytety. Z tego wynika władza archiwów, powiązana zazwyczaj z kontrolą dostępu. Zbiory stale się rozwijają dzięki pozyskiwaniu kolejnych materiałów oraz wyczuleniu na zagrożenie zniszczeniem, rozpadem i utratą. Historia jest konstruowana i przekształcana dzięki relacjom między zasobami materialnymi a historykami. Autorka artykułu szerszą refleksję wyprowadza z doświadczenia w archiwum Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company, stanowiącym z najważniejszych zbiorów poświęconych teatrowi regionalnemu w Wielkiej Brytanii, z którym łączą ją szczególnie intensywne relacje. Właśnie to archiwum stworzyło ją jako historyczkę teatru, najpierw w trakcie przygotowywania doktoratu, później – kolejnych publikacji. Artykuł problematyzuje również relacje między archiwum a historyczką kształtowane przez inne osoby: nowych, młodych badaczy akademickich oraz wolontariuszy-entuzjastów nieskrępowanych akademickimi ograniczeniami i wybierającymi materiały przemawiające do ich wyobraźni. Dzięki zainteresowaniom obu grup powstają nowe historie, z których część bezpośrednio podważa wcześniejsze założenia i priorytety, a także prowokuje nowe pytania. Jeśli kluczowe pytanie ontologiczne dotyczy natury rzeczywistości, to co jest bardziej realne - archiwum i jego zawartość czy tworzone historie? W jaki sposób relacje powstałe w wyniku spotkań z materiałami archiwalnymi – rodzące poczucie własności lub potencjalnej utraty – funkcjonują w historiografii, w procesie tworzenia i przekształcania zapisu historycznego?

### Słowa kluczowe

archiwum teatralne, historiografia teatru, Birmingham Repertory Theatre

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Explaining what it means for something to exist—“why there is something rather than nothing,” the theoretical philosopher Dale Jacquette argues that:

A correct pure philosophical ontology . . . must aspire to objectivity while remaining open-minded about the existence of subjective phenomena. The mind may have its place in the world, but its place is surely not willfully to determine all the actual facts of the actual world. We can accomplish many things by thinking, planning and undertaking action. We are nevertheless not free to create or destroy the world as a whole by simply willing its objects and facts into existence or nonexistence. Thought itself is among the existent objects and facts that constitute the actual world, to which it must also be subordinate. The existence of objective and subjective objects and facts also cannot be taken for granted, but must be upheld by sound argument against serious opposition.<sup>1</sup>

If we are agreed that history is *made* by historians, that we create *something* out of what *we think* we know about the vanished past, then it is possible to concede to the basic premise of ontological idealism that reality is constituted in the mind of the human observer, and thus the reality of our histories has been willed into existence through our thoughts. If, however, we adopt the position of ontological materialism that reality exists regardless of human observation, then the palpably real materials, the traces of the past we access in the course of our work, can offer us the reassurance that what has vanished is not nothing, and that the histories out of which we make our histories exist and existed. They are, and were, outside ourselves. But of course it is not a simple either/or. The histories we think evolve into the histories which we make, and for the sake of the probity of what we produce we have to accept Jacquette’s insistence that:

Thought itself is among the existent objects and facts that constitute the actual world, to which it must also be subordinate. The existence of objective and subjective objects and facts also cannot be taken for granted, but must be upheld by sound argument against serious opposition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Jacquette, *Ontology* (London: Routledge, 2002), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Jacquette, *Ontology*, 8.

I have turned to these basics of philosophical enquiry to help me explore the ontological and epistemological dilemmas presented by the relationship between the archive and the historian as separate but interdependent material entities. The recent rapprochement between the contrasting insights of theatre and performance scholars means that we do not have to reduce the differences between the fixed archive and the embodied repertoire to a crude binary opposition, but the archive I am discussing here does come into Diana Taylor's category of the authorized repository of documents and artefacts.<sup>3</sup> As such the archive is conceived. It is willed into existence; its constituent parts identified, selected, organized, conserved, and protected through human agency. Once brought into being, however, it takes on the attributes of both dependent and independent existence. For survival, the archive is wholly dependent on processes of curation and safe-guarding, but once that is assured as a material assemblage, it is capable of an existence which extends far beyond the temporal limits of individual founders, curators, and users. Each new custodial generation brings further evidence of the archive's capacity for organic growth: collections augmented and rearranged; fresh material acquired; new directions growing new branches of enquiry, new limbs as it were. Furthermore, even as the archive is in a continuous process of change, so too are the histories and indeed the historians which emerge from it.

If we follow Jacquette's argument that thought should be considered "an existent object" that has to be subordinate to "to the actual world," then the ideologies which shape dominant mentalities, and thus the actual world, come into play in the creation of the archive. Jacques Derrida's "Archive Fever" and Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* are for my purposes two of the most widely cited of the published interrogations of the thinking which generates the archive as repository. Derrida's stripping back of the word archive to its Greek root *arkheion*, "a house, a domicile, an address," and to the proposition that this was the address of the *archons*, the magistrates who held political power, draws attention to the potentially coercive priorities and value systems which control the storage of authorized knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Taylor, for her part, inveighs against First World archival tangibility and documents written in the languages of political and economic dominance which exclude the performance practices of the globally subaltern

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<sup>3</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," trans. Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>.

manifested in intangible cultural heritage.<sup>5</sup> In this reading then, archives are organisms of control and exclusion contributing to hierarchies of knowledge which marginalize and occlude. The encounter between the historian, embedded within the poststructuralist epistemic moment, and the archive she/he enters could be as much about what is not there, what has been rendered invisible and effectively willed into non-existence. From the materiality of what is there and not there, what then is “real” about the histories which are produced?

At a much more fundamental level, however, what I think does not change is the affective power of the archive—Derrida’s *mal d’archive*, “archive fever,” the marvelously resonant phrase coined appropriately enough for an event held in 1994 in part under the auspices of the Freud Museum. “It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself.”<sup>6</sup> Even the most skeptical historian enters the archive in the expectation of being in the presence of something special, something singular which is not available elsewhere. In our scholarly apparatus, we still refer to the sources of “primary” research—which boils down, it seems to me, to the opportunity to commune directly with the past; physically engage, often to touch, what has been touched by the subjects of our research—that in so doing we might have reached some point of origin. In Derrida’s play with the word *arkhe*, it is both a *commandment* and a *commencement*—“the originary, the first, the principal, the primitive,” but, he argues, we can never get back to a moment of pure beginning. Instead, the “something” we want to find to give epistemological coherence to our work might become a catalyst for an act of archiving, a reversion to a kind of epistemological anarchy.

What I think is unarguable is the sense of privilege that entry into the archive brings—a privilege which imparts to us legitimacy as historians. I am often aware of this when I encourage students into archival research, and when on my professional authority, they can access the special place of advanced knowledge. Could it be that in the transition to privileged access, the historian is not just legitimized, but actually produced? It is the thought that I was “produced” as a historian through my relationship with a particular archive, that I turn now to focus on that archive. The local specificity of this archive—the contents dedicated to the work of one local theatre—positions me in the first instance as a historian of the “local,” the historiographic implications of which I have recently

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<sup>5</sup> Diana Taylor, “Performance and Intangible Cultural Heritage,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. Tracy C. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 91–104.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 57.

foregrounded in a collaboration in historiography with international scholars also working within their “locals.”<sup>7</sup> In reflecting here on my own local as a case study, I outline the changing priorities of the histories which have determined the function of this archive, making clear, I hope, the extent to which relational imperatives have been crucial in a meshing together of different stakeholders and attachments.

In the hierarchies of British theatre, regional building-based theatre, despite the rhetoric of inclusivity, does not have high status. Writing elsewhere, I have explained the historical reasons for this.<sup>8</sup> In the context of the UK’s recent years of political and economic turmoil, exacerbated by the government’s policy of “austerity” provoked by the 2008 international financial crash, the gap between the resource-rich metropolitan core and the regional periphery, is wider and more unequal than ever. Apart from my own work and that of British colleagues such as Jo Robinson, Ros Merkin, and Kate Dorney,<sup>9</sup> there is comparatively little substantive attention paid to “provincial” histories. What this also means is that archives for regional theatres tend to be poorly or erratically maintained, if they exist at all. However, the archive with which I have had the most intense relationship is, I think, the most ample and longest conserved repository for an individual producing theatre outside London. I stress longevity here because the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, which opened in its first building in 1913 with an ensemble of actors who had begun to work together as amateurs several years earlier, is now the longest continuously trading, regional producing theatre company in the UK.<sup>10</sup>

I have written extensively about this theatre. But to be brief: Birmingham in terms of population and GDP is Britain’s second-largest city. The Rep’s founder Sir Barry Jackson, was the son of an enterprising Victorian grocer who grew rich selling provisions to the burgeoning workforce of the rapidly expanding

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<sup>7</sup> Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson, introduction to *The Methuen Drama Handbook to Theatre History and Historiography*, eds. Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 1–20.

<sup>8</sup> Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Jo Robinson, “Becoming More Provincial? The Global and the Local in Theatre History,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2007): 229–240, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000139>; Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin, *The Glory of the Garden: English Regional Theatre and the Arts Council 1984–2009* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010); Ros Merkin, “Liverpool,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, eds. David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 91–103.

<sup>10</sup> The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, now the Royal Shakespeare Theatre opened in 1879 but did not function consistently as a producing theatre until after the Second World War. The Liverpool Repertory Theatre, later the Playhouse, opened in 1911 but went dark in 1998 prior to a merger with the Liverpool Everyman Theatre. Extensive records are held in the Liverpool Public Library. In Birmingham, however, the inclusion of documents relating to Barry Jackson’s family and early amateur activity extend the collection back to the end of the nineteenth century.



Sir Barry Jackson (1879–1961)

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Birmingham Repertory Theatre on  
Station Street, 1918

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industrial town. Jackson used his inherited wealth to build what was the UK's first purpose-built, twentieth century "repertory" theatre and then provide a financial safety net for the company until the mid-1930s, when on the creation of a Trust in his name, the theatre was effectively given to the city, although he remained in overall control until his death in 1961. His money created a protective shell around the ideological and aesthetic principles of a policy, grounded—albeit in a hybridized, compromised English sort of way—in European modernism. The result, as was observed by a cynical local critic in the late 1940s, was



“a temple of culture” dedicated to the Western dramatic canon, poetic drama, especially Shakespeare, late nineteenth/early twentieth-century “New” British and European drama, ensemble performance, chamber opera, and scenographic experiment. All were to be witnessed by those whom Ibsen envisaged as “the compact majority audience” i.e. the ideal, captive audience amenable to high-minded enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, these were often in short supply in the bustling, industrial city, but those that did go to the theatre, became passionate advocates, and the company policy was a magnet for ambitious actors.<sup>12</sup>

There is no published biography of Jackson but I came to the conclusion that such was the pervasiveness of his entrepreneurial energies, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, when the company also performed under his management in several London theatres as well as on national and international tours, that his influence was exceptional. He was positioned at the center of a widespread network of theatre-makers and goers. He was a friend and patron of George Bernard Shaw and oversaw a company which gave early training to several generations of actors who went on to become internationally famous. In 1945, Peter Brook’s career as a director who would be globally celebrated was launched professionally in Birmingham by Jackson with (typically) productions of Shakespeare, Shaw, and Ibsen.<sup>13</sup>

I was born and brought up in Birmingham and had the majority of my early live theatre experience in Jackson’s original playhouse. The trail I followed back into the theatre’s past was via a doctoral project on the history of Shakespeare production. Apart from the Old Vic in London and the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, no other theatre regularly staged more of the plays. In 1923, in Birmingham, the first twentieth-century professional production of Shakespeare in modern-dress was staged. The 1925 modern-dress *Hamlet* attracted international attention. In 1982 I arrived at what was known as the “New” Birmingham Repertory Theatre, opened in 1971, to look at the materials stored there. What I found was chaos: piled-up press clippings books, posters, photographs, letters, postcards, etc. There were traces of the previous peripatetic history of the records and attempts to exert some control: the beginnings of a card catalogue and some labelled (a few inaccurately) photographs; shelving which held rows of bound-together programs and prompt books dating back even before 1913, but which had been abandoned. To take Derrida more literally, the archive had indeed anarchived itself. For a theatre

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<sup>11</sup> William Archer, “A Plea for an Endowed Theatre,” *Fortnightly Review* 45, no. 269 (1889): 610–626.

<sup>12</sup> Claire Cochrane, *The Birmingham Rep: A City’s Theatre 1962–2002* (Birmingham: The Sir Barry Jackson Trust, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Claire Cochrane, *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1929* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1993), 1.



The New Birmingham Rep, 1971

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which had long-since lost its financial security, the primary task was the work of the present and the future, not the past. To cut a long story short, it took about two years before serendipitous meetings with key individuals in the cultural life of the city facilitated the removal of all the documents into the archival collections of Birmingham Central Library—the largest public reference library in Europe. Of course during that interim period I had indulged the freedom to rummage more or less unchecked. Once the official repository was created and the necessary process of proper sorting and cataloguing begun, the custodial rules and gate-keeping requirements came into force. I was physically on the outside, but the material would come (courtesy of the librarians) when I called. In my version of this story, my beginnings as a theatre historian were instrumental in the “saving” of this heterogeneous mass of material artefacts for managed conservation and thus its new life as a separate entity with the capacity for other productive relationships. I have come to think that in a reciprocal action the archive and the knowledge which it gave me produced me as a historian. Having said that, whatever knowledge I was given was contingent on the depredations of time and successive custodial

interventions—on the ghosts in the archive of other shaping and selecting hands, minds, and agendas. I have no idea of what may have been discarded as a result of the removal process I initiated.

Even in its chaotic state in 1982, it was clear that there had been from the earliest years of the company, and going back to the very beginning of the twentieth century, a determined effort to create a history through the preservation of records. Unusually, before I arrived, there had been three book-length chronicle histories. The first written in 1924 by one of the company founders and then Business Manager; the second, in two editions (1943 and 1948) by a local theatre critic, and the third, published in 1963, two years after Jackson's death, to mark the fiftieth anniversary, by a well-known national theatre critic and historian.<sup>14</sup> What comes across very strongly from the cumulative effect of all three is the unambiguous celebration of a golden history, and in particular, through the three authors who had personally known Jackson, the aura which had been generated around him: his vision, ambitions, and strongly-held prejudices.

By the time I came to publish my first book focusing on a specific period of Shakespeare production up until 1929 which I had carved out of research surveying some eighty years, I had absorbed a lot more information about what had been achieved in terms of innovation. I knew, or thought I knew, the origins of the key ideas and I could see the European connections. I could flesh out more confidently the other individuals, directors, designers, actors who had joined Jackson's adventures. I could give credit, where I thought credit was due, and I could lay claim, as we all tend to do when we take on an under-researched subject, to particular singularities in the contribution to the historical record and to the importance of unsung precursors. Looking at my introduction now, I can see that I declared "an attempt to establish *the factual basis* [my emphasis now] for the legend and place the achievement of one provincial theatre company firmly within the context of the twentieth-century stage production of Shakespeare as a whole."<sup>15</sup>

Recently, I've remediated this material, but via Marvin Carlson's idea of the "haunted stage" and the concept of surrogation as a process of trying to replace a lost original.<sup>16</sup> Recalling the relatively uncut texts of Shakespeare's plays, which

<sup>14</sup> Bache Matthews, *A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1924); Thomas C. Kemp, *Birmingham Repertory Theatre The Playhouse and the Man*, 2nd ed. (Birmingham: Cornish, 1948); J. C. Trewin, *The Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1963* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1963).

<sup>15</sup> Cochrane, *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), quoted in Claire Cochrane, "The Haunted Theatre: Birmingham Rep, Shakespeare and European Exchanges," *Cahiers Elisabethains* 96, no.1 (2018): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0184767818774857>.

I diligently examined in the preserved prompt books, I am now seeing through a lens provided by Michael Bristol and Kate McLuskie which positions me alongside Jackson, his directors, designers, and audiences seeking out a more authentic emancipated original in the interests of “reader’s theatre, a theatre oriented to the rewards and the pleasures of the printed text.”<sup>17</sup> Certainly, what I took to be “existent objects and facts” embedded in the archival remains: stage manager’s annotations signaling the movement; lights and sounds of actions which vanished even as they were executed; the images of dead actors, their costumes, and the stage décor they inhabited; the fragments of eyewitness audience response, were all carefully assembled to instill a sense of felt life, to try, on the basis of paper records, to re-embody the physical reality of a “real” history. The book I published is a solid tangible artefact—the product of working within an academic tradition which has its roots in the modernist assumptions espoused by Jackson and his contemporaries. How far is the history I made real? I acknowledged the top-down ethos; the fundamentally elitist ideology which in Jackson’s view necessitated changing public taste, giving the public what it ought to have rather than what it wants.<sup>18</sup> What I contributed assisted in a more concretely evidenced genealogy of influence which continues to resonate and I think the “original” protagonists of my narrative would give it their qualified approval. How much had I “willed” it into existence?

By 1993 I was fully aware of the price which had been paid by Jackson’s successors as they tried to attract a broader, popular audience into the much larger, financially draining, new theatre. What had been willed into existence in the memories of former Rep aficionados was effectively an imagined version of the old theatre where history as nostalgia created a toxic barrier to interest in the records of more recent activity. When I was commissioned officially by the Sir Barry Jackson Trust to update the history from 1962 to 2002, the “facts” in the light of a pattern of recurrent financial crisis and associated artistic disappointment entailed going into the archive in a spirit of what I would now, with hindsight, and following Max Weber, call “interpretive understanding.” As explained by the historiographer Mary Fulbrook, this means adopting a position of empathy to “try to ‘get inside’ the mentalities of key protagonists in the historical situation.” Empathy, Fulbrook suggests,

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Bristol and Kathleen McLuskie, introduction to *Shakespeare and Modern Theatre: The Performance of Modernity*, eds. Michael Bristol and Kathleen McLuskie (London: Routledge 2001), 3, quoted in Cochrane “The Haunted Theatre,” 81.

<sup>18</sup> Sir Barry Jackson, “The Repertory Movement,” unpublished paper, Birmingham 1932, quoted in Cochrane, *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre*, 30.

should be viewed as a neutral tool for understanding mentalities, quite unrelated to that of the sympathy or otherwise of the historian with the motives and ideas of those whose views he or she is trying to understand.<sup>19</sup>

As I understand it, philosophically there are potentially many ontologies. In epistemological terms, the question for us as historians is how knowledge is mediated between the different states of being, given, as Jo Robinson and I have attempted to show in our 2016 edited collection on the ethics of researching and writing theatre history, that our primary ethical responsibility is to try to tell the truth, however difficult and contested this might be.<sup>20</sup> In her essay on ethics and bias which challenges standard assumptions about the operation of an anti-theatrical prejudice in nineteenth century America, Rosemarie Bank acknowledges the present-day anxiety about truth-telling while observing the way in which “historical propositions are embedded in the ‘facts’ they present and the ‘facts’ in them.” Facts, she argues, “are not immutable and separate from explanations of them.”<sup>21</sup> The force of this has struck me as I have encountered the alternative perspectives of new scholars intent on making new histories from the old theatre and reading “facts” differently. There has to be cognizance—however skeptical—of different points of view, different standpoints in the archive, and where and how the choice is made about the time and labor of documentary and artefactual scrutiny. In her discussion of bias, Bank makes a distinction between “what exists and what controls.”<sup>22</sup> What is/might be the palimpsestic effect on our perception of past existence of the controlling viewpoint?

The facts in the form of figures derived from the paper records: audience statistics, rates of public subsidy, box office income, and size of deficit created a parallel ontology—abstract numbers derived from the “real” world and with real measurable effects. The strategy, as I have discussed elsewhere when considering large-scale, building-based complexity, was to extend Thomas Postlewait’s model of the “event” to an institution in order to consider both “the endogenous features of a theatrical event” and “the encompassing or exogenous conditions that directly and indirectly contributed to the event’s manifest identity and

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002), 167.

<sup>20</sup> Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson, introduction to *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*, eds. Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Rosemarie K. Bank, “Ethics and Bias: Historiography and Anti-Theatrical Prejudice in Nineteenth-Century America,” in Cochrane and Robinson, *Theatre History and Historiography*, 48–49.

<sup>22</sup> Bank, “Ethics and Bias,” 50.

intelligibility.” The endogenous features of the artistic enterprise, especially what had been attempted as well as achieved, were signaled again in paper records—the season brochures, programs, and press commentary. While acknowledging their instability as pure “evidence,” these objects prized facts of an existence, a “something,” out of the archive capable of redressing the affective balance both in relation to the history which was now made and the theatre itself.<sup>23</sup>

The exogenous conditions, however, are perennially unstable. For this theatre, as a concrete built presence detached from the national and indeed international kudos once associated with its founder, the pressures of the local loom much larger, especially in terms of the multiple communities of interest which a single regional, urban producing theatre has to represent. As British urban theorists such as Nigel Thrift and Phil Hubbard emphasize, the only constant feature of the urban environment is the never-ending capacity for change.<sup>24</sup> The urban is always in a state of flux responding to social, political, and economic imperatives which have the power to sustain, constrain, or at worst destroy its major representative cultural institutions. In that respect the theatre building itself takes on the characteristics and function of an archive: every observable or indeed remembered trace of physical remodeling and repurposing creates a dynamic, inhabitable repository of previous histories. Positioned, unlike the old playhouse, in the large-scale, open public space of Birmingham’s civic center, the theatre has been much subjected to the consequences of what Hubbard has dubbed “civic boosterism”: high-profile and extremely expensive adjacent building projects.<sup>25</sup> What has been willed tangibly into existence is an idea of the city which has compelled a reciprocal, and at key moments financially disastrous, thinking through the spatial reorganization and enlargement of the theatre. This in turn, over the last decade, has brought about a significant shift in the relationships between archive, archivist/s, historian/s, and history.

In 2012 the theatre itself intervened to recognize the cultural capital represented by its history. Securing a substantial grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund in advance of its 2013 centenary celebration entailed a commitment to the importance of community engagement and the involvement of volunteers—now an increasingly visible phenomenon in creative industry management. This initiative coincided with the building of the brand new £189 million Library of

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 225, quoted in Claire Cochrane “Facing the Face of the Other: The Case of the Nia Centre,” in Cochrane and Robinson, *Theatre History and Historiography*, 122.

<sup>24</sup> Phil Hubbard, *City* (London: Routledge, 2006), 95–96.

<sup>25</sup> Hubbard, *City*, 86–87.



The Rep & The Library of Birmingham

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Birmingham to which the refurbished and extended theatre is now physically joined. During the necessary period of closure, the old theatre came back into use for productions and an exhibition of archival materials was displayed as an evocative trail within the spaces of their original home before going out on tour. The volunteers, nearly all older women retired from distinguished professional careers, were given preliminary instructions from a Library archivist and set the task of selecting and facilitating the digitization of a few thousand documentary images taken from a range of records covering the one hundred years.

The ultimate, intended destination was an online celebration of the archive linked to the theatre's website. The result once I finally caught up with what was happening in 2017 was an unusable mess, partly technological and partly due to an alarming disjunction between enthusiasm and poorly assimilated curatorial skills.

At the same time, the wider urban economy had gone into meltdown. The government austerity measures to which I refer above impacted with particular ferocity on local authority capacity for public services. By late 2015, the opening hours of the Library had been much reduced along with the dream of a fully worked out creative collaboration with the theatre. For a while the theatre even lost its jointly managed entrance for evening performance.<sup>26</sup> Library staff either left voluntarily or were made redundant: a loss which led to immense difficulties in maintaining what may be the equivalent of miles of archival holdings for the largest local authority in Europe. In early 2019 I discovered that the Library was no longer an automatic destination for theatre records. Nothing had been sent there since about 2008; documents were stored in the theatre's basement, and the majority of data relating to the work of the theatre was stored electronically on a server which gets routinely overfull. Anarchy threatened to return.

And yet. Probing the Derridean notion of an archive that "anarchives" itself took me to the work of the cultural theorist Erin Manning who has suggested that the moment of the anarchive can be seen as "a repertory of traces of events. The traces are not inert, but are carriers of potential. They are reactivatable and their reactivation helps trigger a new event which continues the creative process from which they came, but in a new iteration."<sup>27</sup> What then undoubtedly happened in Birmingham was a stronger sense of wider ownership of a reactivated archive generated through the labors of the volunteer group operating more or less autonomously. Following my intervention, they began to work more strategically with a timeline of key productions carrying selected materials from the Library, which were then scanned in the theatre with a view to curating a better-organized website. Selections of scanned photographs were displayed in the theatre foyer along with themed costumes taken from the theatre's wardrobe and suspended from the foyer ceiling. Audiences were physically surrounded by visible traces of the theatre's history, and, importantly, much of this celebrated the post-1971 record. It was also interesting to observe the choices made. What

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<sup>26</sup> Claire Cochrane, "Birmingham Rep, Youth and Community and the Products and Possibilities of Precarity," *Research in Drama Education* 22, no.1 (2017): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2016.1263561>.

<sup>27</sup> Erin Manning, *The Colour of Time—Anarchive*, Manning's website, accessed April 7, 2022, <http://erinmovement.com/the-colour-of-time-anarchive>.



was recalled from the past was more varied, less academically authorized, a little more perhaps of what the people wanted rather than what they ought to have.

The realization that the kind of existent objects which laid the foundations for my history/s were by then largely digitally stored opened up huge concerns for the future of this archive. As Jo Robinson points out in relation to her own work “digital technologies—indeed the very process of digitization—are certainly no panacea for preservation.” The “digital architectures,” within which even the most carefully planned research projects are built, pass into obsolescence or become too expensive to maintain.<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that in 1994 Derrida was alert to the utility of new technology as he recalled a beautiful morning in California working at his computer:

I pushed a certain key to “save” a text undamaged, in a hard and lasting way, to protect marks from being erased, so as thus to ensure salvation and *indemnity*, to stock, to accumulate, and, in what is at once, the same thing and something else, to make the sentence thus available for printing and for reprinting, and for reproduction?<sup>29</sup>

There is no guarantee of undamaged textual “salvation and indemnity” and indeed the acceleration of technological innovation offers even greater potential for unanticipated or inadvertent damage to undermine the most assiduous attempts to capture the perceived richness of the theatrical event. If reliance on the digital provoked anxiety in 2019, that pales into insignificance beside the shock administered to the external environment by what happened next. The questions about what exists, did exist, and will exist in the future perhaps as “something else” were about to become even more complex.

COVID-19 came in early 2020. As the global pandemic struck, threatening the most fundamental practices and assumptions of quotidian existence, theatres, libraries, and archives shut along with most other places of collective interaction. Birmingham Rep, with a newly installed artistic leadership proclaiming a commitment to creating a national home for truly popular theatre,<sup>30</sup> was in the midst of yet another period of financial precarity. From my position as observer, just one of the causes could be attributed to City Council collaboration

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<sup>28</sup> Jo Robinson, “Digital Histories, Digital Landscapes: New Possibilities of Arranging the Record,” in Cochrane and Robinson, *Methuen Handbook to Theatre History*, 273.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 22.

<sup>30</sup> Sean Foley, appointed in early 2019, has an extensive and award-winning record of performance and production especially in popular comedy. There are established connections to London’s West End theatre industry: <http://birmingham.livingmag.co.uk/sean-foley/>, accessed April 7, 2022.

with corporate development interests. This necessitated the diversion of well-known access routes into the city center and the erection of hoardings around the theatre which isolated it from the major ongoing structural refashioning of the surrounding square. But even as the ambitious visual aesthetic of the new square was eventually revealed, in the Covid-controlled new reality, all attempts to sustain engagement with artists as well as audiences had to be conducted virtually in a digitally authorized existence. When the theatre tentatively began to restore a semblance of productive, peopled normality in the autumn of 2021, there had been wholesale staff redundancies. There was no time or energy for the necessary organization of volunteers. The archive scanning activity had ceased. As I complete this essay the theatre has just unveiled the results of what historically is the fifth iteration of attempts to attract audiences into reconfigured spaces for social interaction. The new front entrance from the square takes patrons directly to newly positioned and refurbished bars and discrete seating areas, all framed in elegant blonde wood. The ambience feels like a tonal shift—one more in keeping with the commercial West End credentials of the now not so new Artistic Director. At first glance it seems there will be little room available for archival displays.

As I write I am *making* more history, braiding together my perceptions of the endogenous and exogenous constructed from my literal standpoint in a physical environment. The somatic response provoked in me is imbued with the traces of a previous environment now archived in my memory, but equally capable of generating documents preserved for future scrutiny. There are palpably real materials which my ideological standpoint is thinking into a history, but the palpably real lacks an independent existence until the archive as repository is secured. Very recently, however, the Rep's deep history has unexpectedly revived to offer a way forward. What appears to be personal memorabilia possibly kept by Jackson himself has emerged out of the vaults of the venerable Victorian Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. The request to relocate these deposited items: little water color costume designs, sketches for stage settings, posters etc., all dating back to the first and second decades of the twentieth century, has renewed the relationship with the Library, and a new Head of Archives pleased to accept this material and make it available for public access and viewing. Despite the traumas of the past few years, there is the hope that bringing together archivists, historians, volunteers, and theatre personnel may achieve a settlement. In particular, there is a need to address the maintenance of the records which were, and will continue to be, "digitally-born." We cannot permanently future-proof this archive against the depredations of constant flux, but in providing, however tentatively, a safe haven, we can make provision for the organic growth out of which histories evolve and are made.

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