

FROM THE EDITOR

Reclamation

Mermaids. Clowns. Sign-mime. Experimental theatre. Although the authors within this issue explore a variety of topics within theatre history, each engages with the process of reclaiming the past. Collectively, they ask us to consider fundamental historiographical questions: Where are the gaps and silences within theatre history? Why do these glaring omissions exist and continue to persist? How might computational tools help reveal biases within theatre history scholarship? In answering these questions, the authors invite readers to consider how reclamation of the past can help us better understand our current conditions.

In contrast to previous studies that focus on the relationship between femininity and visibility in women’s aquatic performances, Sunny Stalter-Pace’s “Disappearing Mermaids: Staging Women’s Mobility through Aquatic Performance at the New York Hippodrome” takes a deep dive into the Progressive Era—a period marked by political upheaval, technological innovation, and increased immigration and internal migration. Here, Stalter-Pace asks readers to reconsider how the political landscape impacted both aquatic women performers (the titular ‘disappearing mermaids’) and spectators of this important cultural institution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In retracing the legacies of these performers, Stalter-Pace ultimately finds that, “the audience’s ambivalent fascination with the disappearing mermaids stood in for a broader cultural interest in and anxiety over modern [young] white women’s mobility.” In so doing, Stalter-Pace not only “reveal[s] the previously concealed” anxieties of white women’s growing social status of the past but also provides greater understanding of the contested terrain of Black girls’ twenty-first-century mermaid performances.

Matthew McMahan and Laurence Senelick’s “Send in the Clowness: The Problematic Origins of Female Circus Clowns” utilizes a variety of sources—from advertisements, to interviews, to human-interest pieces in trade publications—to recover the history of early women clown performers of the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. By unearthing the past, McMahan and Senelick reveal that, “until the latter half of the twentieth century, to be both a woman and a clown was a paradox, one that reveals a host of attitudes related to the very nature of the clown archetype within the circus.” Through detailed firsthand accounts, coupled with exhaustive archival research and a nuanced narrative voice, McMahan and Senelick introduce readers to a rich tradition of women circus clowns that has heretofore been a marginalized chapter within theatre history.

In “The Race for Rehabilitation: Sign-Mime, the National Theatre of the Deaf, and Cold War Internationalism” Patrick McKelvey places the National Theatre of the Deaf’s (NTD) development of “sign-mime” and cultural exchange alongside Moscow’s Theatre of Mime and Gesture within the context of the “the cultural Cold War” and the “racialization of rehabilitation in the United States.”

McKelvey ultimately finds that “NTD’s internationalist ethos was an affordance of whiteness that inflected the terms upon which [lead actor Bernard] Bragg began to imagine deaf theatrical practices that promised to exceed the bounds of rehabilitation.” By providing a detailed look into the theatrical technique of sign-mime, governmental investment, and the problematic nature of “rehabilitation,” McKelvey not only helps us understand Bragg’s departure from NTD but also why “an infrastructure for disability theatre that was not only after, but beyond, rehabilitation” remains important.

Miguel Escobar Varela uses computational tools as a means of reclaiming the past and furthering data-driven theatre history. In “The People and Places of Experimental Theatre Scholarship: A Computational Overview,” readers discover how scholarly biases and omissions are deeply embedded within the simple search term “experimental.” Escobar Varela concludes that “the data analyzed so far indicate that the scope of experimental theatre, as represented in scholarship, became increasingly diverse over time (even if men continue to be more associated with experimental work than women).” His data reveal that regardless of widening the geographical search beyond the borders of Europe and North America, scholars continue to associate the term “experimental theatre” with male artists. Escobar Varela’s goal then, is to use this study—which relies on the systematic interpretation of individual instances—as a springboard for larger quantitative studies that reveal “positive developments” and attend to “truly dire imbalances” within theatre scholarship.

Though the theme of reclamation guides each study, I hope that readers will also discern moments of continued absences. What other stories need to be told? Why do they remain untold? What methodologies might help us recover these stories?