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Introduction

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The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832

Edited by Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor

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[-] Abstract and Keywords

This introduction provides an overview of recent critical extent to which recent scholarship has successfully over-extended the historiographic narrative, which held that little drama by male comic playwrights, was written or staged in Britain of Wilde and Shaw. In place of this narrative, there is no women writers and practitioners, of the extent to which discursive and embodied levels, and of the texts and re-archival archive of hegemonic attitudes about class, race, and gender, actively shaping, revising, and contesting.

Keywords: [theatre history](#), [illegitimate theatre](#), [race](#), [empire](#), [declass](#)

The presences and absences embodied in sources and archives (facts collected, thematized, and processed) are neutral or natural. They are created...Mentions and which history is the synthesis.

(Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*)¹

At the opening of his contribution to the present collection of essays in this chapter—‘Theorizing the Performative Event’—ascribe to a narrative which has been scarcely imaginable a generation or two ago’. The Oxford University Press promote these collections as ‘a simple physical fact of this weighty book that reveals just how much comprising forty chapters and some 330,000 words, this volume is a scholarly engagement with Georgian theatre and theatre history twenty-five years ago.

For far too long the period of theatre encompassed by the dominant narrative of the ‘decline of drama’, a story which would have excluded the playwrights of the Restoration and the works of Wilde and Shaw, drama suffered a chronic period of malaise that was only occasionally broken by works which were themselves no more than exceptions that proved the rule. I find this narrative in ascendance. As recently as 1996—breaking *Cities of the Dead* brought a new critical vocabulary. [L. Styan's *The English Stage: A History* \(p. 2\) of Drama a](#)

the 1720s and 1830s using just three texts: John Gay's *To Conquer* (1773), and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The* authorized version of Georgian theatre history that it re-remembering in a period otherwise forgettable for its g tragedy or pantomime, and not a word about the many

So entrenched was this history that it retains to this day university curricula, and remains in many ways *the* hist theatres on both sides of the Atlantic. Nonetheless, the thoroughly dismantled the blatant white patriarchy with fraying assumptions about aesthetic autonomy and binaries (and they certainly *are* ideological) that underg artistic versus the 'popular', drama versus entertainme early 1830s.³ It is an unfortunate irony that the Georgia occlusion of its own complex vitality.

It is this complex vitality that we are now in the process Rolph Trouillot because they eloquently capture what s scholars of literature and culture in general since the er materialism—have learned to do: to look and listen for inherit. In the case of the Georgian theatre this focus ha performance, the afterpieces and entr'acte entertainme epilogues that occupied the same space and time as five performance—scenography, costume, architecture, m the *communities* of practitioners—actors, playwrights, the stage, with a greater recognition that theatre was in consumption and of professionalization in powerful an

These key lines of critical enquiry, which are of course v different theatre-historical narrative, one this *Handboo* perspectives. The contents page alone offers a clear ser developments, and to give space to the cultural practice within the historiography. You will not find chapters de and epilogues, or afterpieces. These should not be seen positing these areas as discrete chapters it was the edit recursive feature of the *Handbook* and that contributor their topics that look beyond the London stage or the n Johnson's consideration of theatrical culture in colonia that give attention to thriving provincial stages across tl collectively, the chapters in this book paint a picture of

generic fluidity and experimentation; of continual trans-
arenas of performance (in which the very notion of 'leg-
performance that spread far beyond London; and of pr
aspect of production, as playwrights, performers, and r

At its best, this new history of Georgian drama has not
displaced. Julia Swindells is typically incisive when she
recuperate the 'popular' as a discrete category of class
cultural productivity, confirming class prejudice rather
we are now moving towards an understanding of eight
popular cultures were deeply enmeshed at discursive a
playbill at Drury Lane or Covent Garden—where traged
constituted a nightly continuum of performance—to re
bastions of 'official' culture that they so anxiously claim
heralding of legitimate drama was itself a highly comm
for which alternative sites and modes of entertainment
have come to appreciate the doublethink of Romantic t
and Byron—writers who fine-tuned the antitheatricalis
default discourse—desperately sought the revenue and
more on which see the section 'Theatre and the Roman

What is no longer in question is the cultural centrality o
'The metropolitan theatres formed a kind of Grand Cer
networks, a place of meeting for individuals but also of
acknowledgement has come a concomitant awareness
politics of the period is now often broached precisely in
structures of parliamentary debate, of elections (especi
patriotism, and of political protest, were all self-consci
particular, the playhouse was part of a dynamic web of
coffeehouses and taverns to the public squares and ple
—and we are only just beginning to grasp the cogency o
theatre of politics sadly lies beyond the scope of this *H*
theatre sits at its very centre. This emphasis should be u
studies and cultural histories of eighteenth- and early n
of approaches, but—again against the theoretical back
almost all share a commitment in some form to reading
and spaces of dramatic representation.

And it is in light of this political focus that the present vo
era proper (1714–1830) but rather the period 1737 to 18

discussion rather than fixed parameters, and many of the chapters in this *Handbook*, such as those by David Gauntlett (Ch. 13) and Bridget Orr (Ch. 35), for instance, need to be read in the context of the long eighteenth century in offering genealogies of the theatrical discourse. As Jim Davis (Ch. 9) contends that in theatre-historical terms, 1737 is the year of the Theatre Regulation Act. Nonetheless, 1737 is also the year of the British theatre. In 1737 the Licensing Act instituted the first system of censorship of drama that was to remain in place until 1968, and so silenced the voices of the kind written by the likes of John Gay and Henry Fielding. It was a serious enough political concern to merit the attentions of the state, and its deliberations explicitly aligned the state of drama with the state of the nation, which the Reform Act extended the franchise to the affluent. The historical junctures at which Parliament saw fit to intervene in doing so recognized (and sought to assert control over) the power of the theatre.

I do not wish to suggest that the political emphasis of some of the chapters of this *Handbook*, is only a matter of registering the performance of formal censorship, as writers and performers found new ways to speak about the unspeakable. Far more fundamental is the antiquarianism of much theatre history before the final decades of the eighteenth century, on the recognition that, to adapt John Barrell's words, the theatre was not just a mirror for, but theatre alone.⁵ In this way, the most exciting (p. 5) work of the eighteenth century is found in the texts and records of performance a rich and varied world of class, race, and gender—attitudes which theatrical representation was contesting. Our work has come to understand the Georgian theatre as a mirror and not simply a mirror for, the period's structures of feeling.

Almost every chapter in this *Handbook* is informed by the renewed prominence to two areas of research—those relating to the history of the theatre which is not just the history of theatre is production and performance repertoire of historical narratives and concepts we employ in the eighteenth century. In many ways the renewal of interest in the history of the theatre is instigated by feminist scholarship, which has posited the history of the theatre as a form that habitually negotiates the history of gender and sexuality. As already mentioned, we now understand the history of the theatre as a form in which playwrights and performers flourished, and some of the most exciting work of the eighteenth century recognize the extent to which these theatrical women operated in the public sphere as professionals and celebrities who possessed a significant voice. Equally, criticism shaped by the concerns and vocabularies of the long eighteenth century, in the Indian subcontinent in particular, were p

drama a means of complicating the traditional binaries more intricate histories of empire and racism in Britain peoples involved acts of imagining that were riven with grappled with the epistemological challenges of coming the necessary implications of this imperial power for er has argued, theatrical practice at this time was not just a space in which the nation sought to make sense of itself

Of course, for all that the new account of the Georgian theatre of an earlier historiography and recuperated vital content much still to do and we would do well to be alert to the questions remain unanswered. How, for instance, should we of a nightly playhouse programme that routinely shuttles farce? Might the synoptic narratives we have developed attends just to a single night at the theatre, encompassing we push the imperative of recuperation? And how effective worked hard to 'recover' significant and talented playwrights have scarcely been felt at the level of commercial theatre between the emphases of own scholarship and the performance where Georgian drama continues to be represented all over Sheridan? This *Handbook* does include the voice of one who tirelessly to restore the period's repertoire to the stage, or related questions. However, this collection does do it braid their synopses with arguments and queries which current scholarly practice and also suggest cogent new approaches to the Georgian period.

Moreover, Julia and I have given special attention to one researched and under-theorized in our field: the audience to read performance in ways which either ignore the audience's passive body—a kind of mass *tabula rasa*—which was a set of values of the dramas its members paid to watch. If we want to understand of Georgian theatrical practice we must go much further into the intertwining of and disjunctions between individual and collective fluidity, and the political and affective operations of the theatre. The *Handbook*, most obviously but not exclusively Betsy Brantley's more sophisticated and nuanced account of the tricky interplay

Finally, this *Handbook* makes clear that in arriving at a new understanding of the theatre we are also shedding new light on the culture we

chapters suggest, modern theatre—we might say the c more to the cultural practices, institutions, and formati admitted. David Thomas (Ch. 5), for instance, contends theatrical establishment shows that it has to some exte Licensing Act of 1737; Matthew Buckley (Ch. 26) defines mass-produced vehicle of emotional intoxication’, a pr product, its most successful commodity form’; while, b 8) notes that the debates of the 1832 Select Committee: ‘popular’ and fetishized the ‘literary’ was emerging as p

(p. 7) In this respect it is important that the first and last live as much as the past of which we write. Angie Sandh ideological inheritors of the Enlightenment, in particula under the very banner of inclusion and meritocracy, wh painful attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to use drama to population its sanitized version of history has left out. I security of pastness, Sandhu and Wood suggest the cor look and listen for the absences and silences in the cult

Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and* (1995), 48–9.

⁽²⁾ J. L. Styan, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and* (1996), 247–301.

⁽³⁾ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cam

⁽⁴⁾ Gillian Russell, ‘Theatrical Culture’, in Thomas Keyn *English Literature 1740–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge U

⁽⁵⁾ See John Barrell, ‘Introduction’, in Barrell (ed.), *Pain 1700–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3: ‘T alone’.

⁽⁶⁾ Daniel O’Quinn, *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imp* (Hopkins University Press, 2005).

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