Theatre Survey 55:1 (January 2014)
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doi:10.1017/S0040557413000501

FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

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Asking Large Questions In Small Spaces

Much work has been done over the past several decades to delineate new theatre historiographies and reimagine theoretical approaches to telling the history of the theatre. Growing, in part, out of the rejection of positivism and the standard histories of institutions and power structures, postmodern thinking opened up new avenues of looking at theatre history, often by inverting the traditional perspective. One avenue of particular interest is the growing field of microhistory, which seems particularly suited to theatre but which, to date, has not been fully realized in our field.

As exemplified by the works of recent cultural and social historians, microhistory eschews the larger quantification and generalizations of history as social science, focusing instead on the particular, the specialized, the everyday, even the ordinary, to understand the agency of life on a smaller scale. According to Giovanni Levi, "Microhistorians have concentrated on the contradictions of normative systems and therefore on the fragmentation, contradictions and plurality of viewpoints which make all systems fluid and open."[1] Consequently, microhistorians have reinvigorated the narrative (or the neonarrative) as a vital tool for analyzing the normative and revealing the subjective nature of historical discourse. By highlighting the individual exceptions, examining archival evidence in extraordinary detail, and retelling the story through contextualized narrative, microhistory seeks to expose how larger systems and institutions react and function not just at

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557413000501 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the edges of history but through the normal lives of those whose agency affected and reflected the greater world around them. In doing so, such histories reveal in greater depth how those not in power, those not at the top, those whose lives make up the majority, handle both the exception and the normative. Accounts of individual events, physical spaces, audience, actors, and performances are often told from a perspective beyond the norm in traditional history. Microhistory examines in great detail the highly individualized stories that reveal the larger structures through the commonplace, the everyday, the nontraditional centers of power.

Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó give an excellent summary of microhistory that is particularly relevant to theatre. Emphasizing the small-scale approach, they present a three-point definition that deserves quoting at length.

> Microhistorians hold a microscope and not a telescope in their hands. Focusing on certain cases, persons and circumstances, microhistory allows an intensive historical study of the subject, giving a completely different picture of the past from the investigations about nations, states, or social groupings, stretching over decades, centuries, or whatever *longue durée*. Similarly to classical Greek plays, where we can find a threefold unity of place, time and action, the microhistorical approach creates a focal point, collecting the different rays coming from the past, and this lends it a real force. Microhistory, however—and this is the second and not any more evident element of its definition—has an objective that is much more far-reaching than that of a case study: microhistorians always look for the answers for "great historical questions" . . . when studying small objects. . . . And finally, the third main feature of microhistory, and here first of all the original Italian *microhistoria* is meant, is the stress put on agency. For microhistorians, people who lived in the past are not merely puppets on the hands of great underlying forces of history, but they are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors."[2]

This special edition is designed to demonstrate how microhistory may be an ideal methodology for exploring theatre history. Each essay uses various elements of microhistory. These are not necessarily definitive examples, but instead the beginnings of a new avenue for theatre history, a way in which the stirrings in small rooms might reflect on great stories. Odai Johnson's piece, "'Rowme' on the Street (A Cheshire 'Cat Massacre')," presents a microhistorical view of events in Chester during the sixteenth century concerning the texts and mysterious disappearance (and reappearance) of the city's cycle plays. In both scope and detail Johnson's essay (its title alluding, of course, to Robert Darnton's early microhistorical work *The Great Cat Massacre*) manages microhistory as a particularly apt tool for the examination and telling of this curious and insightful story.

Stephen Huff's "The Impresarios of Beale Street: African American and Italian American Theatre Managers in Memphis, 1900–1915" takes microhistory to early twentieth-century America and refines our understanding of race and commerce by telling a specific story within a small space bounded by the larger implications of society, economy, and politics. In "The Mysterious Victory of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557413000501 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Newsboys: The Grand Duke Theatre's 1874 Challenge to the Theatre Licensing Law," Michelle Granshaw uses microhistory to examine a particular event on a particular date regarding a particular location, demonstrating the specificity that both delineates and resides within Magnússon and Szijártó's microscope, while still relating it to the larger picture of the Panic of 1873. Finally, Marvin Carlson's "Microhistory in the Middle East: The Case of Ibn Dāniyāl" exposes us to a specific person and his actions within the frame of grander events. In this instance, the issue of microhistorical agency is demonstrated through the unlikely product that Ibn Dāniyāl managed despite the times and the culture, showing how microhistory can inform the larger picture through specific accomplishments.

Admittedly, microhistory is a relative latecomer to the crowded field of methodologies, having remained somewhat on the periphery of historical studies until the 1980s when E. P. Thompson, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Carlo Ginzburg, and others made it the center of their research. Since then, writers such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Simon Schama have popularized microhistory as a viable method as a way to tell stories beyond the positivist bricks-and-mortar studies of earlier generations of social and political histories. With this edition of *Theatre Survey*, perhaps microhistory will find a new avenue as a valuable tool for telling the history of the theatre as well.

ENDNOTES

1. Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 93–113, at 107.

2. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013), 4–5.

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