

Series Preface

This series of volumes provides access to a compendium of the best and most significant scholarship published on European performance practice over the last half century or so. The featured articles and book chapters provide a comprehensive introduction to many of the major past and current developments in the field, emphasizing acting, performance spaces, staging and audiences, from the Middle Ages to the present day. Each of the four volumes covers a specific period: these, with inevitable overlaps dictated by geographical and other concerns, are 1400–1580, 1580–1750, 1750–1900 and 1900 to the present. The volume editors have selected those publications that most usefully represent performance practice within their own specialist period. The strong focus on British theatre is complemented by European material and references.

The timeframe spanned by the four volumes witnessed striking changes in definitions of the term ‘performance’. The editors of the first and fourth volumes confront this challenge from different perspectives. Philip Butterworth and Katie Normington remind us that the term ‘performance’ was not used in conjunction with what we now define as ‘theatrical performance’ prior to 1580. For the purpose of considering medieval performance they insist that the term must encompass

the conscious and deliberate organization, execution, perception and reception of theatre and its aftermath to people who choose to witness and participate in it. This involves indoor and outdoor performance – both formal and informal, theatre of the streets and the deliberate organization and construction of stage and spectator space.

By the twentieth century, as Nadine Holdsworth and Geoff Willcocks demonstrate, with reference to Richard Schechner, ‘the very term “performance” has taken on multiple meanings and infiltrated numerous disciplines within the arts and humanities’, whether through Goffman’s work on performance in everyday life or Butler’s on the performance of gendered identity. Thus their task is not so much to define performance as to limit definition to a focus on

Performance ... that is, in some sense, theatrical in that it has been created with an audience in mind, whether that audience is deliberately party to the transaction through the act of purchasing a ticket or turning up at an allotted time or inadvertent as with works such as happenings or street theatre that address both a knowing and unknowing audience in its broadest sense.

While performance practice, especially at the beginning and end of our period, is not necessarily confined within purpose-built spaces, theatre buildings and the performances they engendered, through their impact on acting, design, technology and audiences, figure in many of the extracts anthologized in these four volumes.

Each volume has been compiled with an awareness of the historiographical background to the study of theatre practices in different periods. Butterworth and Normington provide a useful

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account of the development of scholarship on medieval theatre prior to the twentieth century and more recently through the work of Chambers, Wickham, Kolve, Meredith and Twycross, showing how the REED project has provided greatly enhanced resources for a new generation of medieval scholars, enabling them to examine medieval performance practices more closely. In response to these advances, the first volume provides a cross-section of performance documents as well as critical discussion. In Volume II, Robert Henke and M.A. Katritzky provide a rich insight into the influence of the Renaissance on European theatre practices and the convergences and development of different practices, organizing their materials under Gurr's 'four estates' of theatre: playing spaces, staging, actors and audiences. The impact of space on performance – on acting, setting, design and dramaturgy – is closely considered, while notions of acting 'character' and acting the 'passions' are also examined. Audiences become increasingly more diverse and complex during this period, a theme followed up by Jim Davis in Volume III, which covers a period of greatly expanding audience demand for professional theatre, in both its popular and its high cultural manifestations. Larger theatres, new technologies, advances in scene design and lighting, the cult of the celebrity actor, as well as debates about the nature of acting itself, are among the many factors that influenced European performance during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The rise of the director towards the end of the nineteenth century gathers momentum in the twentieth century, when many directors and practitioners demonstrate a pan-European range of new approaches to theatrical practice, covered in Volume IV. Holdsworth and Willcocks are also mindful of the strong focus on the social and political dimensions of performance during this period, the notion of spectator as witness and the extraordinary cross-fertilization of performance practices throughout Europe.

The chosen chronological subdivision, just one of many ways in which these four volumes could have been organized, reflects a widespread approach in performance practice studies. The editors have worked from the premise that each volume has its own idiosyncratic voice, most appropriate to the period under consideration, while maintaining a focus on performance practices as they have developed and varied across time and space. This selection offers the reader a compact and reliable introduction to the vast range of publications generated by scholarship in this field and provides reference pointers for further study. We trust that this representative cross-section of articles, book chapters and records will serve as an invaluable resource for those wishing to study, teach or recreate aspects of the many and varied facets of performance practice in Europe from medieval times up until the present day.

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Series Editors

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