

# The Literary London Journal

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**David Worrall, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage*, hardback, 305 pages, Cambridge University Press, 2013, £65.00, US\$99.00. ISBN: 978-1-107-04360-2.**

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Following on from *Theatric Revolution: Drama, Censorship and Romantic Period Subcultures, 1773-1832* (2006), *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality, 1787-1832: The Road to the Stage* (2007) and *Harlequin Empire: Race, Ethnicity and the Drama of the Popular Enlightenment* (2007), this is the fourth book by David Worrall on the Georgian stage. According to its preface, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* arises from Worrall's realisation that his earlier work afforded no answers to the question of 'how to conceptualize for analysis theatrical performance in the state of its historical activity' (vii), and thus represents 'an attempt to evolve a working, predictive method of theatre history, which can then be further adapted by other scholars to a range of performance types' (vii). This attempt, as the book's subtitle indicates, draws heavily on 'assemblage' theory, as first articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) and subsequently adapted by Manuel DeLanda in three works, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (2006), the essays collected by him as *Deleuze: History and Science* (2010), and his latest book on the topic, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* (2011). Assemblage theory, drawn variously by Worrall from Deleuze, Guattari and DeLanda, is taken as useful to this book's aims since it helps to 'model Georgian theatre in the state of its contemporary activity, that is, as a working and materialised economy of performance' (2). Such a model is of particular value as this book insists a great deal on the size and complexity of that contemporary activity.

'[A]s far as any robust empirical method of recovery is concerned when linked to figures of consumption, Georgian theatre was the nation's dominant culturally expressive form in the long eighteenth century' (1). This is the assumption on which

*Celebrity, Performance, Reception* rests, and although those working on the novel, the periodical press or sermons in this period may beg to differ, Worrall never swerves from his argument for the statistical pre-eminence of the stage. First, he points out that the theatre achieved both massive cultural impact in the capital and in the provinces and that its presence and economic impact can be measured with greater accuracy than other contemporary cultural forms. Of course, there is a distinction to be made between greatest measurable cultural impact and greatest cultural impact *tout court*, and Worrall is careful to stick to his statistics, even if he does occasionally come close to crossing the lines of his own nuance. When contrasting London theatre audiences with those visiting the Royal Academy exhibitions, he argues, for example, that 'compared to the scale of the visual spectacle and capitalization presented in the nearby theatres, the influence of paintings was low (prints, circulated to disaggregated sets of consumers, function in similar ways to readers of books)' (39). Again, in the final sentence of the conclusion, we might read sceptically the rousing peroration that 'Whether measured by extension or intensity, the contemporary theatrical assemblage existed as a materialized presence on a scale unequalled by any other cultural form' (237).

What matters, though, is not the settling of such an impossible distinction as being the most prestigious cultural form of the 18th century, but Worrall's undoubtedly correct insistence on the scale of the theatrical world in Georgian England. The headline statistic, quoted in the blurb, that, by 1800, London had as many theatre seats for sale as the city's population, is an instructive one to keep in mind. The figure, approximately one million, is reached by summing the number of seats available during the course of a year at the Haymarket, Covent Garden and Drury Lane and comparing it to the results of the 1801 Census, which set London's population at just shy of 1.1 million inhabitants. Every now and then, Worrall will remind us of the numbers involved by using a similar calculation to work out roughly how many people will have seen one of the productions he studies. With (in this case, undeclared) allowance for empty seats or returning spectators, we are told, for instance, that near to ten thousand people would have watched the opening seven-night run of *The Siege of Curzola* at the Haymarket in summer 1786. How this all stacks up with the numbers of those reading Beckford's *Vathek*, published in December of the same year, is, however, ultimately secondary to the way that *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* makes us see the importance, in Georgian England, of the theatre in its own right.

It is the scale of the theatre world that has led Worrall to use assemblage theory as a means to model it. In what can at times be a tough to read introduction, the book's adaptation of sociological theory to literary history is first sketched out, before being substantiated through each of the subsequent chapters' particular foci. Broadly, an assemblage is a kind of network (and Worrall provides a useful appendix comparing assemblage theory to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory), whose 'identity is not only embodied in its materiality but also expressed by it' (1). This means that, in the particular context of the Georgian 'theatrical assemblage', the identity of this network is the result of a great many factors, both human (actors, audience members, managers and so on) and non-human (theatre buildings, physical locations, the time of day, economic forces and more). Meaning in the theatrical

assemblage is created through a process of 'textual codings and subsequent textual decodings' that occurs where performance meets specific 'performance populations' (14). Such meaning can then be stored in the network and transmitted across it. This model, particularly as I have roughly drawn it here, may seem vague, but its value for this book resides in how it nevertheless creates a larger framework for both the empirical tracing of a performance's historical moment and the analysis of 'the materiality of their implicit cultural meanings' (14).

A little later on in the introduction, and in a movement that is symptomatic of this book's efforts to connect its theory and its object, the example of *The Separate Maintenance*, written by George Colman the Younger and produced at the Haymarket in Autumn 1779, is used to clarify what has been said about the Georgian theatrical assemblage so far. Worrall begins by pointing out a brief passage where the fashion for reading plays is mocked; he then reminds us that play-reading is, of course, part of the larger theatrical network. What happens next is a jump to James Cobb's 1787 farce *English Readings* and its satirising of play-reading in the provinces. *English Readings* was also produced at the Haymarket, but the larger idea here is that the critique of reading plays for pleasure 'as a minor subtheme present in both *The Separate Maintenance* and in Cobb's *English Readings* is a good incidental example of how fashionable knowledge was disseminated across the theatrical network, giving specific audiences an awareness of popular cultural practices' (21). This connection shows us how the assemblage stores knowledge but also how, to use DeLanda's term, it 'deterritorialises' it: Colman's and Cobb's plays occur at different times but make the same joke. From here, Worrall adds further examples of the complexities of the theatrical network as expressed through this 1779 production of *The Separate Maintenance*. Contemporary newspaper reports show, for example, how the press participated in the larger network by emphasising and storing information. At the same time, the play's prologue (preserved only in *The Public Advertiser's* report) appears to have commented bitterly on the patent theatres whose royal pre-eminence bent the London theatre world around them. This last observation, via some observations about how censorship also connected royal authority to the theatre, then leads Worrall to write of how a performance of *The King and the Miller of Mansfield* (written 1737) at Drury Lane in 1820 was interrupted by a boy, well aware of the status of the theatre, proposing a toast to Queen Caroline instead of to the King. My summary could continue, as Worrall does, with a return to the Haymarket and its peculiar position as a semi-legitimate stage, but my point here is that while there are discernible connections between Colman's play and everything mentioned with it, sometimes those connections feel inadequate. The virtue of the assemblage model is that it provides a rich framework for understanding the vast phenomenon of the Georgian stage, from patents to newspapers and actors to royalty. Its vice is, however, that, for all Worrall's claims for the particularities of each event within the assemblage, the reader is occasionally left unsure of where they are in the web, of what, that is to say, they might find between the little picture and the big one.

Such feelings diminish as the book goes on, and the assemblage model starts to prove its worth by helping to introduce several useful reassessments of the theatre in the period. One example of this comes in Worrall's second chapter, where he writes that 'No matter how obscure, [actors or actresses of middling rank] were all integral

components within the theatrical network and its national social assemblage reiterated through the inventory of the playhouses' (52). This provides a conceptual basis for a welcome attention to performers who are no longer well remembered, such as Dicky Suett, the D'Egville family, Margaret Cuyler and many others both professional and amateur. In this way, Worrall brings many remarkable insights and fragments of information into his work in a well-ordered and coherent manner. One example of this will suffice. Analysing a single entry in the Drury Lane accounts for a performance of *The Glorious First of June* on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1794, given as a benefit for the widows and orphans of English soldiers, Worrall reveals that neither Peter D'Egville nor his son James wished to join the rest of the cast in donating their evening's salary for charity, a decision redolent with the two French-born dancers' attitudes to their country of residence and perceivable at the same time as a tiny manifestation of the larger political trends tracked throughout the chapter. Even a bizarre closing quotation from DeLanda drawing on object-orientated programming languages as a way of explaining social interaction cannot spoil the effect, the vertigo of seeing the big and small of Georgian England's vast theatrical network all at once.

When not writing about such figures as the D'Egvides, Worrall's exploration of the assemblage provides much else that is of interest. A section on Edmund Kean in chapter four begins, for instance, by showing how the actor's rise to fame was actually dependent on the larger network in which he moved. Drury Lane may not have been full for his first performance of Shylock, but, as Worrall shows, many key movers and shakers of the theatrical assemblage were present to interpret and transmit his performance. This challenges many of the Romantic myths that have built up around Kean, as does the book's next point, regarding the actor's famous portrayal of Richard III. Here, the theatre's records show that Kean was no solitary genius but rather benefited greatly from a larger than usual series of rehearsals scheduled by the prompter Dibdin in the week before opening night, including what Worrall calls a 'possibly decisive fifth act final run-through on the day of the first performance' (104). Such new information is fascinating, consistent with the socio-economic basis of this book's theoretical approach, and does much to make up for some less well-formed judgments about David Garrick in the third chapter of the *Celebrity, Performance, Reception*.

The passage in question occurs in a chapter which aims to describe how the material aspects of the theatrical assemblage determine the identity of the celebrity actor. After making a series of excellent points about the impact of the Theatrical Fund (a pot of money maintained by the patent theatres as a way of supporting retired performers), and then describing the special financial arrangements James Quin and Garrick were able to negotiate, Worrall argues:

As far as the earliest stages of this process of celebrity development are concerned, if we consider his acting skills as separate from the managerial skills he later developed at Drury Lane, box-office draws such as Garrick exerted only a marginal effect on playhouses, while the whole system depended on the overall functional integrity of its salaried company and the management system which provided the framework within which the company itself could consistently prosper. (86)

The difficulty here lies in separating Garrick's acting from his managing, which seems particularly hard to do. Garrick's travels in France, for example, led him to introduce new technologies to the Drury Lane playhouse, but it is hard to say whether such an act was the exercise of a manager's prerogative or a performer's judgement. Similarly, Garrick's own practices in casting and rehearsal, as detailed in Tiffany Stern's *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (2000), would indicate that the actor-manager had a great deal of influence over what his fellow actors did on the stage, and thus within the larger theatrical framework as a whole. It is not unusual, for example, to find nostalgic writers longing for 'the age of Garrick' in the early 19th century, where the name of Garrick is synonymous both with a new style of acting and, beyond this, with a different kind of theatrical experience. As well as describing Garrick's 'marginal effect' on the playhouses, Worrall also claims in the next paragraph, still with the same aim of reducing the impact of this particular actor, that 'As far as performance history is concerned, the perception of the extraordinarily talented individuals endowed with special powers of textual interpretation probably only dates back as far as the career of Edmund Kean' (87). This is wrong: Garrick's performances were praised by Elizabeth Griffiths as a 'better comment on [Shakespeare's] Text, than all his Editors have been able to supply' in her preface to *The Morality of Shakespeare's Drama Illustrated* (1775), a sentiment anticipated by many others, including the poet Robert Lloyd (Garrick is 'the Comment of his Shakespear's Page') in 1760. This error, as with the uncomfortable attempt to separate actor and manager, is due to perhaps too strong an attachment to the assemblage model, which, even as it promotes a useful interest in the less-prominent members of the Georgian stage, nevertheless threatens, with its emphasis on the material, to give a limited view of such a various figure as Garrick.

To conclude, it is worth recalling Worrall's own words from the preface to this book, his declared aim to 'evolve a working, predictive method of theatre history which can then be further adapted by other scholars to suit a range of performance types' (vii). This is an ambitious goal, but *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* goes a long way towards justifying this endeavour. However, and in spite of its attractiveness, I confess for now to being more struck with those displays of Worrall's incredible knowledge of the minutiae of Georgian theatre than with their integration into a larger model. The wealth of information contained in these pages would make it a worthwhile read regardless of one's feelings about assemblage, while the larger theoretical argument adds an important but less immediately convincing dimension to the book: we absorb the new information eagerly and are provoked to new thinking by its unusual and suggestive framing.

### **To Cite This Article:**

James Harriman-Smith, 'Review of David Worrall, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage*.' *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11, Number 1 (Spring 2014): 72–76. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2014/harriman-smith.pdf>.