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reads

Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage

(Cambridge University Press, 2013)

by David Worrall

AT ITS BEST, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage* offers a stimulating revisionist analysis of both theatre-going and theatre-making during the eighteenth century: David Worrall transports his readers across London, the provinces, and America; he invites them to join the Turkish Ambassador (Yusuf Agha Effendi) during his 1794 trips to the London theatres; and re-stages the seductive performances that rendered Mary Stephens Wells and Elizabeth Younge celebrity figures. But *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* is also, unfortunately, a book that seems overly complicated by the very theory that it seeks to propagate.

Worrall's aim is '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' (Preface, n.p.). For this, he turns to social assemblage theory as developed by Manuel De Landa, whose own approach to social ontology is heavily influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guttari. *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* takes up De Landa's focus on the material dimension of assemblages, and likewise stresses complexity and non-linearity as key characteristics for analysis. Worrall quotes frequently (and sometimes at length) from De Landa's *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (2006), but as the Introduction to *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* makes clear, Worrall has adapted De Landa's theory in order to make it more suitable for a historical analysis of theatre practice. This fair (indeed, welcome) innovation is nevertheless compromised by direct citations of De Landa at crucial conclusive moments. These tend to impart the impression that the evidence has been selected and analysed with the deliberate aim to reinforce, rather than interrogate or nuance, the theoretical framework; and seem to suggest an uneasy match between the book's historical subject matter and desire to provide a '*predictive* explanation of materialized social complexity' (1, *emphasis mine*). In terms of methodology, Worrall's application of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory, or ANT (which, like social assemblage theory links human and material components) also proves somewhat problematic insofar that it features most consequentially in the form of an appendix that could—and arguably should—have been better integrated into the main argument.

But if *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* can be a demanding read, it can also be a very rewarding one. Worrall's argument unfolds over eight chapters, each crammed with fascinating material, including details about theatrical funds (Chapter 1), descriptions of rehearsal customs and attendance (Chapter 3), and

the extent to which the physical spaces of playhouses may have helped facilitate audience interaction (Chapter 4). As Worrall is quick to underline: 'all physical spaces, locations and embodiments of performance are expressive and comprise population components within a connected social network or assemblage of production and reception'(1). *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* develops into a book that is as much about the non-human (buildings and finances, for example) as it is about actors, playwrights, managers and audiences. Defined as 'the outcome of the interaction between the performer in the playhouse, the playhouse itself and the playhouse audience' (14), Worrall stresses that the assemblage is, therefore, always a *social assemblage*.

Although the chapters are somewhat uneven – there is much internal repetition, for example – several significant lines of argument emerge. These include, notably, Worrall's insistence that successive representations of a play constitute 'reiterations but not repetitions' (47). Reiteration, as he goes on to explain, amounts to 'the principal characteristic whose territorializing effect confers stability on the assemblage' (53) and proves significant to later chapters. Also important, as highlighted by the book's title, is the topic of theatrical celebrity. This is pursued most directly in Chapters 3 and 4 (on Garrick, Kean and Siddons), wherein Worrall argues for the need to redirect our gaze from the star player to the player's interaction with his or her fellow actors. Worrall provides interesting examples of how actresses working within the same company regularly played off/against each other's reputations. In this respect, his discussion of the careers of Sarah Siddons and Mary Stephens Wells is wonderfully thought-provoking. The two Drury Lane actresses, Worrall explains, 'worked within the same assemblage, although at different levels of its reception gradient' (75) – a fact that enabled the younger Wells to carefully select the roles that would encourage reviewers to compare her career to that of Siddons. Worrall also makes persuasive claims for the links between the theatre and the newspapers, but it is a shame that Daniel O'Quinn's *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium, 1770–1790* (2011) probably appeared too late for Worrall to examine his argument's many points of contact with that book.

In Worrall's quantitative study (defined both 'materially' and 'chronologically', 3), finances, predictably, take centre stage, proving that 'Georgian theatre was always a place operating under conditions of raw capitalism' (86). Many of his calculations rest upon overt assumptions (such as 'two-thirds-full houses', 127) but the confident conclusions drawn from these figures need to be taken with a pinch of salt. (Although glossed in a footnote, Worrall's estimated capacity of 3,000 spectators for Henry Holland's Drury Lane Theatre is likely to rest uneasily with the majority of readers accustomed to the generally accepted figure of c. 3,600.) It would also have been interesting to contemplate how more qualitative considerations might have affected the range of quantitative examples provided, especially with regards to the concept of 'density', usefully developed in the second half of the book to argue that even plays performed only once could have significant outreach.

Celebrity, Performance, Reception concludes with a chapter that takes De Landa's interest in the 'virtual' (distinguished from the 'real') as the starting point for an investigation of entertainments that 'were not fully materialized into performance' (202)—in this instance, Kemble's *The Roman Actor* (a play prepared for, but ultimately never included in, Drury Lane's 1794–5 season). Chapter 8 thus nicely exemplifies the many advantages (notwithstanding the difficulties) provided by the book's novel theoretical underpinnings, and Worrall's compelling use of case studies. Also worthy of special mention is Worrall's judicious use of anecdotal criticism to help balance more involved theoretical citations. These ensure that while *Celebrity, Performance, Reception* may have its shortcomings, it nevertheless constitutes a refreshing contribution to Romantic-period theatre studies.