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Memory, Erasure and Legacy

As a historian, it has been my job to find different and connected memories and to create different ways of remembering. As a feminist historian, I have also made it my job to question who we 'remember' and who 'does' the remembering and of course, the 'how' of remembering itself. Writing about the histories of women performing, writing, directing or producing theatre requires us to dig well beneath the surface of time, of archive catalogues and of internet content. We should never believe the first thing we are told. We must allow our curiosity and intuition - there must have been some women working there? / there must have been women running theatre companies? / there must have been women authors before such and such a date? - to determine where and how deep we dig and how we go about doing it.

When reading through many of the articles in this edition of *The Open Page*, I see that women of different generations and from all perspectives, have battled, in very different ways, against being rendered invisible and against the process of erasure. Their memories of working lives are often entwined with their memories of domestic lives and human relationships - with mothers, with fellow workers, with partners and children. Memory and the ability to remember is also such a large part of the making of theatre and of performance, in really practical terms. The loss of memory or maybe the cleaning out of memories is also such a significant part of maturing professionally, growing older and growing wiser, I would say. When I was a girl, I used to think memory was like a filing cabinet in an office, and I would worry endlessly about what you would do when the filing cabinet became full. I wondered what you would have to clear out to make room for more memories over time, and how you would make decisions about this. These days I'm far less worried: I seem to have a very selective memory indeed. I was in conversation with someone at work whom I hadn't seen for some years the other day and they reminded me that we had travelled to New York together some ten plus years ago. I had completely forgotten that they were there with me. I don't know how this happens, but it does happen even to a historian! How we forget is, I suppose, as interesting to me as how we remember.

We are living in a historical moment where those in power take the opportunity to try and erase history at will and on demand, and equally to erase the power and presence of many of the collective ideologies which have driven culture over the last few decades, ideologies that are more liberal, collaborative and inclusive ways of working. The president of the US recently announced that one of his henchmen is, 'as clever as Sir Isaac Neutron!'. As funny as this is, it's also scary! The henchman in question posed in front of the world, offering a Nazi salute as a form of celebratory greeting. The internet was awash with comments on this: Did he realise what he was doing?; Was this a mistake?; Did he understand the significance of his gesture? Many current political regimes place the notion of truth in the realm of the imaginary, as opposed to the factual. In some countries this is being done with great force and commitment.

But we can also *make* history, history *is* what *we make it*, so when we are told that women have always been on the sidelines of histories of theatre making, we have to continue to push back, and just as has happened over the last, more than, three decades with *The Open Page* and, of course, with The Magdalena Project, we can curate our historical presence and write about its dynamic and creative qualities.

The next article in this issue narrates a woman's extraordinary journey from the radical theatre company of her early career, to her focus on women's theatre practices to her work as an officer for a new and hopeful government. She is from a continent which was riven with military conflict and militaristic governments during the 20th and into the 21st century. She remains a poet and radical artist through all of this and details, with great honesty, her journey from the past to the present. So too, many of the articles here are written by women whose work has been punctuated by their domestic commitments: to children, to aging parents - or indeed to keeping the companies they work with together in difficult times. When I first began working on theatre women's autobiographies, I couldn't understand why they wrote so little about their *actual* work, and often instead wrote so much about other peoples' work. Then I realised, this was precisely how they wrote about their *own* work, by overlaying their descriptions or analyses of performances - in rehearsal and in reception - with memories of their everyday lives. I remember once excitedly finding a 'rehearsal notebook' from a well-known actress working in the 1910s: I thought it would offer detail about her work on a famous production, but it literally contained two line drawings with the words, 'make sure you enter here from this side, and then stand here' (with an arrow indicating upstage), then nothing for a few pages, followed by a shopping list of things to buy for props for the role and a series of question marks. Her partner was a famous director, she however, did not see much point in noting his rehearsal notes to her. She just got on with it, or maybe even just did it her own way?

In another piece of research I carried out on an artist who became very well-known as a Hollywood character actress in the 1940s and 1950s, I was trying to find out about a cabaret/performance club which she had set up, run and in fact, lived in, in the middle of Soho, London during the early 1920s.

I found various reviews and short articles in newspapers and periodicals, and mentions of the club and its performers and after-show offerings in other people's memories of London's 'alternative' theatre culture of the 1920s. What I couldn't find anywhere, in any of the archives, was evidence of the actresses' legal conflict with the local authorities over her running of a 'Children's Theatre'. In her brilliant, observant and funny autobiography, she mentions this with great pride (her mother was also a bit of an anti-establishment radical in the late 19th century). She wanted to use this moment as a means of marking her presence in history. She was doing work - on the periphery of an industry some might say, whilst others would suggest it was right at the centre of innovation - which was important enough to draw the attention of censoring authorities. The fact that I couldn't find evidence of this moment in historical record, doesn't mean it didn't happen, but it may have been more happenstance I suppose. A local authority officer may have been tipped off by a rival, that her Children's Theatre was a huge success but that she wasn't necessarily following employment laws? In fact, she was working with 'street' kids, and had somehow corralled them into a collective performance group, who loved what they were doing: she didn't charge the public for the shows and so was not making any money from their labour. But her work drew attention: maybe the local authority officer attended a performance and had an 'unofficial word' in her ear? Of course, the story of her career has become overshadowed by the story of her partner's career, and those of the other men with whom she worked. There was no funeral or memorial when she died: but all the papers she kept are in a US archive, waiting for someone to reconstruct a memory or history of her life and work: the two books written about her so far make very little use of the papers in this archive - many of which are about her professional and domestic life, as written by her. Maybe this is because of the expense of travelling to carry out historical research, but it may also be because it is much easier to 'make a memory up', to construct the memory or the history we want to see?

This is a moot point for a woman historian. I want the women I research and write about to be somehow heroic or genius, to be special in some way, to have been somewhat misread, or even erased so that I can rescue them from obscurity. Some of the women I have written about were unsavoury characters: unkind to their fellow actresses, narcissistic, too quick to put others in their place and so on. That's an odd thing to admit, but it is also honest: they aren't all by any means heroic. But they were there, and they are part of our legacy as creative women. As an historian I can search for truth, but I can also of course inflect a 'reading' on it; and this is the kind of trick that memory plays on us too.

I also think, late in my career, that inflecting readings on women's roles in the history of creative practice, may be the only way to ensure they remain, visible, part of that history. When I began work as an historian - I had maybe one or two shelves of books by or about women working in theatre or as artists: that is pretty much all that was available in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Now, some thirty plus years later, I have shelf after shelf of them: autobiographies, biographies, plays, memoires, collections of essays, even recipe books by actresses.


Oct. 5, 1927 The Sketch 37

APPEARING AT THE NEW CAVE OF HARMONY CABARET: MISS ELSA LANCHESTER AND HER EXPRESSIVE HANDS.

Miss Elsa Lanchester is one of the cleverest of our revue artists, and much interest was roused by the recent re-opening of the Cave of Harmony Cabaret in the disused Grapes Inn in Seven Dials. The premises have been cleverly arranged, food being served in the old vaults, while a dancing floor is situated above, and a cabaret theatre on the top floor. Miss Elsa Lanchester is associated with

Mr. Harold Scott and Mr. Mathew Norgate, the secretary of the Stage Society, in this venture, and the two former are the principal artists in the entertainment. Miss Lanchester gives a number of songs, including some of Maurice Chevalier's numbers. She sings in French, and gives an admirable rendering of "Seven-oom plaster les choux ?", and other songs.

THE PRESIDING GENIUS AT THE NEW SEVEN DIALS CAVE OF HARMONY.

Photographs by Gregory Howard.

Books about women from all over the world. However, I'm not sure that the curricula we teach in universities reflect this quantity of histories even now. And even in this edition of *The Open Page* there are women, much younger than me, who grew up believing that such a heritage of women's creativity did not exist. They wondered if it did perhaps. But even in the process of producing histories

of women's work, they also become erased - either because they don't 'fit' with the latest version of what is 'good' or 'bad' theatre practice or indeed desirable history itself. We are very good at censoring ourselves. I have worked on histories of women in the mainstream as well as on the peripheries of theatre, on the conservative as well as the experimental. Together, and to different degrees of course, they all share a precarious access to presence. Some are associated with 'famous' men and so can squeeze themselves through the mangle of history alongside them. But even in the case of the actress I mentioned earlier, this squeezing demands a kind of lessening of professional self, their work is seen only in connection to and sometimes even shaped by that of someone else, invariably considered more important or more significant than them, often a man too. In some ways, it is easier to construct histories of those on the peripheries, as their relative historical invisibility allows for more imaginative play by me as a historian: the more that is left out, the more I can find or even create to construct the history.

Either way, my love for *The Open Page* and the women who have written for it over the years, is that the publication places in time and in material form, histories of the women who have been the backbone of collective and more ideologically-driven experimental theatres in the last four decades. Some of these theatres stem from traditional practices more than others, and so connect us in other ways with our legacies. For me, memory is all about legacy, how we talk of it, how we care for it and how we carry it from the past into the future through our presence. So, just as we know that there was no such person as Sir Isaac Neutron, so too do we know that when we are told theatre history is not a history of women's work, that this is not the case. Our memories are sound on this question, and there is yet plenty of room left to fill in that filing cabinet of memory that worried me so much as a child.