

Thoughts on Performance Legacies

By Sean Aita

The thematic focus of this issue of Platform, exploring the remains, traces, ghosts and legacies which theatrical performance might leave behind, is something which resonates very strongly with my own personal history as I was brought up in a theatrical family. My grandmother had been a ballerina at Covent Garden in the 1930s and her sister, my great aunt, managed and performed in a weekly repertory company at the Watford Palace Theatre during the same period. Stories and anecdotes relating to performances which had taken place decades earlier, a photograph of my grandmother in a tutu doing a pose arabesque, and a box full of faded programmes belonging to my great aunt, were all the evidence that remained of lives dedicated to the performing arts. They were also potent, totemic objects of prophecy which spoke of a potential future career for me.

I now have my own collection of programmes, photographs and scrapbooks, contained safely in a suitcase under my bed. In my living room there is a large painted screen which featured in the production of *Lady Winderemere's Fan* I directed at the Royal Theatre, Northampton, and the decaying rubber head of a puppet made by Forkbeard Fantasy for my play *Yallery Brown* produced at Greenwich Theatre. Naturally my relationship to these two sets of memorabilia, the one from my childhood and the one I have gathered myself, is different. The first spoke of a mysterious and seemingly glamorous past existence two people close to me had experienced, the second whilst retaining an element of nostalgia also contains problematic connotations touched on by Aoife Monks in her (2010) book *The Actor in Costume*. During a key note speech at the 2013 TAPRA conference, referring to her book, Monks suggested that when we see a costume without an actor in it, it is not dissimilar in some ways to viewing a corpse. I feel somehow that the same is true of the theatrical ephemera which I have gathered around me throughout my career as an actor and director.

The urge to hold onto these scraps and remnants, despite the element of uncanniness which clings to them, seems

universal amongst theatre practitioners. I have never met an actor or director who did not have some physical memento of their time in the business either concealed somewhere in their homes, or on public display. One of my friends refers to these items as his theatre *relics*; as touchable, tangible mementos they are imbued with an undeniably talismanic presence mediating between the present and the past, the material and spiritual.

The iconography found in some of the external and internal decorations of European theatre buildings, particularly those constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, operates to my mind in a similar fashion. I recently found myself sitting in the stalls at the Playhouse Theatre in the West End, and whilst waiting for the show to begin I began to look around the auditorium. High above me on the ceiling I saw an inscription on a golden plaque naming the muse of comedy and of idyllic poetry Thalia. I then identified two huge sculptures of her sister Terpsicore on either side of the stage boxes. A bas-relief of what appeared to be a goat's skull emblem wound round with a chiton trailed along the front of the dress circle hinting at the provenance of tragedy. Around me it appeared that very few of my fellow playgoers were paying much attention to their surroundings. The majority were buried in their programmes. In spite of the fact that the auditorium was dominated by artefacts representing the sacred ritualistic origins of our art form, they were somehow both fully present, and at the same time completely invisible. It was as if the building had been deliberately seeded with codes which spoke to actors, directors, playwrights, and designers in the same way that the symbols of freemasonry might be apparent to the initiated, and yet meaningless to those outside the order.

This feeling was compounded further when I looked up at the walls above the boxes. On the stage left side was a plaque bearing the inscription 'George Bernard Shaw' - a name most theatregoers might be expected to recognise, whilst on the stage right side a similar plaque read 'Marie Tempest' - a name that has now begun to vanish into the theatrical past. I wondered how long it would take for Shaw's name to become as obscure to the play-going public and questioned the reluctance of the Playhouse Theatre management to re-decorate or to update the

names. Would they remain for as long as the building stands or only until the next refurbishment? Were there, in fact, other names concealed beneath the ones I had read - the walls a rich palimpsest of theatrical history?

There can be little doubt that works of art such as the ones I was surrounded by at the Playhouse Theatre; Klimt's *Altar des Dionysos* at Vienna's Burgtheater; or Henry Bird's mural on the safety curtain at the Ashcroft Theatre exist in some degree to offer those members of the audience capable of, or willing to, interpret them with a way of engaging with the cultural and historical traditions of performance. I think they also fulfil a much more significant function for theatre artists. It may seem a somewhat grandiose suggestion, but I would contend that these objects not only demonstrate the provenance of our art form they also prompt reflection on the eternal nature of the desire to 'make meaning' through live performance. It is this, and this alone, which counterbalances the impermanence, and precariousness of the profession.

I know for certain that the memorabilia which I mentioned at the outset of these musings are kept partly as evidence that I actually *did* appear on stage as an actor at one time, and was paid to direct plays. Since without them I would only have my increasingly untrustworthy memory to rely upon. Gazing around the Playhouse Theatre caused me to consider the possibility that the décor within a theatre building can be, and has been, used as a powerful way of exorcising the spectre of ephemerality. It is unfortunate that the 'low information rate' favoured by modern theatre architects, unwilling to distract attention from the stage, mitigates against the representation of our gods and goddesses in their interiors. I fear that I shall not see the names of any current practitioners enshrined in letters of gold within a contemporary theatre building. I wish the architects and commissioners of our modern theatre buildings would re-consider. They are potentially condemning us all to the fate that actors dread – to have been the poor player who 'struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more'.