

transformative potential as it sets out to “spark a shift in historical understanding: it wants to demonstrate powerfully, viscerally, exhaustively that ordinary people shape history” (p. 176).

Archivists, like historians, have been trained to be wary of subjective interpretations, particularly when it comes to the tasks of accessioning and appraisal. What *Letting Go?* brings to our attention is that sharing authority requires us to admit that we are emotional about our work and it is not easy to let go. There is much to be learned from our museum colleagues, in particular how to balance our professional duties to develop and care for collections for future use and our responsibility to serve the present needs of our publics, including people who will never set foot in the archives. What Adair, Filene, and Koloski promise is that sharing authority may throw light on the limitations of heritage institutions, but it also reasserts the expertise of heritage workers. Sharing does not mean giving over. It does, perhaps, mean a significant shift in our cultural roles from “sole interpreters” to “cultural facilitators.” Once we have admitted to our vulnerabilities, we can then move on to serve as stewards of cultural history and provide guidance, when requested, to audiences who would like to take the making of heritage into their own hands.

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A Tyranny of Documents: The Performing Arts Historian as Film Noir Detective. Performing Arts Resources, vol. 28. STEPHEN JOHNSON, ed. New York: Theatre Library Association, 2011. xiii, 353 p. ISBN 978-0-932610-24-9.

This twenty-eighth volume in the Theatre Library Association’s monograph series, Performing Arts Resources (PAR), contains thirty-nine essays dedicated to the late Brooks McNamara, one of the key figures in theatre and performance studies in North America. As illustrious scholar Don B. Wilmeth describes him in the foreword, McNamara was the “Master of the Archive” and was an excellent detective when it came to following research clues. Edited by Stephen Johnson, himself one of the most prominent contemporary performing arts scholars in North America, *A Tyranny of Documents* presents insightful contributions that illustrate the many aspects of performing arts history research conducted in archives. All the essays have one thing in common: their authors are researchers who never take anything for granted and who go to great lengths to get to the heart of the matter at hand. They are open to surprises and to being taken in unforeseen directions.

Introducing the essays, Johnson outlines several threads that run through the course of the book. These can be grouped as follows: the elusiveness of documentation (for example, documents that should exist but are nowhere to be

found); the unexpectedness of documentation (for example, documents “about something else” that actually provide clues for the topic being researched); the deceptiveness of documentation and the trap of accepting documents at face value; the apparent irrelevancy of documentation and the risk of dismissing seemingly unimportant clues; the partiality of documentation and the need to read into the motives of the authors who created the documents; the inadequacy of documentation alone and the need to find other sources of information, including re-creating past performances; and, finally, the open-endedness of documentation and the need to re-examine documents at different times. The majority of scholars represented in the book have current or past affiliations with major national and international academic institutions, and several of them have experience as an archivist, librarian, curator, playwright, or technical director.

Although most essays focus on written evidence, more unforeseen sources are also examined. In “Barnum’s Last Laugh? General Tom Thumb’s Wedding Cake in the Library of Congress,” Marlis Schweitzer discusses an unanticipated turn in her work, prompted by an unexpected document she encountered at the Library of Congress while researching actress Minnie Maddern Fiske, who was “celebrated for introducing American audiences to Ibsen in the early-twentieth [century].”¹ While delivering boxes of the actress’s papers to Schweitzer in the Library of Congress reading room, one of the archivists told Schweitzer about “Tom Thumb’s wedding cake.”² Although surprised by the information, Schweitzer initially dismissed the cake as unimportant, but she eventually immersed herself in researching why it had ended up among Maddern Fiske’s papers. She writes: “There was something so deliciously perverse, so utterly Barnumesque about requesting a box of cake from the Library of Congress.”³ Especially since the cake had been made in 1863! The boxed cake, a souvenir from the lavish wedding of P.T. Barnum circus performers Lavinia Warren (Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump) and General Tom Thumb (Charles Sherwood Stratton), found its way into the actress’s papers as a 1905 gift from Warren to Harrison Grey Fiske. Fiske, Minnie’s husband, was the editor and publisher of an influential arts trade periodical, the *New York Dramatic Mirror*. Warren, who possibly hoped that Fiske would publish her autobiography, sent him the cake as a gift. Although he did not pursue Warren’s memoir, Fiske kept this important souvenir of one of the most famous and spectacular weddings of its time. Schweitzer writes a delightful account of her encounter with the unexpected artifact and how it contributed to a better understanding of the broader context of her topic. This essay is a testimony to serendipity and open-mindedness in research.

1 Marlis Schweitzer, “Barnum’s Last Laugh? General Tom Thumb’s Wedding Cake in the Library of Congress,” in *A Tyranny of Documents: The Performing Arts Historian as Film Noir Detective*, ed. Stephen Johnson (New York, 2011), 116.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 117.

Another essay that focuses on non-textual documentation is “The Silent Laugh of *Laughing Ben*” by Amma Y. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin re-examines the Library of Congress paper print (converted to 16mm film) of the circa-1901 silent film *Laughing Ben*, directed by Arthur Marvin for the American Mutoscope & Biograph Co., which depicts Ben Ellington laughing. Ellington, known as “Laughing Ben,” allegedly ninety-six years old at the time, was one of the most famous performers at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, NY. A former slave born in Georgia’s Laurens County, Ellington became a touring storyteller later in life (he died in 1905). A “laughing genius,” he created his storytelling act around his experience as a slave. The Library of Congress has the only known film footage of Ellington, who was famous for being able to laugh longer than anyone else; his laugh never lasted “less than 30 seconds.” While there is no sound to accompany the footage, Ellington’s laugh is described in written documents as “loud and long,” although with “not much music to it.”⁴ The 1901 Exposition was Ellington’s breakthrough as a performer; he took part in the re-creation of the “Old Plantation,” and the crowd paid five cents apiece to hear him laugh. *Laughing Ben* documents a renowned performer, and the film was shot to capture one of the highlights of the Exposition. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin defines *Laughing Ben* as “a document that perpetually unsettles any conclusions I attempt to make.”⁵ This footage is well known to silent film scholars but not necessarily to a less specialized audience, and it is interesting to learn how difficult it was for Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin to locate it. Her first access point was Spike Lee’s movie *Bamboozled* (2000), which showed *Laughing Ben* as part of a montage of “demeaning portrayals of African Americans captured in film and cartoons.”⁶ Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin claims that *Laughing Ben* continues to leave her with unanswered questions. The main one centres on the fact that Ellington built his act around telling stories about his years as a slave: over a century later, it can be puzzling for a modern researcher to understand the strength of a survivor who is able to make light of hard times. The why and how of Ellington’s performances continue to keep Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin guessing, and she has even researched technical aspects through physical re-enactments of laughter. A document answers questions and often opens up many more. As Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin writes, “The silent laugh of *Laughing Ben* perpetually haunts the archive, as if Ben is still laughing, perhaps at the researcher.”⁷

4 “Death Gets the Laugh on a Famous Laugher,” obituary in the *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 April 1905, cited in Amma Y. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin, “The Silent Laugh of *Laughing Ben*,” in *A Tyranny of Documents: The Performing Arts Historian as Film Noir Detective*, ed. Stephen Johnson (New York, 2011), 194.

5 Amma Y. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin, “The Silent Laugh of *Laughing Ben*,” in *A Tyranny of Documents*, 193.

6 *Ibid.*, 195.

7 *Ibid.*, 199.

The other essays span a range of sources, topics, and times, and analyze a variety of documents, including play scripts, dance notations, caricatures, watercolours, official reports, and objects, such as the *batocio* (“slapstick,” an important element associated with the character of Arlecchino in *commedia dell’arte*), which is discussed by Paul J. Stoesser.

Rigorously scholarly and engrossing at the same time, this book takes the reader on a journey through research, and appeals to the expert and the novice alike. It clearly outlines research steps and acknowledges the key role of archivists and archives. It conveys the joy of research and the rewards of “archival detective work.” The volume lends itself to different uses: teaching theatre history, demonstrating research methods, and explaining to patrons what archives are about. It can be used very successfully in archival outreach and in devising special programming based on unique holdings.

This book brings together established scholars and new scholars who greatly value archives. It is a breath of fresh air for archivists working in environments where they feel overlooked and under-appreciated. By reading about the passion for research and the gratitude shown by researchers, archivists can reconnect with the initial spark that led them to pursue this profession in the first place. As an archival educator and practising archivist who gets plenty of recognition in her workplace, the author of this review knows how important it is to feel appreciated and to be able to pass on the enthusiasm for our profession to the next generation of students and archivists. The performing arts are an especially rewarding field for those with a passion for working with creative forces.

The Theatre Library Association (www.tla-online.org) was founded in 1937; the PAR volumes have been issued since 1974. The entire PAR series is a testimony to the great variety of resources and user interests encompassed by the performing arts. Anyone interested in this field will enjoy other volumes in the series, which contain scholarly essays as well as articles on technical aspects of theatre. The topics of recent volumes have included scenic design (2012), costume design (2010), performance reclamation (2008), and lighting design (2007). Archivists who do not have a primary interest in the arts will nonetheless appreciate the variety of document types and uses discussed in these volumes, including the array of formats (e.g., costumes) that are integral to performing arts documentation. We applaud Stephen Johnson for this new volume and for reminding all archivists why they have the best job in the world.

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