

Q&A with Barry Houlihan



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Abstract:

The interview is aimed to reflect on the elusive nature of theatre and the archive(s) through discussing issues of research, memory, and navigating digital spaces of the archive(s). It does so by considering the work of National University of Ireland Archivist Barry Houlihan, whose career recently has developed across theatre history, archival studies, digital cultures, and history.

Keywords: Archival Studies, Digital Archive, National University of Ireland, Theatre

At the time when we started discussing a possible special issue that would investigate the state of the art in the digital humanities in Ireland, we felt such work would also allow us to rethink the places of production and the diffusion of (academic) knowledge, as well as the breaking of conceptual canons as they circulate and are (re)produced within cultural institutions, such as the university. The idea of an interview came about as we tried to capture the educational challenges and cultural-political import of “the turn to the digital” within Irish studies as our common shared interest and focus in this issue. The work of Archivist and Lecturer Barry Houlihan fit with our aims in many productive and important ways. Houlihan is one of a series of innovative voices – some of whom we have been lucky enough to gather for this issue – who have combined the shifting and evolving nature of their research to pave new ground within the previously unexplored territory of the digital humanities. In doing so, and as this interview illustrates, he has used previous knowledge and expertise in history and English literature to span issues of medium, content and contexts, the revolutionary potential of the digital embedded in research and archiving practices, and the shifting ideas of the archive(s) to explore cultural, social, and historical-political (re)sources. We are grateful for the time

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he dedicated to this interview and hope that his insights will inspire yet more scholars and practitioners to thread the paths and connections of theatre-archive-digital work.

AASG: You started out as an academic researching the field of theatre studies. Can you say something on the relationship between theatre studies and your socio-cultural approach to the archive?

BH: Sure, my undergraduate background was in History and English, and my interests always focused on the overlap between the two disciplines and the methodological questions that it raises, such as – how has cultural history been shaped by social change? Where are those intersections between State and Art more broadly and how has one been influenced by the other? After my M.A. in Archives and Records Management I worked as an Archivist at the National Library of Ireland, cataloguing the archive of Dublin's Project Arts Centre (PAC). For me, it was a formative experience. I was wholly immersed in the archive of a multi-disciplinary arts centre, which was (in the late 1960s) born out of a period of great social change in Ireland and which was also influenced by similar international theatre work of the time.

The history of PAC was, in a sense, completely parallel to the social and cultural development of contemporary Ireland. Here was theatre, film, music, and visual art, all under one roof, led by a young and innovative group of artists, all of which was reflective of a society in flux. It was avant-garde, punk, and dynamic, and the PAC archive documented this fascinating record of Irish theatre, Irish culture, as well as political and social issues, reflected in the programming of work that engaged with sexuality, youth culture, housing, Religious change and secularisation, emigration etc. I have always brought that approach into later research and teaching, seeking out a wider archive of modern Ireland, and being aware of how theatre is such a powerful record of the country. It is a wholly public act. We can read radical or subversive material in our homes but to go to plays of a similar nature is to be physically present. You are part of a live moment.

AASG: Theatre studies may seem to benefit from digital archives / archiving in prescient ways. Here one could mention, among others, the Irish Playography project. What would you comment on this?

BH: Digital archives and digital theatre archives(ing) have really transformed how live performance today, as well as past performance, is being considered, re-engaged, and documented. *Irish Playography* from the Irish Theatre Institute is one of those special projects that has transformed the work I am able to do as a historian and archivist of the theatre. The canon of Irish (Western) drama and literature, as a concept, has been roundly challenged in recent years, for all its biases and singleness regarding gender, race, ethnicity, class etc. "The Archive", as a broad concept, should also be challenged as one which can be limited. It can be limited to those works which have the privilege of being performed, works that were revived and re-performed again, works published, translated etc. Production databases, such as *Irish Playography*, are vital touchstones – an accessible dataset of who, what, when, where etc. Like any project it has some limitations, new Irish plays' first productions since 1904, but it is a critical starting point to begin asking questions of repertoire and production histories, interrogating the data, finding gaps, cultural blindspots, and omissions.

So much of what digital theatre projects and digitising of archives of Irish cultural studies material more generally enables scholars, artists, and the public to do is aid the discoverability

and visibility of neglected and overlooked histories. Performance history in an Irish context has traditionally been linked to a textual history, one of a playwright and a play that had overall authority. This has been re-calibrated to a great extent over recent years with new scholarship of performance itself. Terminology has shifted towards “theatre-makers” as a catch-all term, and in practice we see that with a more devised and collaborative process. None of which is all new of course! Thomas Kilroy wrote a hugely important manifesto essay in 1959, *Groundwork for An Irish Theatre*, which advocated for exactly that collaborative process. Theatre and performance history is in a way still catching up with that thought.

For me, digital theatre archives and digitised records of past performance have to be increasingly open access. Copyright and licensing will also make a full online archive impossible (and rightly so) but especially for those marginalised performance histories and for projects which can correct the biases of subjective record keeping, online and interoperable archives and databases can play a vital role in giving visibility and authenticity to those omitted from other “official” versions of the past.

AASG: In the volume you edited in 2019, Navigating Ireland’s Theatre Archive: Theory, Practice, Performance, you argue that archives are never complete. Indeed, several authors have tackled the issue of the gaps, breaks, and silences that are structural components in collecting and archiving materials and experiences. How does your work fit into this

BH: To be honest, it may be at the very core of my work. I do believe no archive can ever be called “complete” as such. I find I am continually working against the grain of memory, in seeking out collections and archives of theatre, literature, and social history, which otherwise perhaps would not be preserved at all. Archives are “institutions” of their own – they have their own privileges and biases in terms of what records are collected, what records secure funding for preservation, cataloguing, and digitisation etc. Those structures of power should not control the historical record, but rather be fluid enough to encompass as broad a cultural and historical record as possible. I have argued elsewhere for an approach towards “national memory” as a term and concept, rather than a “national archive”. A national archive is often considered “official” and “authoritative”.

The archive of a people, a theatre, or a social/political movement, is none of those things, but rather an organic process of documentation of those things, a live archiving. I do not believe a passive stance or in the blind hope that an archive or records of a theatre will serendipitously survive and be preserved and accessible. Rather, a pro-active and responsive archival methodology, one that embraces digital and born-digital components, (such as oral history) can help remove those structural gaps and silences. Conversations also need to happen with artists and theatre-makers, as well as with audiences. In *Navigating Ireland’s Theatre Archive*, the process and thinking was, as the title intimated, a journeying, and I was fortunate to have such wide-ranging contributions from archivists, academics, playwrights, digital humanists, and others in that book all working at the intersection of technology, performance, and theatre-making.

AASG: More recently in your career, you have developed a growing interest in the digital humanities, broadly conceived. How did you start engaging more in depth with the digital humanities?

BH: The field and work of archival management itself is supported by databases containing masses of datasets, ensuring we maintain physical and intellectual control over a vast set of archives, which can vary in size from single objects to hundreds of boxes of manuscripts

and materials of all media. The main turn came around a decade ago when the scale of work and technology enabled the mass digitisation of high resolution surrogates, all tagged with accurate descriptive metadata, that enabled the sharing and discoverability of the digital object as well as the metadata. Also, rights management was key. Performance archives are incredibly complex in terms of literary copyright, photographic rights, recording licensing etc. Orphan works with no known provenance or owner/estate are also difficult to select for digital open access.

In reality, so much was supported by hugely diverse and collaborative partnerships. We were fortunate at NUI Galway to have a broad range of skillsets and interested parties all working towards the same goal – enabling scholarship, teaching, and research in new and innovative digital ways, and using the archive collections as a means to transform how theatre is studied, how theatre archives are accessible, but also how theatre is made. We had close working relations with academic staff at the O’Donoghue Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance, such as Professor Patrick Lonergan, archival consultants like Martin Bradley, Library management such as John Cox, cultural partners such as the Abbey Theatre, The Gate Theatre, Druid Theatre Company, and others, that enabled us to create (albeit on a steep learning curve) the platforms and workflows to digitise and manage access to singular item level to over one million digital items across our theatre collections.

AASG: Do you see any particular connections between theatre studies and digital humanities, or does your interest emerge out of a desire to cross-pollinate different disciplinary backgrounds?

BH: I think theatre, live performance and digital humanities are essential partners. The recent Covid-19 years of theatre closures also saw an interesting turn where some companies streamed digitised archive performances to keep a connection with their audience. Others created altogether new and live-streamed live performances via Youtube or via ticketed live online performances. The Abbey Theatre, Landmark Productions, Anu Productions all did that to great effect and now post-pandemic, we all will return to the live theatre but it does still raise interesting questions on global audiences, sustainability etc.

My growing interest and work in digital humanities stems from working on those projects and also working with and supporting students and researchers from around the world. Collaboration in scholarship and in supporting the use of digital archive materials in new performance work is so interesting to be part of. A further thread to my own research is digital performance and digital media within performance, and that is a whole other but connected area! So I have been more active in recent years in working to create new active artist-partnerships and archive the work of contemporary theatre companies, like Druid Theatre Company, Pan Pan Theatre Company, Corn Exchange Theatre Company, and the archive of designer Joe Vanek.

That intermediality of the archive is a fascinating battle against digital obsolescence. Working, for instance, on migrating hundreds of hours of performances from the Pan Pan Theatre archive, from the mid 1990s to present, has meant working with VHS, BETA cam tapes, mini-disc players, harddrives, floppy discs, DAT tapes, cassette tapes etc. All have some fragment of the live performance but all give a three-dimensional quality to the textual and photographic material in the physical archive.

AASG: Digital and technological developments and the rise of “theatre-makers” can be said to have shifted the provenance and classification of archival records. What would you comment on this, with particular reference to the Irish context?

BH: Theatre has been produced in a much more digitally collaborative and devised in the last decade, or even longer. I think a few companies and factors have been influential on that. The likes of Dead Centre theatre company have really transformed how technology and live digital performance have been used in theatre in recent years. Works like *Chekhov’s First Play* utilized headphones in such innovative ways while still drawing on archival records (the lesser known text and play of *Platanov*) and canonical figures, like Chekhov. Also *Hamlet* was a fascinating take on father/son relationships through the digital avatar of Shakespeare and his dead son. What works like this means in relation to classification and provenance, is a re-thinking around how a play exists and around how we document, capture, and preserve such work. Beyond, the ensemble devised work on text, movement, dialogue etc. is the vital work of sound design, video design, digital editors, who work to seamlessly combine and sync the digital elements with the live human presence on stage. The fields of metadata that we have used to document and classify records need to be updated to accurately capture the form and medium of the work, as much as the “where” and “when”. There is no singular text with many of these works, but even if there was, it can never exist, or later re-exist, without the correct knowledge of file classification and metadata to ensure the digital files are accessible into the future.

AASG: The archive is changing into a dynamic and self-reflective medium. In your view, how has the turn from the text-as-archive to hypertext (from emails to video, Apps, social network) transformed current approaches to performance theory and practice today?

BH: It has been a steep learning curve, from an archival perspective as much as anything. From a performance perspective it has enabled so much more in-depth dramaturgical preparation also. The term you describe, “hypertext”, is a really good one, as it reflects that digital journey, a searchable, omnipresent virtual world. It allows for remarkable new studies in voice, movement, choreography, design of set and costume etc. In the hypertext and hyperworld of the digital archive, we can see, here, and experience the now reanimated performances and assess how a line was delivered, how an accent sounded, how bodies moved on stage – even hear how audiences reacted. We get a sense of that also today through the social media world and record – audience video vox pops, video clips, comments, likes, shares, retweets etc. We can monitor the data of the performance in circulation through such online fora, and gauge public engagement/reaction etc. but ironically all these records are incredibly unstable in terms of a permanent archival record. Scholars such as Patrick Lonergan have written on theatre and social media and the instability of the online performance. Similarly, the online record of performance is far more at risk of loss over time than a physical record.

AASG: Your paper “Sound and Vision: Recovering movement, gesture and the actor’s craft from NUI Galway Digital Theatre Collections”, presented within the work of the DocPerform project, addresses “the archive of contemporary theatre” and “the contemporary theatre archive” as “two disparate things”, which we find a productive and provocative claim. Could you say something more on this?

BH: Yes, this was something I was encountering more frequently when working with current working companies on their archives and while also working on projects which involved large scale digitisation of more historic records. The “contemporary theatre archive” is a mix of all those things, both the current and the historical, one that is primarily a dataset of both digital objects and corresponding datasets and all range of media of material that may exist, from eighteenth century broadside to a twentieth century promptscript. This “contemporary theatre archive” is being actively shaped by research needs and performance theory. How is theatre and performance being researched? For example, are we interested in linguistic form in adaptation of European theatre? Or queer/LGBTQ[IA]+ identities in Shakespeare works? For these we need large longitudinal studies across many centuries and through archive material that could be held here in NUI Galway, Trinity College Dublin, The British Library, the Harry Ransom Centre etc. We need these digital collections and datasets to talk to each other, to be searchable, discoverable, and interoperable. There is no quick answer to that, it is an ongoing work across all disciplines of Digital Humanities.

For the flatter point, the “archive of contemporary theatre”, I see (and encounter) that as a different entity. That is the live and current archive of theatre and performance happening now and has happened last year and as will be performed next year. That is a multi-faceted and ever-changing body of work, but one I would also argue is rapidly disappearing. Material now sits between shared drives, commercial cloud stores, hosted/created/edited on proprietary software that needs licences to access etc. I am already seeing so much work of the last decade become obsolete and inaccessible. If we want (or hope) to have an archive of today's theatre to exist at all in 10/20 years, beyond what exists as a published text, or may temporarily exist on Youtube or Vimeo, intervention and dialogue is needed, between archivists, archive institutions, and with artists and theatre makers to ensure some standard practices are being used in terms of storage or deposit of records.

AASG: Do you view the internet as a new performance medium? What has improved and what has been lost, for instance, in the uncertain present/futures of the Covid-19 pandemic?

BH: The internet is perhaps the ultimate performance medium. Most of what we do online is a performance, from the social media identity we curate of ourselves, to the people and sites we engage with – it is all a projection of ourselves. But it is also a most unstable one. The horrific idea of “The Metaverse” that Mark Zuckerberg’s Facebook is slated to become, or the very real risk to freedom of speech should Elon Musk’s take-over bid of Twitter be successful, are warning signs of how performance of the self is being monetised for massive personal gain. This is data-washing – the algorithm that shows you all ads corporations want to sell you is a grim reality where you are the product on sale.

Elsewhere online, the internet did enable some semblance of connection to happen between theatres and audiences during the Covid-19 period of global lockdown. Some companies screened ticketed archive recordings of past productions, while others produced live performances, produced in empty theatres and broadcast to the world also by ticketed events. This generated some welcome revenue and was received as very positive by people with accessibility issues, so that should be really welcomed. There are many pros and cons – long-term and thinking of climate sustainability, is international travel/touring going to be effective in its current form? Can more live-streaming help? One risk is that only the larger theatres/companies in receipt of

State/public support can pay for such facilities to professionally record/live stream. The biggest challenge of all may be can that model sustain “liveness”? Will it keep an audience coming to the online theatre vs that of the physical theatre – I am not so sure.

AASG: To conclude, can you say something about the fundamental relationship between curation and preservation in the digital age, and what directions do you see it as heading towards?

BH: One challenge will be to control/manage the digital space as much as the digital object, and by that I mean, the labour of digitisation is now familiar to many/most of us working on archives and digital humanities. The greater and perhaps still broadly untested task is digital preservation. I have mentioned elsewhere the risk to current theatre records, born-digital materials etc. that I see as becoming less material and even more ephemeral in a digital space where storage is not endless and has a financial cost. Digital obsolescence is a major risk to curation and preservation. That is not a new phenomenon of course, but the range of media now being produced and used in performance is so wide-ranging, we need to be actively in the conversation with artists and theatres and advising and partnering on curation and preservation.

Also open-access is essential and will increasingly be so. This might clash with copyright/licensing, so again those active conversations will be key.

There is great potential for companies to grow their audience by maximising their archival process and materials. That does not have to mean *just* monetary gains, but wider cultural connections through education, training, public engagement etc. I would love to see theatre and performance be more embedded in schools and with younger people and in communities. Bring the special experience of the theatre directly to them. They consume culture and entertainment in a wholly different way – use the digital archive as the medium and vehicle and bring a new cohort and generation along.

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