

## Snapshots on Theatre Photography

Joel Anderson

In this article, I will briefly attempt to offer some perspectives on photography and theatre, in part drawing on ideas I explore in my last book, *Theatre & Photography* (Anderson 2014). I will summarise some points of intersection between photography and theatre, examples among many, taking as a particular focus theatre photography, which is to say photographs of theatre practice. I will consider how we might come to understand theatre photography by way of a conceptual distinction between two kinds of image, two approaches to photography, and suggest that theatre photography, while sometimes reinforcing one or the other notion, can at points point to their synthesis.

We might start from the observation that theatre and photography enjoy, and have enjoyed, a close association starting with the advent of photography (the innovations that would take the name “photography” emerged in the 1820s, but photography is usually granted 1839 as its birthdate). One figure featuring in the shortlist of the nineteenth-century inventors of photography, Louis Daguerre, was an established theatre designer before he commenced his photographic experimentation. Research by Michel Poivert (2015) convincingly argues that another of photography’s supposed founders, Hippolyte Bayard, was engaged in a distinctly theatrical approach, and himself had links to theatre practice. Bayard is best known for his 1840 photograph “Noyé” for which he posed as a drowned man, accompanying this image with a text in which he playfully denounces the acknowledgement of Daguerre as an inventor of photography... Thus we can observe a practice of staging and of theatricality in early photography specifically linked to the theatre.

Photography figures in the script and onstage action in plays dating back at least to Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* (1999), first staged in 1859 (certainly this is probably the first extant dramatic text in which photography plays a central role), where photography appears to possess redemptive power and the capacity to convey truth. Photographers, photographs, and photography make appearances in plays by Chekhov and Ibsen, with photography here not necessarily a tool for the capturing and dissemination of truth but on the contrary a means by which appearances can be manufactured and falsehoods can be disseminated (see Anderson 2014, 18–36). The practice of projecting photographs onstage is often stated to have begun with the work of Erwin Piscator in 1920s Germany, and photography participates in the experimental stage design of figures such as Jacques Polieri; the significance of this historical phenomenon is explored in depth in a French volume, *Les Écrans sur la scène* (Antúnez and Picon-Vallin 1998). Screen projection is of course today a very common stage technology, and at points can seem little more than an evolution of the device of the painted backdrop, rather than necessarily proposing something radical. But the use of photographs on the space of the stage can help to extend the limits of what is representable in the theatre, or posits a juxtaposition whereby the representation on the stage (what might include the stage image) is confronted with another image (the photographic projection). The dramatic work of Robert Lepage and his company Ex Machina has engaged with photography extensively (as well as conceptually, notably in the 1994 production *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*), through Lepage’s extensive use of projected still and moving images.

In conceptual terms, photography and theatre might initially seem opposed. While both are understood as forms of representation, it seems clear that the way in which the two represent what they represent is distinct. Consider, for example the definitions of the two offered in canonical writings in their respective fields. Theatre, it has been proposed, takes place at a particular time and place in the presence of an audience: “A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged,” (Brook 1996, 7). Photography, on the other hand, is concerned with the creation of images referencing (or hosting the trace of) something already past, and the circulating photographs, “quote out of context” (Szarkowski [1966] 1980, 70). Seeking to find commonality, we might consider that photography and theatre can usefully be grouped as instances of media. But if photography seems an incontestable example of a medium, following the definition of McLuhan (1964), there can be some doubt as to whether theatre can be readily understood as such. Theatre today, and perhaps since its earliest instances, seems to have assembled and combined different technologies of communication in its apparatus, and it does not always fit into the notion of medium as “extension” as defined in the examples McLuhan addresses. Nevertheless, it can be instructive to imagine the meeting points of the two in terms of what Jürgen Müller (1996) has influentially named “intermediality” to describe instances of one medium interacting with or incorporating another.<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin is attentive to both theatre and photography, situating them on opposing sides of his discourse on the “aura” in the work of art (1936), with theatre reliant on the *hic et nunc*, and photography functioning as a means of technological reproduction.

Theatre photography, while in some ways marginal for both theatre and photography (witness, for example, the scant critical attention to the domain in both theatre and photography scholarship, at least in English), can nonetheless boast a long history. Indeed, one struggles to isolate any one single “theatre photography”, but rather of a number of contingent practices, the modalities, approaches, and stakes of which shift across time and in different contexts.

Some of the earliest photographic portraits show actors performing theatrical roles. But these are not, or at least not primarily or by intent, attempts to convey stage action. Rather, in common with other bourgeois citizens of the time, actors (and their photographer-portraitists) were keen to exploit the new possibilities offered by photography by creating for the camera a performance of their profession and civic status. Such images were not taken in theatres, but in the photographer’s studio, with actors using costume and props from the productions in which they performed (or indeed from other productions entirely See Anderson 2014, 39–45). Although actor portraits no longer circulate as they did in the era of the *carte-de-visite* image, which arguably was instrumental in the emergence of celebrity culture, we can observe that comparable images, shot in the studio, still form part of the apparatus of theatre production in the form of actors’ headshots used in casting. The most prevalent kind of theatre photography, at least in some contemporary contexts, is marketing images that are generally required and produced in advance of a production taking to the stage (and which thus may not always be coherent with the production itself). Such images, and even promotional images taken during rehearsals or runs, occupy an important place in the theatre landscape:

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<sup>1</sup> I explore the possibility of photographic theatre and theatrical photography in (Anderson 2008)

theatre-goers, from the general public to theatre scholars, find themselves informed and influenced by images of theatre accompanying reviews, academic papers, or sometimes adorning the walls of theatre buildings. Such images, in Britain for example, make up the bulk of the visual trace of theatre productions, and photographs specifically intended to archive theatre work remain somewhat rare today, a luxury enjoyed by a few specific institutions and companies.

In examining the broad relations between theatre and photography, even in the brief account above, we can identify two distinct conceptions of the photographic image, relevant beyond the domain of theatre (although theatre may permit it to be particularly observable and significant). The first is the notion of a photograph as a trace or record, an imprint of the real. This idea is outlined in Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, one of the earliest English-language books to engage critically with photography, where the author proposes this as the difference between photography and earlier image-making practices such as painting. The second conception is that of the photograph as something crafted, an aesthetic procedure more continuous with that of creating artworks on a canvas. The tension, for theatre, between these kinds of image is presented in an early British text on the value of theatre photographs for the theatre historian. Muriel St. Claire Byrne (1945) suggests that photographers who undertake to create works of art in their own right (a trend she is observing) do little to foster an accurate record of stage practice, and she uses the article to call for more documentary approach from photographers. We can perceive a similar distinction in one of the most thorough books on the subject of theatre photography, published in France in the 1990s (Meyer-Plantureux 1992). *La Photographie de Théâtre ou la mémoire de l'éphémère* traces an evolution of theatre photography from the actor portraits I have describe above, through the staging of images for the photographer in the theatre, to an approach closer to reportage that emerged, according to the author, in 1945.

Clearly, shifts in approaches to the photographing of theatre cannot be understood without reference to the evolution of the technology of cameras and of photosensitive materials and their increased capacity to "still" the motion of theatre. Indeed, the very earliest photographs of onstage work date from the late nineteenth century, but these are very few, and the practice of photographing actors onstage gradually developed later, in the early twentieth century. This initially required that the photographer work with actors in dedicated sessions (or "calls") to allow for the use of supplementary lighting. Actors were required to hold static poses for the camera, sometimes resulting in configurations invented solely for the purpose of creating photographic images. The technical possibility of photographing theatre during dress rehearsals or public performances while rendering clear images only arrived in the mid-twentieth century, giving rise to the approach of Roger Pic in France (the example *par excellence* given by Meyer-Plantureux of a documentary theatre photographer) and others. Indeed, it is at this point that common practices of stage photography we might recognise as dominant today took shape.

Nevertheless, the refinement of technologies, the increasing capacity of cameras to capture moving performance as a still image, and a desire to create images that approximate what a theatre spectator sees should not prompt a consideration of such practice as neutral or objective. The most rigorously documentary approach to photographing a production surely does not render the production in a

comprehensive or complete form. Indeed, photographing, even when it claims to capture events faithfully, and without imposing an aesthetic agenda, must necessarily involve a process of selection (selection of the frame, of the focus, aperture, and shutter speed, as well as of the eventual image that is selected from the body of those taken). Vilém Flusser might suggest that this would be to misunderstand the relationship of the photographer to the gesture of photographing: “there is no such thing as a naive, unconceived act of photographing” (2000, 36). Flusser argues that a photographer is necessarily responding to a program, to a set of possibilities contained in the camera, and is necessarily hunting for the shot, among the infinite number of possible shots.

Theatre photography, producing an image of a fleeting event onstage, seems compatible with what Benjamin describes in terms of the reproducibility of a work of art, and can perhaps be compared with, for example, photographs of paintings or sculptures. Certainly, theatre photographs share those practices’ capacity to take the work of art, or at least fragments of it, into new contexts, and to different “spectators.” It is no doubt in the study of performance art, that this potential of photography to provide an additional vector for performance work, has received the most attention, both positive and negative. There is a long association of theatre and performance art, with photographs often constituting the enduring record of work that in some cases was only presented once and potentially for a relatively small group of spectators (for examples, see Goldberg 2004). But while many performance artists have worked with photography or recruited photographers, and while performance artworks are often best known as the result of photographic documents (this would apply to many iconic performance pieces), some performance artists have sought to limit the photographic documentation of their work, with a few eschewing it altogether. An influential text, “The Ontology of Performance” (Phelan 1993, 146–66), challenges the capacity for live performance to be documented, suggesting that performance is precisely that which cannot be captured in another medium, and cannot circulate via technologies of reproduction and mediatisation. In a more recent book on performance documentation, Philip Auslander (2018) offers a distinct way of considering documentation of performance, arguing via Benjamin’s account of reproducibility (Benjamin 1936) that recordings of performance might best be understood as “reactivations” which do not transport the viewer to the past performance (as it might be understood in discourses on performance documentation, attempting to grant access to something ephemeral) but rather bring something the performance into the viewer’s own context.

Accounting for theatre photography as the reproduction of theatre in photographs, and emphasising the veracity of images in relation to what a theatre spectator might see risks ignoring the potency and attractiveness of theatre photography as an artistic practice as well as the “photogenic” (Pavis 1998, 264) nature of some theatre.

By way of a conclusion, I will briefly note two examples of theatre photographers, both born in Czechoslovakia, who can be seen to dissolve or even collapse the two categories of image I have suggested might characterise theatre photography across its history. Both, I suggest, seek to convey theatre practice as a live activity, but do this by means of photographic experimentation that emphasises the creation of an image rather than a likeness. I am, incidentally, aware of an established tradition of theatre photography going back to the nineteenth century and persisting in the

Slovak and Czech Republics, and there are indications that theatre photography has sometimes occupied a more prominent role in that region's theatre and cultural landscape than it does in the British and French contexts with which I am much more familiar. The photographers I mention have come to my attention because they are established internationally or worked in British theatre. Although Josef Koudelka is best known for his subsequent work (having made a definitive break with theatre when leaving Prague), his photographs of 1960s theatre practice, and particularly those created in response to Otomar Krejča's productions offer a valuable reference. Over the course of his career as a theatre photographer, Koudelka appears to have progressively tested the limits of the theatre stage and of the photographic frame. This takes place initially through his choosing to photograph from diverse vantage points, not limited to the spectator's position, and the corpus of images includes close-up images clearly taken from the stage. He next experiments with bold framing, excluding elements of the staging and configurations, and even the performers' bodies, at points creating images at the expense of coherent rendering of the subject. This logic is intensified where Koudelka crops the photographic prints or even the negatives, further eliminating detail and bringing the photographic materials' own structure of grain into the foreground, hence images seemingly coated in fog, or extremely high-contrast images. Koudelka appears dismissive - and this is supported in testimony from the photographer - of any task of accurately documenting the theatre works, and instead uses the action onstage as the raw material for the creation of images, images which nevertheless attest to a vital aspect of the production. As such, Koudelka's theatre photography embraces the ambiguity of theatre as a subject for photography, and balances the rendering of theatre with the crafting of images.<sup>2</sup> It was a comparable positioning between capturing and crafting images that led Ivan Kyncl to receive an invitation to come to work with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1985. The director Terry Hands (writing after the photographer's death in 2004) describes his decision to invite this "continental photographer" to come to work with his company as being born of a certain frustration with the general situation of theatre photography in Britain, where conditions were, he suggests, inadequate for sustained photographic work, and images tended to be the preserve of marketing departments. He suggests that Kyncl could satisfy his wish for a theatre photography that would "marry definition with art," and even states that the photographer sometimes even made stage work look better than it actually was (Hands 2004). Kyncl's subsequent work, notably at the Almeida and the National Theatre in London, was marked by a tendency to eschew photographing the overall stage setup or the more conventional configurations used in theatre photography, and instead to photograph at the less obviously "visual" moments of a performance, as well as by an attention to details that might have seemed insignificant, focusing on, for example, the play of light onstage, and fleeting expressions by actors.

The account of theatre photography I have given here is by no means exhaustive, and although I have attempted to consider the relationships of photography and theatre historically, it is worth noting some of the risks inherent in the present situation. While it offers considerable advantages, the advent of digital photography has posed a number of challenges to photography, leading in some contexts to the

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<sup>2</sup> My forthcoming (2019) article, "Theatre Photography between Theatre and Performance" for the journal *Focales* (<https://focales.univ-st-etienne.fr/>) considers Koudelka's theatre corpus in more detail.

figure of the professional photographer risking becoming extinct. The decline of dedicated theatre photographers, particularly those operating in longstanding relationships with theatre-makers, or forming part of a theatre company (all relatively rare situations in any case), would surely be to the detriment of the collective memory of theatre, and to ongoing theatre practice.

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