

# Challenges to Historically Informed Staging and Research

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## Prologue

As you all know, my path to become a Historically Informed Performance (HIP) stage director was initiated by a combination of being a dancer, an early-dancer, and a trained musicologist. I was lucky to grow up in the midst of a flowering Early Music movement in Flanders in the 70s and early 80s, and as a result, the HIP approach and the quality of the music which touched me the most – baroque music – felt the most natural to me. Listening to, playing, singing, dancing, and later directing this repertoire was therefore always embedded in a sort of HIP *Selbstverständlichkeit* that was fed by my constant curiosity and a sense of endless discovery.

I was asked to reflect on the challenges that I encounter as a stage director when integrating my work with the theatrical aesthetics of the past, and how I deal with them, while responding to three specific texts. At first, I must admit, I was frustrated with the chosen texts, because I thought that other texts were better suited to illustrate my way of dealing with the challenges; even more so because this symposium is one of the first platforms I have encountered on which this question is treated as a serious topic, and on which I could finally speak up to likeminded colleagues! After a while, however, I came to think that the selection could not have been better:

1. Dene Barnett's text, because his writings offered me guidance in the early stages of my career as a director;
2. Jed Wentz's text on Gilbert Austin, because it reminded me that one has to be prepared to re-read, re-valuate, re-question and thus re-appreciate the sources;

3. and Magnus Tessing Schneider's text, because it represents my challenges of dealing with contemporary research and dramaturgy.<sup>1</sup>

I will not comment on the content of the texts, but rather on what they trigger in regard to my personal challenges when staging HIP.

### Challenges within the texts

The writings of **Dene Barnett** – whom I had the honour to meet once, in London in 1994 – to some extent replaced my training as a stage director, since I am completely autodidact, and he provided me with practical tools that I still use sometimes. Most importantly, however, his bibliography (mainly eighteenth-century sources) offered me guidance of preeminent value in my training and throughout my career.

Re-reading Barnett's introduction made me realise how strongly he was influenced by Austin's treatise *Chironomia* (1806); the extent to which he uses quotations from all periods and contexts to 'prove' a standardised hypothesis (much like Michel Verschaeve does);<sup>2</sup> how different and personal my own theatrical language has become over the years; the extent to which I diversified my own approach to HIP through teaching, through numerous stage experiments, and through the staging of works from other genres than *opera seria*, such as comedy, Mozart operas and pieces from the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Nonetheless, I must admit that I have stayed true to Barnett's rather 'mechanical' or 'cool-and-detached' approach to staging, even if far more emotion, subtleties and psychological role analysis have entered into my way of working. This was not because I was indoctrinated by Barnett's approach, but because my work with the baroque repertoire has confirmed over and over again that this was a core parameter in the stage organisation of the time. Furthermore, it remains a very clear *image* that – even if it is simplified – is useful when it comes to making today's actor-singers understand the difference from the 'normal' style that they are used to see on stage and to employ themselves.

Barnett does not trigger any thoughts in me on *how* to deal with the challenges I encounter as a HIP director, but rather on *what* challenges one might encounter. For example, when he writes about acting and verse on p. 16, I was reminded of the challenges that we put to ourselves when staging Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* at Drottningholm in 2013, trying to reconstruct the awareness of verse rhythm, or rather

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<sup>1</sup> The three texts are the introduction to Dene Barnett: *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18<sup>th</sup> century acting*, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg 1987; Jed Wentz: "'Mechanical Rules' Versus 'Abnormis Gratia': Revaluating Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* (1806) As A Source for Historical Acting Techniques" (forthcoming); and Magnus Tessing Schneider: "On Acting in Late Eighteenth-Century *Opera Buffa*", in this issue of *Performing Premodernity online*.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Verschaeve, *Traité de Chant et mise en scène baroques*, Editions Aug. Zurfluh, Bourg-la-Reine 1997.

integrate the practice into our work.<sup>3</sup> In my view, this was no great success, due to our inexperience with the practice, to the total lack of knowledge on the part of the singers, to the limited amount of time that we were able spend on this, but the experiment made me reflect on how far one can or should go when integrating past practices into a production in order to capture as much as possible of the past.

Though Barnett's own writings may be outdated to some extent, and although they (like Austin's) are not firmly rooted in the day-to-day practice of theatre-makers, they turned out to be a cornerstone on my path as a HIP stage director.

**Jed Wentz's** article on Gilbert Austin tickled my old love-hate relationship with that source, and ultimately made it clear to me that what I do is very often in complete accordance with Austin's prescriptions. It also reminded me of the challenges I encounter on a daily basis in my own didactical work with 'gesture' (at the Conservatory of Leipzig since 2008, at that of The Hague since 2001), and of the need of the singers and myself for a notational system *that works*. I have previously blamed Austin for his austerity, his negativity and his simplifications, but Jed's text reminded me that in didactic contexts I was often pushed to similar exaggerations, simplifications and classifications. Austin's rigidity originally awoke in me an aversion towards his system that has been growing over the years, partly because I worked very little with late eighteenth-century English repertoire, for which reason I consulted him quite seldom, and partly because I found that too many colleagues were staging *any* repertoire from *any* period in the 'Austian' style, thus restricting HIP to a mere set of hand gestures. My critical attitude made me ignore the fact that Austin himself stresses that the gestures should be "varied in a 1000 ways" (Wentz, p. 28), and I forgot that so many things I value are indeed confirmed by Austin. For example, on p. 23 Jed mentions the critique of Austin as a "mechanized monster", but when I read what Austin himself offers in his treatise to contradict this, I am struck by exactly the same calls for psychological feeling, subtext, conviction and knowledge with which I urge singers to fill their acting in order to make it alive and natural. Maybe this is what Austin meant with "the actor's fire"?

Jed's article makes me ponder the challenge of re-reading, re-evaluating, and re-questioning the sources, in order to re-appreciate them, and look for what they have represented in the different stages of my own career. It also triggers thoughts on the value of pure *reconstruction*: I think it is extremely valuable to reconstruct as much as possible of the existing notated dance repertoire, of the existing detailed guidelines for the use of costumes in specific operas, and of the existing indications in the few preserved promptbooks. In the same way, and in order to capture as much as possible of the aesthetics, the style and the techniques of the past, I think reconstructing Barnett's notational system should be a fixed item on our menu!

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<sup>3</sup> The production team included Mark Tatlow as musical director, Magnus Schneider Tensing as dramaturge, and myself as stage director.

Reading **Magnus Tessing Schneider**'s text reminds me of the joy I feel when being able to read new research on a piece I am staging – or any research at all, in the case of unknown operas – and then ending up with more questions than I had before. It is indeed a challenge to deal with the many disappointments one faces when reading research literature in order to find 'food for staging'. I know that academics do not choose their topics in order to feed practitioners, nor should they formulate their hypotheses in such ways that we can *translate* them into stage practice: academic research has its own jargon and is not seeking to enlighten the recreation of a repertoire. On p. 7, for example, Magnus deals with many parameters when trying to get the grip of a certain 'acting style', but he leaves me asking what on earth this would mean in practice! Sometimes the title of an article is sooo promising, but the *discours* of the research is sooo far away from any practical perspectives: defined merely by the literary content, the text, or musical analyses, it fails to integrate the contemporary context of making theatre as a *conditio sine qua non*.

At first, I got quite irritated when reading Magnus' remark that the "creation of such subtle and complex expressive effects clearly poses an important challenge to the adherents of HIP" (p. 17), but it turned out to be a valuable irritation, because it reminded me that the academic and the practitioner need to grow towards each other, and understand each other's subtleties, sensitivities and commonplaces. It reminded me of the need to feed academics with topics which we seek knowledge about,<sup>4</sup> and the need for more initiatives and appreciation on the part of the academic world. It is a challenge for researchers to serve and initiate reconstruction, to get more in touch with living theatre as a touchstone for their theories, even if this is more difficult than with music because a 'theatrical score' is missing. In short, I hope that more John Rices will stand up in musicology!<sup>5</sup> However, Magnus' text also reminds me that reading academic research creates new views on the same phenomenon – and that it makes one grateful for the wealth of source material presented in the bibliographical references!

Reading the text also reminds me of the challenges we both encountered on the above-mentioned production of *La clemenza di Tito* when dealing with the traditional role of the twenty-first-century dramaturge in the context of a 'historically informed' concept. Early in my career, dramaturges were rarely part of my environment, and if they were, they had neither sufficient interest in, nor the experience with the research that might feed a HIP staging. So I was 'left alone' for many years, and could do my own research without feeling the pressure of contemporary dramaturgy trying to shape my staging. Being myself trained as an academic, I know where and how to look for the sources, and it has always been an extremely joyful part of my preparation. But the

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<sup>4</sup> My personal top-4 requests are 1) the *Kostüm- & Dekorüberschläge* of Haydn's Eszterhaza operas; 2) relating the treatises of Delle Sedie and Engel to the operas of Verdi; 3) the melodrama *Leonardo und Blandine* (1783) by von Götz and von Winter; 4) studying the Jelgerhuis pictures newly acquired by Antwerp Conservatory library.

<sup>5</sup> *Mozart on the Stage*, Cambridge University Press 2009.

more I produce, and the more my work enters into the regular opera production system, the less time I have to conduct research myself, and the more non-initiates, with their 'traditional' dramaturgical concepts, feel the need to correct, interpret, comment on and change what I do, and to prescribe the ways in which I should communicate this to the audience. I realize, however, that if HIP wants to play a role in contemporary theatre, it has to deal with this challenge as part of its contemporary expressive power.

### **Some more Challenges**

1. In the end, after researching and reading about the past, one must close the books and let the information flow into the contemporary staging, with the main goal of making good theatre, in which the smell of the study room should be avoided at all costs. But let me make it clear that after closing the books, I feel no need whatsoever to deliberately integrate more of 'today's context' into the production. The fact that the work is done *today* is the most contemporary context that anyone could wish for.

2. I do Monteverdi today, Haydn tomorrow, and the next day I do Handel; I tackle melodrama, opera, oratorio, *ballet-heroiqne*, pastoral ode, dramatic cantata, *serenata*, Singspiel, *dramma giocoso* etc.; I work with the French, Italian, German and English repertoires; and when teaching I sometimes move across these styles and genres from hour to hour. As a consequence, one of my challenges is the problem of dealing with the national and stylistic differences within a repertoire that spans more than two centuries. There is a major lack of research into these differences, and sometimes I wonder if I should restrict myself to one style, one period, or one genre. Sometimes I feel almost trapped, having to create a style of staging that fits the piece well and leads to quick and convincing results, but that is based on too little historical evidence and differentiation. Certainly, this challenge will keep me busy for many years to come.

3. Over the years I have learnt to read about the fourth wall, about Stanislavsky, Brechtian theatre, the production histories of famous operas, etc.; I have been 'advised' by dramaturges, costume and stage designers, colleagues, critics, etc.; I have worked within the typical machinery of the repertoire theatre – and this all to such an extent that I have begun to long for my early days as a stage director. Sometimes I almost feel contaminated with superfluous information and *Hineininterpretierung*, when I am advised to adapt to modernity, or I feel pushed to take part in debates about the credibility of a piece or about the justification of HIP, etc. In such moments I sometimes long for those naïve days when I was just surrounded by the libretti, the scores, and the sources. It also makes me wonder why the musician is not asked to justify his art by *proving* the contemporary value of his historically informed techniques of playing, and why the opera house intendant or the 'other' stage directors are not asked to *prove* the contemporary value of choosing an eighteenth-century piece

rather than a contemporary one. *So one of the great challenges is to stay true to oneself.* I try to make the piece 'visible', just as the musicians try to make it 'audible': this is how it all started, and this is still mainly what drives me. If I stay true to myself, perhaps someday I will be valued as a stage director *tout court* rather than as someone who fails or succeeds by working in the HIP way. Being known as a HIP director clearly has both advantages and disadvantages, and these challenge me on a daily basis.

4. One challenge that knocks on my door repeatedly is the problem of how to deal with education, and of the need to explain the historical 'why' and 'how' to singers. First, because I sincerely think all singers should experience as much as possible of the old theatrical concepts underlying the repertoire they sing; and secondly, because I need high-quality acting in order to convince the audience in the performance. I encounter the educational challenges both within the school system and within the production system.

Within the conservatoires, historically-informed *playing* can rely on an educational model that has existed in Europe for about forty years now, but – with a very few exceptions – historically-informed *acting* cannot, and furthermore, the existing Early Music departments do not even include opera in their curriculum. Dealing with the education in historical acting techniques within the existing pedagogical structures thus remains a huge challenge, on which I have spent many efforts through the years, but it is the challenge of the curriculum and the directors of the schools rather than of the students who simply love it and want more.

Within the modern production system, the early opera repertoire is mainly sung by artists who have received conventional vocal training rather than an education in early music, and even if they have received acting training, their skills are embedded in a style alien to that of the eighteenth century. It is therefore a huge challenge, within the maximum rehearsal span of six weeks, to protect the singer from feeling responsible for the positive outcome of an alternative style of staging; to provide the inspiration and the education that allow the singer to enter into and embrace an aesthetic and a style far away from anything s/he has previously encountered; and finally to make the singer perform in a historically informed way with the same quality, authority, sovereignty and artistic personality as that of the musicians in the orchestra pit.

## **Epilogue**

The invitation to this symposium mentioned the premise that all the participants were united by a mutual fascination with eighteenth-century theatre, which is obviously the case, but it also stated that we share "a belief in the feasibility of reviving at least elements thereof", although possibly employing different styles. However, I do not 'believe' in, just as I am not interested in *proving*, the 'feasibility' of a style. My aim is to revive a piece of ephemeral art, which only speaks when it is revived, and this is also

what fascinates me. When the revival of the work occurs by integrating the theatrical means of the time of its creation, I feel like a string player in a Baroque orchestra who does not use the repertoire to *prove* that his technique is good and convincing, but who feels that this repertoire is well served by the employment of techniques from the past. It feels natural, and normal. It speaks with strong rhetorical power and pictorial beauty. It moves me, and I feel content and at home.