

Remembering Thomas Postlewait 1941–2021

WILLMAR SAUTER AND JANELLE REINELT

The picture of the group of scholars on the steps of the University of Helsinki in 1993 is typical of Thomas Postlewait and depicts at the same time an important moment in the history of the International Federation for Theatre Research (Fig. 1). Tom keeps in the background, furthest back in the top row, next to Selma Jeanne Cohen and Martine de Rougemont, then the vice president of IFTR.¹ This position was in a way typical of Tom. He remained in the background and at the same time he supported and pushed those around him. This characterized his role as the editor of the University of Iowa Press series called *Studies in Theatre History and Culture*. During twenty years he published forty books by authors from many countries. Some of them can be seen assembled around him on the photograph. Anyone who was lucky to be coached by Editor Tom will easily confirm the strong directions that were given with a soft hand, preserving the particularities of the author within the overall framework of the series.

The gathering on the steps of the university also marks a decisive step in the history of the federation. August 1993 was the moment when the IFTR working groups were firmly established. The background is well described by Tom himself in an article he wrote together with Barbara Susek Michieli, ‘A Transnational Community of Scholars: The Theatre Historiography Working Group in IFTR/FIRT’.² Working-group-like procedures were tried out in the congress in Stockholm in 1989; the historiography group was established in Dublin in 1992 and consolidated in Helsinki in 1993. The reason for coming to Helsinki was slightly different from what Tom and Barbara remembered. Four years after Stockholm, Moscow was supposed to host the next world congress. But in those years after the collapse of the Soviet Union the social conditions for bringing hundreds of theatre scholars to Moscow were absolutely impossible. It was my first duty as newly elected president to travel to Moscow and ask the organizers to postpone the congress to 1994. In this situation, Pirkko Koski stepped forward and invited the two then existing working groups to Helsinki. In addition, also the executive committee was invited, because many of its members were also active in one of the working groups. Thanks to Pirkko Koski’s invitation two important turns in the history of the federation were allowed to happen: the first working group on performance analysis and the second one on theatre historiography were now recognized and showed the way for the thirty-odd working groups to come over the next two decades. At the same time, the members of the Ex.Com rewrote the constitution into a democratic document that was accepted and sanctioned at the congress in Moscow in 1994. According to Tom’s own judgement, ‘these three gatherings in Stockholm, Dublin and Helsinki proved crucial for the birth of the



FIG. 1. Participants of the IFTR conference in Helsinki 1993. W. Sauter, private collection.

working groups in IFTR, and these meetings initiated new developments in international scholarship on theatre history and performance studies'.³

Tom was convenor of the Theatre Historiography Working Group between 1992 and 1994 and again in 1996. I think this was a very typical strategy of Tom's: to engage actively, to help when it was needed and to give space to new talents whenever possible. Tom was well qualified when he appeared on the IFTR scene in 1989: he had just published, together with Bruce McConachie, *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*. This book was at the beginning of a new area of theorization, away from the dominance of semiotics and opening for historical interpretation. The further development of the working group maintained its grip on Tom's writings as far as historiography was concerned. He also wrote about theatre history, especially on William Archer and Ibsen, but the working group was devoted to historiography. After twenty years of yearly conferences, Tom summarized his profound insights in two books: his own *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (2009) and a completely rewritten version of the 1989 anthology, now entitled *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* (2010), edited with Charlotte Canning. To the latter, a number of colleagues from the working group had contributed, but Tom's generosity held the doors open also for other collaborators. In a dedication, Tom stated dryly, 'We've made the field *adjust* to us.'

Tom was a sensible listener and also a very sincere critic. He could help when he saw a potential of improvement, and he could dismiss what he considered of little worth. Despite his sometimes severe criticism, the friendship endured, which gives a good picture of Tom's extraordinary diplomatic skills and his deep sense of friendship.

Tom received a number of distinguished awards from both organizations and universities. There was only one award missing: an honorary membership of the International Federation for Theatre Research. IFTR has not awarded honorary memberships for a long time, for any of its old members, but if anyone deserved it, it was Tom, honouring his long-standing contributions to IFTR, from 1997 to 2005 also as member of the Ex.Com.

Despite his weakening health, Tom continued to come to our IFTR conferences until the coronavirus pandemic put an end to attending conferences. I do not know to what extent he also visited the conferences of no less than five other learned societies in the field of theatre and performance of which he was a member. Conferences, meetings, conversations and collaborations were Tom's very breath of life – that is why we miss him so much. Now we are left with our memories and the best we can do is to continue his work, consider his ideas and live up to his friendliness.

Willmar Sauter

There are so many ways to remember and honour Tom Postlewait that it is somewhat daunting to decide where to begin and what to highlight. In addition to intellectual inspiration, professional leadership and personal friendship and kindness, I remember most brightly and clearly his political contribution to enabling feminist scholarship in the early days of our second-wave endeavours, and this is what I would like to recall here.

Our field of theatre studies was conservative when I entered it in the mid-1970s. The hierarchy of white men was firmly established in theatre scholarship as well as in the theatre system itself, with its male star directors, writers and designers. Following on from a long struggle for academic legitimation as a field of study, pioneering or innovative theories and methods were infrequent and almost always came into play from other disciplines such as English, history or philosophy, whose positions were powerful and unassailable. Hayden White published *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* in 1974, Fredric Jameson *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* in 1974, and Clifford Geertz *The Interpretation of Cultures* in 1973, to name just three influential books shaking the foundations of thinking across the humanities and social sciences.

Tom Postlewait, Joe Roach, Marvin Carlson – these were the 'Young Turks' of their day in our field: established credentials in publication and research that guaranteed recognition and eventual membership in the 'old boys club', mentored and/or affiliated with one of the top existing departments (Cornell University), brilliant and well-spoken self-presenters: they already had considerable 'clout' in the professional organizations such as ASTR and ATHE. When they spoke people wanted to listen. Tom had his work on Ibsen, showing archival and interpretive strengths on one of the holy modern trio: Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov. He also had recognition in the professional organizations that controlled and legitimated the field. This is where he first showed his true colours.

Feminist scholarship was just emerging in our field. There were a few rare women scholars such as Ruby Cohn, Eleanor Prosser and Helen Krich Chinoy, although only Chinoy produced explicitly feminist scholarship while the former two kept a distance

but mentored and taught the upcoming generation of feminist theatre scholars such as myself, Sue-Ellen Case and Elin Diamond. It is notable that all three had degrees in English. Chinoy published in 1981 one of the early studies in second-wave feminism and theatre history with Lynda Walsh Jenkins (a younger colleague): *Women in American Theatre*. These senior women were generally not to be seen at the disciplinary gatherings of theatre studies, finding MLA and other professional organizations in allied fields more meaningful and accessible.

By the beginning of the 1990s, however, a new generation of young women had entered the profession who were passionate about feminist scholarship and keen to bring it to bear on theatre studies, wanting to change the field as well as changing the world. The Women in Theatre programme of ATHE had been founded in 1974, and now well-known names in the history of American feminist theatre scholarship were giving their first papers: Gay Gibson Cima, Noreen Barnes, Jill Dolan. We soon realized that while women only or mostly attended panels (which was good for building a movement and providing safe space), we also needed to gain recognition within the full organizations. One way to guarantee that was to collaborate with other progressive scholars who could leverage our visibility and help create intellectual frisson. So it came to pass that Tom Postlewait, Joe Roach, Marvin Carlson and Bruce McConachie partnered in producing with me, Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan and Viki Patraha a double-session panel at ATHE in New York in 1989 called *The New Convergence*, referencing the interdisciplinary research in history, theory and criticism emerging in our fields. The white men lent visibility/credibility to us women and garnered a large attendance at the sessions. Tom was an enthusiastic partner in this endeavour, and I shall always remember it with gratitude. This is only one small example, and indeed an imperfect one: as Sue-Ellen Case and I wrote in our account of this session, ‘The panel itself was comprised of four white women and four white men and really bridged only two formal groups, Theory/Criticism and History ... In other words, on the panel, we both displayed and attempted to deconstruct the structuring of dominant power.’⁴ Many other efforts to assail the bastion of privilege in the field took place over the next few years, but I will always remember Tom in relation to this act of challenge and inclusion.

In future years, Tom continued to be a champion of women scholars in our field, publishing with feminist scholars Tracy Davis and Charlotte Canning, and appointing Heather Nathans co-editor of his long-standing and prize-winning University of Iowa series *Studies in Theatre History and Culture*. The mentorship of feminist authors in that series is long, including, for example, Joe Calloway prize winners Kim Marra and Aparna Dharwadker, and Barnard Hewitt winner Charlotte Canning. I also experienced Tom’s assistance and support in building a strong feminist and socially conscious International Federation for Theatre Research during my presidency. He was a key diplomat negotiating the proposed working group on Jewish cultural studies among a diverse membership and many other sensitive issues confronting an expanding and changing organization at that time.

In short, Tom was a fellow traveller in a number of worthy disciplinary causes, and I will always remember the reasoned yet forceful politics of his interventions.

Janelle Reinelt

NOTES

- 1 The names of all the participants can be found in the caption of a similar picture in Thomas Postlewait and Barbara Susek Michieli, 'A Transnational Community of Scholars: The Theatre Historiography Working Group in IFTR/FIRT', *Theatre Research International*, 35, 3 (2010), pp. 232–49.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p. 235.
- 4 Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle G. Reinelt, eds., *The Performance of Power: Theatrical Discourse and Politics* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1991), p. xiii.

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