
Dramatic performance, especially early modern performance, would seem to be ephemeral. How can we really know how the performance of an Elizabethan play would have looked? We have a few fragments of journals, some financial records, and an ambiguous sketch or two, but reconstructing the conditions of the first performance of, say, *As You Like It,* would seem at first glance dubious at best. Recreating the conditions leading up to such a performance might therefore seem nigh impossible. But paradoxically, as Tiffany Stern demonstrates in her remarkable *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan,* it may be possible to know more about the preparations for an early modern performance than about the performance itself. Assembling a truly daunting number of instances from archives and from references embedded in playtexts themselves, Stern offers a wonderful three-dimensional look into the process of preparing and performing plays between 1567 and 1780. This encyclopedic study is indispensable for those interested in the conditions of England’s early modern theater.

Stern covers five periods in this study: an overlapping discussion of Ben Jonson’s theater and Shakespeare’s up to the Caroline stage, followed by discussions of Restoration theater, early eighteenth-century theater under Cibber, and the practical changes to mid-century theater under Garrick. In each section, she approaches the questions of theatrical practice logically and systematically. She first provides some background information, follows this with an extended discussion of rehearsal practice, then comments on the performance. Under each subheading, Stern further divides her discussion so as to throw light on the duties and practice of all personnel involved in that particular portion of preparation or presentation. This helpful approach makes this study vital on many scores: it traces the waxing and waning of the importance of each participant in the theater, showing when and where the author or the actors or the managers might be more important to the prepa-
ration of a play for the stage; and importantly, it makes this wonderful study function as a useful reference, as a reader may consult a single section to find the information he or she may need about a single element of theatrical practice in a particular decade from these two centuries. It is one of the book’s great strengths.

Stern begins her work with a discussion of the fluidity of terms that would eventually acquire more or less fixed theatrical meanings in later centuries. As she demonstrates, the term “rehearsal” could be quite flexible in its denotations, running from rehearsing a lesson—something akin to “reciting”—through singular or continuous recallings, into imitations or mimickings, and including specific types of sermonizing. All these meanings contribute in one way or another to the “rehearsal” as preparatory to a performance, but even then, as Stern shows, the performance itself could be a “rehearsal” as acting companies were required to “rehear and see” a play—either as a kind of audition or to receive permission—for civic authorities: mayors in cities visited while touring, or the Master of the Revels while in London. The companies also maintained the fiction that their regular performances in London were themselves “rehearsals” for court performances. Even early performances—we’d call them previews—functioned as a kind of rehearsal. At the heart of Stern’s book is the point that rehearsal was an amorphous concept whose beginning and end is hard to delineate.

Stern arranges each chapter of her text around an ideal chronology, allowing readers to compare the process of acquiring, preparing, revising, presenting, and further revising a play across different periods. Before 1642, the process was extraordinarily hectic, though the pace slowed in the last years before the theaters were closed. At the end of the Elizabethan period, the professional companies put on dozens of plays each year—some of which, admittedly, were revivals of older plays, but even then there had been lengthy stretches in which the plays were out of use and the revivals would have additional material engrafted. When a play was nearing completion, the sharers would hear it and decide whether to take on the play; if they did, sides—speeches preceded by three
word cues—would be distributed to actors for individual study, by far the most time-consuming part of preparation. Actual group rehearsal, Stern suggests, was not necessarily required, and frequently the play might be put on without the actors knowing anything about the rest of the play. The effect of such haphazard rehearsal may have been ludicrous—and strain the modern imagination—but Stern finds evidence that actors may have stood on stage without always being in character or engaged in the play’s progress. With so little rehearsal, Stern finds, plays could be prepared in under a week in a pinch (though three weeks seems to have been the norm). Variations on this typical period of preparation might include time for individual instruction from the playwright (in which the actor was meant to parrot the pronunciation and gesture given to him) or partial rehearsal before the typically single group rehearsal of provincial, university, and even public theaters. The playwright need not have been extensively involved in preparing the play, though after the first night’s performance some revision might be necessary if the play were not damned and were to be performed subsequently.

Changes in the theater business after the Restoration (beyond the much-remarked matter of women on stage) brought some elements of the previous steps in preparing a play to the fore and had some small impact on the matter of rehearsal itself. Because it was imperative that a play gratify its initial audience, and because playwrights now had to hope that a play would reach a third night’s performance (the “author’s benefit”), changes in the preparation of the play took place. One new step in preparation was that the author, or his or her designee, would now read the completed play to the company as a whole for its judgment, though here the author’s responsibility ended and individual study of parts was still the norm. Roles would be learned, not only as lines to memorized but as performances handed down from one generation to the next, supposedly linked to the actual performance styles of the pre-1642 theater and back to Shakespeare’s instruction itself. Because plays would now have short “runs” rather than a few single performances, more time—perhaps as much as a month—might be devoted to pre-
paring the play, though ensemble rehearsal was still not very extensive. Rehearsing a play seriously was potentially a waste of time if its initial audience hissed it from the stage; no one could be fully committed to a play until it had survived its first performance. The first several performances of a play—including preview performances for influential patrons—might in effect serve as “substitute rehearsals” themselves (143).

The amount of time devoted to rehearsal continued to expand through the eighteenth century and at the same time the author’s importance to preparing a play continued to erode as actors took on greater responsibility. The author might not be present at the judgmental reading, during which the actors would decide whether a proposed play would suit. Ensemble rehearsal continued to be less important, though there was more emphasis on attending these, a rule that seems to have been honored in the breach of it. At the beginning of the century, the prompter comes to the fore as one who holds the performance together—there are many more metatheatrical references to the prompter in this period and printed texts often advertised themselves as coming from the prompt book, especially the book of the famous prompter William Chetwood. With the advent of Garrick on the English stage, some small revolutions in rehearsal began, though these were primarily a matter of style—handed-down performances were increasingly done away with. Garrick’s micromanaging served to extend the period of rehearsal, though not significantly. Nevertheless, Stern concludes, by the end of the eighteenth century, Garrick’s theater was not significantly different from Shakespeare’s. As she concludes, “Theatrical preparation did not fundamentally alter between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, though its emphases changed” (289-90).

Stern’s very dense, rich study is sure to spark heated debate. One might ask, for instance, to what extent evidence drawn from plays themselves constitutes viable support for a thesis about theatrical preparation or practice. Theater practitioners may doubt that plays could be prepared with the speed and in the way Stern describes. And yet her argument is quite compelling. The sheer
amount of dramatic references to the preparation of plays lends credence to the conclusions Stern draws here, and the exigencies of a wide and diverse repertory in the early theater certainly suggest that theatrical practice then could not be the same as it is now, the rehearsal itself being one likely space in which that practice differed. *The Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan*, then, is a truly landmark study, one whose thesis is worth serious consideration as we revise our understanding of early modern theatrical practice.


*The Theatrical Baroque* is the catalogue of a 2001 exhibition at the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago. As the Director of the Museum, Kimberly Rorschach, explains in the “Foreword” that the book’s goal—as well as that of the exhibition—is “to explore some of the many intersections between theatre and the visual arts in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe” (vi). It includes eight essays and numerous color and black and white plates as well as a “Checklist” of the 31 exhibited artworks by Callot, Quinault, Carlone, and van Dyck, among others. Larry F. Norman’s introduction to the book is followed by seven essays, which discuss some of the exhibited works within the context of larger issues and ideologies that shaped baroque culture. As Rorschach further explains, the book and the exhibition “investigate how the more familiar devices of the period—grand scenography and dramatic gestures, for example—illuminate critical debates in baroque culture, including those concerning the proper role of art, the relationship of reality to representation, and the nature of social hierarchies” (vi).

In his introductory essay, “The Theatrical Baroque,” Norman notes that, flourishing in the mid-seventeenth century, theatre was the most popular form of entertainment and art, as it “had allied