

**Triangle's Immersive Museum Theatre: performativity, historical interpretation and research in-role.**

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**Introduction**

**Richard Talbot:**

Over the last twenty years Triangle Theatre Company, based in Coventry, England, and led by Artistic Director Carran Waterfield, has incorporated historical research as a significant aspect of all of its studio productions. A curiosity about personal stories, family histories, and national historical events and figures has led to research-orientated performances in which the processes of uncovering, unpicking and piecing together narratives and identities are still active in the "finished" (unfinishable) work. Triangle's interpretations veil and unveil characters through the technique of slippage in which one body shifts across the voices and perspectives of different personae sometimes leaking the perspective of the actor. Such work exploits the dynamics of gossip, interruption, intimacy and betrayal in order to unsettle the authoritative historical or protagonist voice.

In its recent experiments with site-specific "Immersive Museum Theatre" the company has been playing with the notion of "character" and the actor's co-presence as historical researcher. One feature of this work is an ongoing negotiation between document-*based* and character-*driven* historical enquiry. This mode of performance-as-research interrogates documentary evidence as a foundation for enquiry and is self-reflexive about the function of intuition and speculation.

In this chapter we will discuss the Triangle's work on two projects: a series of improvised performances in 2008 at Charlecote Park in Warwickshire, a property now managed by The National Trust, and the very early phase of devising The Last Women, a production which has since been scripted, recast, and rehearsed and which opened at The Belgrade Theatre B2 studio space in April 2009.

At the "Performing Heritage" Conference in Manchester University, in April 2008 we delivered a partially improvised live performance-presentation which sought to revive the interactive methods of these two projects, and to suggest how apparently different contexts shared some features consistent with Triangle's emerging methodology of historical performance. In the following "discussion" which is shared across numerous personae and voices we will attempt to articulate some of the ways in which performance practices and historical research practices may become mutually informative and integrated in and as the event of performance.

What follows is a partial transcript and further iteration of the conference presentation, which seeks to sustain the exchange and contradiction between the two figures on stage in Manchester: Richard Talbot, the actor in-role, "as" the 19<sup>th</sup> Century architect of Charlecote, Charles Samuel Smith; and Dr Norwood Andrews, the academic, performing himself: the historian and advisor on The Last Women project. In the live performance, the voice of some characters, scholarly texts, and other actors on the projects were fragmented or displaced appearing in video clips or as texts which the audience were invited to read out.

As I write this, distancing myself from the actor in-role, I see that I am emerging as an additional voice in this process of reflection, that is, as someone writing up the performance. I am aware that a proliferation of characters and contexts is an inevitability which undermines the inclination to refine or clarify events and inform the reader. The conversation which is presented here, then, examines this slippage and juxtaposition of actor/curator/researcher/academic and other research characters. This slippage can be understood as a performative ambiguity in which the reader is brought into a shared and productive uncertainty as to the framing of the speaker's proximity to past events, including their presence in the conference piece. [Good!]

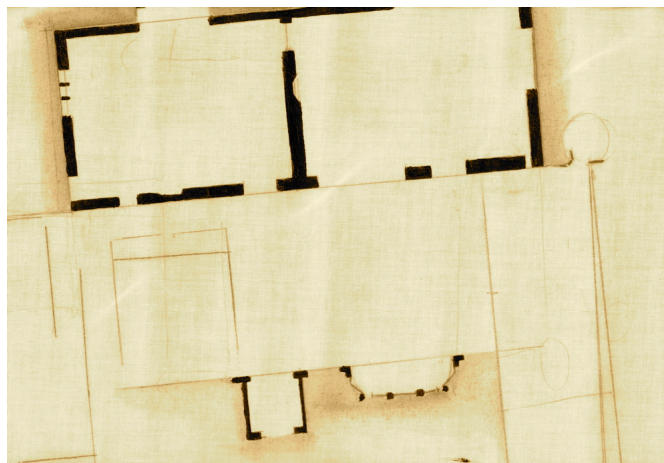
In this transcript, the stage directions and various voices are not provided to suggest a reproduction of the performance-paper or of the same scene imagined for staging the future. Rather, these clips are a collage of multiple perspectives, including that of the “non-actor”, Dr Andrews. In the performance Norwood Andrews presented a self-contained paper in the second part; nevertheless his presence at the back of the stage throughout the first part was a form of mute commentary. This presence is approximated here through the use of asides linked by thematic association and accumulating towards Norwood Andrews’ concluding contribution.

*One ‘candle’ (an electric light with a pointed bulb) on a chair. Charles Samuel Smith is dressed in top hat. “Pat-a-pan” (Christmas folk music) is playing from a mobile phone on the floor. A figure (Richard Talbot [RT]) is dancing in the dark, is barely lit. The audience is guided one by one to chairs assembled around a blind suspended below a swag of net curtain. The tough calico blind has a small architectural plan painted on it in black ink and blue watercolour. When the audience is seated, a candle is held up to the architect’s ground plan. Throughout Dr Andrews [NA] is sitting in the gloom behind the screen. He too is barely visible.*

Charles Samuel Smith/RT:

I am - I am being - Charles Samuel Smith. I am Charles Samuel Smith. I built this. This is Charlecote Park in Warwickshire.

*I indicate the floor plan...*



Copyright Triangle, 2007 (328KB)

Mullioned windows replaced with 18<sup>th</sup> century sashes, two storey canted bay windows, ogee-roofed turrets, brick and stone piers, strap-work on balustrades, obelisk finials...(Jones 2007:45)

Queen Elizabeth stayed here for two nights in the late 1560s. They built the portico in her honour in 1573. The footprint of the “original” building is therefore a typical Elizabethan “E” shape. I

was - I am - responsible for re-edifying the building and adding an extension (*I indicate*) - here, and for creating a canted bay, and for literally raising the roof in the Great Hall.

Charlecote Park is The Tudor home of the Lucy family for more than 700 years; the mellow stonework and ornate chimneys of Charlecote sum up the very essence of Tudor England. There are strong associations with both Queen Elizabeth I and Shakespeare, who knew the house well. (The National Trust website 2008)

Shakespeare, it is alleged, was caught poaching deer on the estate as a youth. He was brought before an impromptu court convened by the landowner, Sir Thomas Lucy, then tried and punished for this misdemeanour. However, according to one Victorian critic, Shakespeare took his revenge in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in a scene in which Justice Shallow mentions the "lousie", in other words, both flea-bitten and hopeless local JP, the master of Charlecote, Sir Thomas Lucy:

A parliamentary member, a justice of the peace/  
At home a poor Scare crow in London an asse/  
If lousie be lucy as some volke miss call it/  
Then lucy be lowsy whatever befall it. (attributed to  
Shakespeare by Rowe (1823) cited in Wainwright 1989:210)

This tenuous connection with Shakespeare brings tourists here in 1769 for a conference and Shakespeare "jubilee" presided over by the actor, David Garrick.

Sir Walter Scott also paid Charlecote a visit in 1828:

While we were surveying the antlered old hall with its painted glass and family pictures, Mr Lucy came to welcome us in person, and to show the house, with the collection of paintings, which seems valuable and to which he had made many valuable additions... This visit gave me great pleasure; it really brought Justice Shallow freshly before my eyes. (Sir Walter Scott letters qtd in Wainwright 1989:218)

In the great hall Mr Lucy becomes Justice Shallow in an unwitting re-enactment prompted by an earlier description of a visit to the property by Washington Irving.

I was courteously received by a worthy old housekeeper who, with the civility and communicativeness of her order, showed me the interior of the house... there is a wide hospitable fireplace, ...formerly the rallying place of winter festivity... I had hoped to find ... the redoubted Sir Thomas sat enthroned in awful state [before] the recreant Shakespeare (Washington Irving qtd in Wainwright 213)

The Shakespeare mythology exceeds the verisimilitude of this site. It was/has been/is almost entirely "modernised" by George Lucy in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and I have largely re-constructed it as a "mock-Tudor" house for the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*A slippage occurs shifting the perspective from Charles Samuel Smith to that of the actor, although the physicality and tone of voice of Smith is weirdly sustained.*

RT

The site has a theatrical connection (based on real and apocryphal events) and a theatricality as it becomes something like the stage set for the legend in which the Lucys and their household appear as guides *re-dressing* the humiliation of Sir Thomas and performatively reinstating his judicial status through a re-incorporation of Shakespeare as hero of the scene at Charlecote. This lineage of performances inspires interactions in 2008 which interrogate the claims of the house.

*A small video image appears on the domestic blind. The image is positioned just above the floor plan drawing and the projector lens has been distorted by a lantern glass, creating a kaleidoscopic effect, distorting and dividing the image into segments with different hues. The image is further distorted by scratches and film jitter. A scullery maid, a footman, a butler and the architect can be seen moving through the building and grounds. It is projected without commentary.*

RT (continuing):

Triangle's performances at The National Trust are pitched into a curatorial environment of intensive preservation. However the historic building and the artefacts it contains can be understood as a materiality that is decaying and also reconstructed through preservation and, to some extent, "improvised". Although they are intangible, the improvised performances by visitors the "unmatrixed" (Zarilli 1995:45) performances of volunteer guides and the presence of professional actors restores or re-enacts the performances by a "visitor" like Walter Scott or a "guide" like the housekeeper, not through impersonation, but through a dialogic kaleidoscope or matrix of viewpoints and knowledges. This interpretation strategy draws as much on the predicament of the visitor as on the knowledge of the interpreter, and is stimulated by unproductive, excessive and playful speculation as much as by "fact".

NA: *(as if from the dark at the back of the room)*

On the day of my visit, the "house staff" spent some time in the rooms of the service wing which are open to the public (principally the scullery and the kitchen), peeling potatoes, and making crude sculptures out of potato. Generally they seemed easily distracted from their chores. They persuaded most of the visitors to join in country dancing, and offered a farcical staging of a Shakespearean comedic scene in a section of the garden.

Miss Nicholls, the scullery maid, typically displayed a downcast expression and manner which reflected her life of drudgery, but she serenaded the visitors with an unexpectedly pure and heartfelt rendition of *Sigh No More, Ladies* (*Much Ado About Nothing* Act II, Scene 3).



Copyright, Triangle, 2008. (104KB)

Kathryn Bond/Miss Nicholls:

Some people believed me stories more than others; some I had to slip a wink; others I left with the cruel un-satisfaction of

an un-finished story as I had things to do; others I was with for far too long; some trapped me and others I trapped. Sometimes I forgot who I was and had to remember meself. Knowing where I came from 'elped. I saw some of their eyes glaze over like cows when I was talking - this was not a good sign so I just left 'em and decided to walk off and get on so they could watch me from afar. I do cut a finer figure from a way off more than I do up close, like. I keep forgetting that.

RT:

At Charlecote, the visitor's sense of trespass may be strongest in the study, which is used by the current resident, Sir Edmund Fairfax-Lucy, as well as his forbears. On the desk there are artefacts in the process of repair. This lord seems to be an active participant in his own conservation. From here he can observe visitors and they may spy him. This is a museum with a living resident. It is a space in which the volunteer guides are "squatting". Like jesters in an empty "seat" or throne, this might be an opportunity to play. However, the tendency is towards a dutiful respect: inside the public areas of the house volunteers take up positions at doorways and at desks, and in each room framed by doorways, thresholds, corridors and stairways they lurk and wait to deliver their "material".

(slipping again into a perspective shared with Chares Samuel Smith)

In the cramped study, I mutter over the shoulders of a small group of visitors as they look for signs of real life: an aristocrat at his desk. They are pressed up against a rope barrier and "real life", appears behind them and surprises them with a whisper.

In the Great Hall we hug the walls and rush to corners, working on the edges of the rooms and in-between spaces: leaning against a pillar, whispering from the shadows, or eavesdropping on visitor conversations. Alternatively, working against my own habits and expectation, I pace along corridors with apparent purpose – looking for someone.

In the intimacy of the bedrooms we mutter about Victorian pornography. Along the corridor or on the staircase we shield the public from "ugly" paintings. We use the bay windows as stages, walled on three sides. We create a massed dance in the hall, just like Washington Irving supposed.

(slipping again)

It is by playing dialogically with speculation, and the unknown, that new knowledge unfolds.

(and again)

During my time in Charlecote I am asked a question by a visitor about the different shapes of the ceilings in the library and dining room respectively – one is barrel-edged, the other square-edged. A specific question about an apparent line of darker paint where the barrel ceiling meets the walls is not answered by a guide but redirected via the actor (who could not answer) to other visitors, and then onto the guide (who could not answer) and on to other guides and visitors until everybody spending time in the library or dining room participated in an enquiry that offered numerous explanations from the improbable to the technical. For the most part the educational method in the National Trust is to return to the available facts and methods of manufacture. Here the enquiry and outcome was based on how the ceiling made the visitor feel as they took up space "squatting" in this residence. As the light changes the optical illusions created by the ceiling design shift and there is shift in our collective conjectures. The ceiling and fabric become a sculptural and affective artefact in their own right rather than simply a design whim of a wealthy former resident.



Charles Samuel Smith. Copyright Triangle, 2007 (120KB).

The ceiling in the library creates an optical illusion. The pendant stucco moulds are all the same length but appear to be more squat when viewed at a distance. As you move they also appear to move. In addition they are differently formed. In the plaster work there is an apparent “s-shape”, a “comma” and a “question mark”. They are arranged in a pattern - perhaps this could be a code? Each one is decorated with beads or diamonds, forms like sugared fruit, or sweet corn or decorations from a Christmas cake. You must be careful not to spill your soup down your front when you look up to admire them. The ceiling is so delicious you could eat it. You could snap the pendants off. They are like meringues. Each one is surrounded with a quatrefoil and the coffers are filled with exuberant arabesque and serpentine forms. (Visitor, reproducing Charles Samuel Smith’s lecture Triangle (evaluation): 2008)

RT:

We breed misunderstandings and distractions, all the time drawing more people into a sense of bewilderment. We start some business with a piece of rubbish, like a cart or a plank. We struggle with the paraphernalia of the site, the railings, the fences, ropes and barricades, bay windows, narrow corridors. We talk at tangents to a more serious history of the house, we invent fantastic plans, such as installing plastic double-glazing or building improbable extensions made of iron grid work,.

NA:

Bold, insubordinate Miss Hunt induced one visiting family to dance around a maypole, and then persuaded the children to put on pieces of her uniform and take on some of her tasks.

RT:

All costumes are in processes of ongoing repair: the scullery maid’s pinafore became stained by mud and potato juice; the housekeeper’s skirts became “daggy” after trailing in the mud; and dry mud was ingrained in the knees of the butler’s woollen breeches every time he proposed to Miss Hunt, the housemaid. The pocket of Miss Hunt’s original 19<sup>th</sup> century apron strains under the pressure of her notebook and pencil. Hunt’s restorative needlework around the pocket is her mark on the history and personality of the apron. These many ways of being worn out become the thread of subsequent narratives shared with visitors. Perhaps this is why each persona has been self-contained, carrying all other artefacts in the pockets of a costume that becomes a portable museum..

NA:

Miss Hunt told me that she and I were to be married and instructed me on preparations for the event. Mr. Parsons, the butler, asserted his authority over the household staff but was plainly unable to establish control. (Rumours of a drinking problem were spread about by the house staff). The butler and the maids were constantly trying out ways of using space and engaging visitors. While their uniformed presence implicitly invoked a familiar type of living-history display, with costumed interpreters acting out traditional work routines and offering earnest explanations, their actual choices about performance defied these expectations and (consequently, in my view) elicited both bemusement on the part of visitors and a heightened level of curiosity.

RT:

Coming as it were from the edges of conventional performance at an historic property (e.g. the guided tour or talk), these responses or “entrées”<sup>1</sup> divert expectation. They have a stab at what visitors may be thinking and they challenge the tendency of audiences to start acting or directing when they encounter “costumed characters”. We seek to playfully undermine the format of the conventional visit. Visitors are gently degraded or mocked. Alternatively, volunteer guides may be dubbed “upper servants”, or even as stalkers of the former aristocracy. This “institutional critique” is intended to expose some frustrations visitors may feel with the constraints and ideology of the institution..

An audience member who encounters a character *on the stage* is put in what performance scholar Nicholas Ridout has called a “predicament”. (Ridout 2006:32) Ridout’s predicament arises from a disorientation. The audience asks who am I here and now? What am I supposed to say and do? A person who encounters a re-enactor on site is already immersed in a performative space, but also an improvisational everyday space in which the script requires contemporary and anachronistic behaviour. We are not encouraging the audience to pretend. We notice and comment when they stand on ballet toes or rock from side to side like Harlequin or a Pantomime Dame in anticipation of their “role”.

Charles Samuel Smith:

“What are you supposed to be?” asks a 70-year-old red riding hood in orthopaedic sandals. Visitors sometimes seek to address me as an actor. To me the question sounds ridiculous, if not rude. It may be posed in good faith, the speaker standing straight as a pin on tidy feet, assuming the stance of a ballerina or harlequin. But in the heat of the late afternoon this game can twist into cruelty and feed my alienation and glee. I once came across an Italian architect (so he claimed) who was elaborately but unfashionably dressed up, in a Fellini sort of way. He asked if I was teasing him with my pretence at being an architect, and perhaps he was right. He asked if I was honestly interested in architecture, but rather than wait for an explanation he began sucking on a long monologue about beauty. His partner, “Sophia Loren” was standing beside him pushing an empty wheelchair. Her face was deeply fake-tanned and as her eyebrows lifted they pushed dark waves of wrinkles back to her hairline. Who is the wheelchair for? I wondered. I am anachronistic myself and when I come across anachronistic fashions or frail bodies there is a slight recognition that invites a deathly playfulness, but it is important to play seriously.



RT:

Sometimes this predicament may inspire aggression. The instance of the heckle has been theorised by stand up comedian and academic Kevin McCarron as a moment in which authoritative texts are challenged by improvisation. (McCarron 2008) The heckle is a spontaneous demand on the comedian to make a witty unplanned riposte, and to prove themselves over the heckler. Likewise in the heritage house, joking or confrontational responses demand a counter-response that is markedly unplanned.

Fionn Gill/Ellis, The Groundsman:

exploring ideas on the spot, ... and then developing those into a 'mini-scene' – you have a start, a twist and an exit  
 ..[learning] how to 'warm-up' your potential audience ...  
 learning how to do this alongside another performer ... [this is an] almost scientific side of comedy and improvisation.

RT:

The unstable amalgam of period character and contemporary commentator is constantly mutating. Characters betray confidences and factual details borrowed and stolen from visitors. They learnt to give the household staff more reality by executing the steady labour of cleaning or serving. Initially, actors tend to find planned scenarios and detailed research blocked or confounded by visitors who have other priorities (some visitors cast themselves into the role of visiting gentry, or as activists demanding social change. Some simply ask for directions to the café). Making self-conscious external changes to character is problematic: a sudden change of accent can throw the hierarchy established with other actors. However, the audience is changing day by day, and the way that their individual stories weave into the work of the staff assists (or threatens) character by extending the whole network of conversations and events.

Lindsey Chapman/Miss Hunt:

Met a 'Lord and Lady' who used to live in Sheffield but now live in Gloucester. Their house was 4 inches from being flooded. I explained about the cellars here and the Avon flooding. This encounter seemed to cross the boundary of time. The couple were talking in a very modern sense about something personal that had just happened to them. I was talking in a Victorian context and yet we understood each other perfectly and they did not think I was being patronising. There was no "Oh well I suppose they used to..." It worked perfectly in the present tense.

Thus interpretation is not "first person" which is used to mean that the performer identifies with the character and is restricted to the time era allocated to the performance. Nor is it "third person" interpretation which speaks from a fixed sense of "now" about what "they" *would* have done then. In this work we are trying to find a way for the actor and the guest to both be too late (3<sup>rd</sup> person) and too early (first person), both not yet present, but rather present imperfect, becoming, any minute now.

*The lighting is less gloomy now. The figure behind the screen is clearly visible. He is wearing a smart jacket and tie and carries a clipboard, from which he reads a prepared essay. He is not improvising, it seems:*

NA:

I am a historian, part-time projectionist, present-day acquaintance of Charles Samuel Smith, and newcomer to Immersive Museum Theatre. I have myself been drawn beneath the surface and immersed, as a participant-observer, in the performance-filled space created by two of Triangle's projects.

One of these is the Charlecote Park project which you have just experienced in its incarnation as text. The other is a work titled The Last Women. Triangle's Artistic Director, Carran Waterfield, conceived this project and directs it. I have been offered a vantage point within this development

process, with a view of Carran's methods of direction. This experience has informed my own study of the same historical episodes which the theatrical work-in-progress has been exploring. This immersion in theatrical space amounts to a unique opportunity to devise a scholarly interpretation informed by experiences of performance.

Inevitably, the differences between devising The Last Women and the public performance of the Charlecote project reflect methods, objects of emphasis, shadings of tone, and other particularities that distinguish Carran and Richard as individual artists.

RT:

Factors which influence these particularities include the very different context of performance and public engagement imperatives. At the stage of research and development artists working on The Last Women made weekly improvisations for a small invited audience. At Charlecote Park public engagement is in the form of day-long improvisations. "Development" in both cases may be measured by the ways in which an exchange of information between audience and actor becomes more detailed or evocative and less general or stereotypical as the actor's understanding of the historical context deepens.

NA:

The historian may recognise in both works a shared concern with the fluid qualities of identity, and the relationship between identity and improvised performance. I argue that these separate projects together relate closely to ways in which scholars are seeking to understand historical episodes in terms of their performative essence.

Each of Triangle's productions has found memory and resonance in past experience, whether intimate (as in Carran Waterfield's own family history) or communal (as in the Coventry blitz). Carran sets conventional narrative aside and instead renders experiences, and relationships among characters, by arranging a sequence of images, spoken words, and actions, which can include symbolic objects, references to myth, repetitive movements taken from ritual practices, and sense-memories and remembered moments from a particular individual's life, together with musical accompaniment. These arrangements can convey the mind of a character, or the heart and soul of a community, more acutely, and with a stranger and more intense emotional impact, than a linear story. Devising the arrangement is an intensive process in which the hidden qualities of the themes being explored, and the most resonant means of displaying them, are revealed through improvisational exercises.

In developing The Last Women Carran initially directed a cast of five women. The work has focused on the case of Mary Ball, the last woman to be hanged in Coventry, in 1849, for murdering her husband. Mary was an innkeeper's daughter in Nuneaton, and her husband Thomas was a ribbon weaver with a reputation for unfaithfulness and (we suspect) abusive treatment. One hot day he came home from a fishing trip feeling unwell, took some Epsom salts that were on the mantelpiece, ate the gruel that Mary had prepared, and then late that night became violently sick to his stomach. He died after thirty-two hours, and the initial death certificate cited a stomach disorder. Then a post-mortem examination found arsenic in his stomach.

Mary did not testify at her trial, but sat through some damning testimony by the local constable, and the chemist, and some of her neighbours. Housewives bought arsenic to kill rats and bugs, and Mary had bought two pennies' worth. As she did so, she asked a friend if that was enough to kill a man. Actually it was "enough to kill a horse," as the chemist said. The first time the constable asked Mary about this, she said she had set it out to kill the rats and used it all up. Then she told a neighbour that she had saved some of the arsenic in a paper on the mantelpiece, and Thomas might have taken it by mistake. Former neighbours testified about domestic quarrels in the Ball household. At this time spousal murder by poisoning was a recurring public sensation. The jury members were at least willing to request mercy on Mary's behalf. But the judge accepted their guilty verdict, rejected their mercy plea, donned the black cap, and sentenced Mary to be hanged by the neck until she was dead. In the gaol she refused to show penitence or remorse to the chaplain, who in a fit of rage held her arm for two minutes over a burning candle, claiming it would give her an idea of the fires of hell. But she did ultimately confess to the governor, saying she had mixed the arsenic with the salts, hoping not to be caught if her husband took the mixture himself. She said he "was in the habit of going with other women and used me so ill, no one knows what I have suffered." And, several days later, on the scaffold before a vast crowd, her sentence was carried out.

Carran and the actors considered Mary's life and death from several angles—her social identity, as a woman, in relation to the authority of her husband and the state; her domestic identity,

and responsibility for hearth and home, and the sadness of repeated loss; and the question of whether the act of spousal homicide can be related to war or political protest. These perspectives converge in Mary's final days and hours, in the effort to envision what remains of life in the darkening shadow of death, and what may be glimpsed in the last moments of extremity. During the devising work, the actors held events open to the public in which they interacted with visitors while in character, and also enacted a performance drawn from recent improvisational exercises. At the beginning of these events, the characters who greeted the visitors were ladies holding a club meeting modelled on the Women's Institute.



Copyright Triangle, 2008 (132 KB).

Pictured here is Miss Nanna Smith, wearing her signature blue dress with white lace. Miss Smith had a mannered but charming way of speaking and acting which is highly distinctive. (The actor who played this character is Nina Smith.)

I never asked Miss Smith about her husband, or how many children she has, but among the ladies she was always the one most committed to the domestic realm. She was usually the one who offered to bring me a cup of tea, and somehow she always made me feel at home. For all of her warmth and graciousness, I suspected that her own domestic life was not purely blissful. After a guest came to a meeting wearing a neck brace, Miss Smith took on the similar article you see here. I wondered what kind of mishap had occurred, but she never explained it.

Each week the performance carried out by the actors would take them away from the ladies, and the club meeting would morph into something else entirely. In one case, Nina Smith and another actor, Emily Ayres, acted out a scenario of cross-examination. Emily's character, holding a clipboard, asked leading questions in brisk tones suited to the courtroom, or the interrogation cell. Nina's character stood helplessly on a chair, struggling to explain what had happened to the arsenic she had bought. As Emily's inquisitor pressed Nina's guilty witness, their confrontation built to a climax:

Inquisitor: Like you said, you put the mix with the Epsom salts. Or did you mix them?

Witness: I can't remember—

Inquisitor: Like you said! Well, which one is it to be?

Witness: He went to get some salts off the mantelpiece. He might have picked up some arsenic. I don't know!

Inquisitor: I'm trying to ascertain whether the salts were put directly into the gruel by you,

or by your husband, or whether they weren't there at all. Maybe he did die of natural causes! What do you think?

Witness (in Miss Smith's voice): Could you please take the chair?

Other choices made by the actors in the scene reflected prior planning, but the switch, or slip, when Mary Ball is asked a question and Miss Smith responds, suggests an accident, or a spontaneous decision on Nina's part rather than a calculated one.

Carran seeks to elicit such sudden acts of displacement. Each of the actors had different characters to play at different times. The relationships among these characters can be the object of reflection, or discussion. But Carran expects that the truth will instead come out sometimes by accident, in the heat of the moment. In this particular case, She later indicated to me that Nina's action was not especially productive, for purposes of the devising process. But the historian-witness pursuing his own simultaneous inquiry into Mary Ball's case may apply a different standard to particular instances of improvised performance. Such occurrences may contain clues—or at least raise possibilities—about Mary Ball which would not occur to the historian himself. What terrible knowledge might be gained from the descent into darkness? Could a spousal poisoning have reflected a displacement of domestic energies or a homemaker's impulses? What forces were tightening around Mary's neck, long before the hangman fastened the noose?

As a day visitor at Charlecote Park, I observed Mr. Parsons the butler, and Miss Hunt and Miss Nichols as maids, "squatting" in the performative space. What is particularly important, in the historian's judgment, is their commitment to "serious play," genuinely spontaneous interaction, and productive, non-predetermined dialogue. The actors at Charlecote were frequently switching or perhaps slipping between period character and contemporary commentator as they chose angles of approach and engagement. Like the improvisatory exercises assigned by Carran, their performance allowed the opening of unexpected possibilities and the potential creation of new knowledge.

In evolving their own views, historians have recently come to appreciate some of these same possibilities. Richard Schechner's primer on performance studies analyzes the full spectrum of human activity in terms of performed routines. This analysis draws a basic distinction between ritual and play, as the two composing elements. (Schechner 2002: Chapter 2; Kershaw 2006: 30-53). But for historians trying to see into the past, the most visible patterns have often been ritual practices—actions taken by authorities in their official capacity, or by members of organisations with their own codes and standards, or by communities with their formal and informal traditions. For a past generation of historians, the order and sequence of parades, or the deliberate conduct of food riots, offered clues about social life that could not be found in statute books. Structuralist anthropology portrayed culture as composed of rules, and systems of rules.

More recently, Peter Burke has detected a distinct trend—what he calls a "performative turn"—in the work of other historians. "The main point to emphasise," in Burke's view, "is the fact that the same people behave in different ways, whether consciously or unconsciously, according to the occasion, situation or, as linguists often say, the 'domain' in which they find themselves—public or private, religious or secular, formal or informal." (Burke, 2005: 44). This shared assumption privileges fluidity over fixity, and the exercise of individual agency through visible improvisation as opposed to the enactment of scripts.

Historians are therefore seeking out instances of agency-wielding subjects rejecting assigned roles and breaking the surface of fixed routines. Thomas Laqueur's influential reinterpretation of public executions as communal carnival, rather than ritual affirmation of state power, vividly portrayed unruly subjects with purposes of their own. (Laqueur 1989). In a more recent study of the execution of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century French provincial judge convicted of murder, James Farr decodes the judge's unusual performance (theatrical public conduct and urgent private appeals for distinctive treatment) as calculated to maintain family honour. (Farr 2003: 1-22). In studying British Jacobins, James Epstein and David Karr focus on "the excessiveness of their behaviour," citing heated rhetoric which deliberately transgressed restrictions on political expression: "By toasting and countertoasting, exchanging words and slogans, refusing to back down, they [the Jacobins] were testing limits, exploring expressive boundaries, playing at the edge of the permissible—and perhaps suggesting other worlds." (Epstein and Karr 2007:520; Conquergood 2002: 339-367; Friedland 2002; and Frantz Parsons 2005: 811-836.)

RT:

This often happens during encounters in the brewery when the boundary between real and fake drunkenness seems uncertain. A person is found asleep, or mumbling, or spilling beer on the floor. Who appears to be slacking - the performer or character or both ?

NA:

To the historian, part-time projectionist, and immersed participant-observer, Triangle's work offers possible ways of advancing the frontier of scholarship on performance. Given the protean character of identity, any given individual possesses the capacity for separate personae and the scope for play. Individuals oriented toward these possibilities will typically engage in switching and sometimes betray this in instances of slippage. The instances in which they do so may primarily be interactive, and (more specifically) dialogical—instances in which the mutual recognition of shared thoughts and perceptions, and the momentum of continued play, overwhelms one set of intentions and draws out other truths.

*The historian keeps watching, from within the margins of the performance, and asks that the lights above the stage be dimmed once again.*

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