

■ **Nic Leonhardt**

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany

Editorial

Dr. Nic Leonhardt is the guest editor of this special focus issue on “Negotiating the Entertainment Business: Theatrical Brokers at the Turn of the 20th Century”

Transnational trade, media, circuits and networks are essential features of globalisation. During the last few years, historians and social scientists have started to study the historical dimensions of globalisation and networks, while digital humanities have begun to develop tools for the visualisation and mapping of these networks. Despite the attention to global entanglements, scholars have almost completely ignored the various human agents that enabled these connections: mediators, brokers, ambassadors, diplomats, or—in the field of theatre and popular entertainment—agents, artists and impresarios.

The time period between 1850 and the 1920s formed the heyday of the profession of agents, impresarios, managers and entrepreneurs in the fields of literature, music, and the performing arts: it was only in the mid-19th century that a professional class of brokers and theatrical agents began to emerge on an almost global scale. As is well-known, this period is characterised by a paradox in the processes of globalisation, in that they involved the creation and construction of nation states on the one hand, but also an increased awareness and appreciation of global or transregional connections on the other. Changes in media, technology and infrastructure are both a result of and premise of these connections. Moreover, due to new approaches to transnational / global history and historiography, cultural mediators have gained in importance in their roles as ‘connectors’, tradeswomen and –men, or even diplomats. Agencies, it can be argued, are essential hubs, and agents are key enabling figures of exchange at various levels: they select, trade with and disseminate news, images, cultural artifacts and practices, goods, knowledge, and the performing arts. Although agents and impresarios, particularly in the field of music and opera, already existed in the 18th century, it was only in the second half of the 19th century that the professionalisation of cultural brokers and the establishment of agencies begin to emerge on a global scale. This proliferation of theatrical brokerage can be closely linked to technological and infrastructural innovations, the *media-*, *techno-*, *econo-* and *ideoscapes* (Appadurai) that formed part and parcel of the industrialisation and globalisation of the period: trading with theatre, music,

images, and music on an international scale became more and more popular. Artistic brokers dealt in theatre, opera, vaudeville, variety, music, art; agencies specialised in news or images and set up transnational networks.

From a transnational historical perspective, neither theatre as an art form nor theatre as a business can work without the patronage of professional mediators. When French actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) toured Europe, South and North America in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, she could not have done so without the support of agents and managers. They were responsible for arranging her contracts, negotiating her royalties, taking care of the travel logistics (ship, train, accommodation, customs), arranging her itinerary, the transport of her costumes, and the negotiations with the press. Sarah Bernhardt's tours are internationally well researched, whereas the logistics of her journeys are not. The trade areas of theatrical brokers did not remain within national borders, but had a truly transnational dimension: an agent in Vienna, for example, would book acts for a circus in India, an American impresario would organise a tour of performers in South Africa, a German agent could become the representative for German playwrights in France, etc. The same holds true for the management and organisation of national, transnational, or global tours of other, less noteworthy actresses and actors, indeed of performers of all kinds. Their activities were embedded in, and benefitted from technological innovations such as newspapers, professional photography, the new media of communication (the telegraph, the telephone) and transport networks.

In his relevant book *Forty Years' Observation of Music and the Drama*, Robert Grau describes the enormous rise of theatrical brokers in New York City: "The vaudeville agent ever a factor is to-day everywhere to be found; there are probably two hundred in New York alone. Twenty-five years ago they could be counted on one hand."¹ Already more than a decade earlier, Hugues Le Roux and Jules Garnier wrote in *Acrobats and Mountebanks* that agents for performing artists and arts could be found in all the major capitals of the world:

Between the artist who seeks for an engagement and the manager always on the look out for an extraordinary 'novelty,' a third person necessarily intervenes, the middle-man, who arises everywhere between buyer and seller. And, in fact, at the present time all the principal cities of the world have their agents for performing artists of every kind. These personages are very important, and make large profits."²

Despite their enormous influence, the practices, connections and circuits of artistic brokers in the period under consideration have been, in the main, under-researched. When it comes to the field of theatrical entrepreneurship, differences between the United States and European research interests become evident. Whereas managers seem to be part and parcel of American theatre history and research, European history books on theatrical entertainments have largely remained silent about this profession. One reason for this might be the lack of interest in, or even recognition of, the "business" of theatre. Theatre as an art, it would seem, does not need an agent, a manager, or a mediator; both the

artist herself and the artifact are “cultural mediators” in their own rights. Instead, one finds either polemics about agents or legal theses on business contracts and their validity, both of which can, however, reveal valuable information about the profession *ex negativo*. The legal dissertations are particularly interesting for theatre historians, as they try to define the profession, its premises and working conditions, and to discuss specific case studies.

In order to come to terms with the profession of theatrical brokers, one needs to study source material such as trade papers, business correspondence and contracts, and legal regulations. Some agents regularly functioned as freelance writers for the papers, had their own columns, in which they reported, very often as a marketing strategy, on their business practices and daily routines, or in which they give performers advice for international engagements and inform them what the risks working for big circuits abroad might entail. Daily and weekly newspapers, too, had begun to report on the activities of brokers, both on a local and a transnational level. They informed their readers about plays for which agents had secured the rights, theatrical genres or venues that they were planning to appropriate, vaudeville acts they had booked, or contracts that had been broken by one party or another. The trade papers and the press remained, however, silent about the royalties and contractual conditions. This information can be retrieved almost exclusively from studying the correspondence, letters or cablegrams, of the agents themselves.

This special issue of the *Popular Entertainment Studies* journal gathers a selection of papers from the international symposium “Cultural Brokers. Nomenclature, Knowledge and Negotiations of (Performance) Agents, Managers and Impresarios (1850-1930)”, that I organised in October 2014. This conference, generously funded by the Center for Advanced Studies (www.cas.lmu.de) of the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and the German Research Foundation (www.dfg.de), brought together scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds such as English and American Studies, History, Theatre Studies, and History of Law, in order to exclusively and intensively discuss the profession of brokerage in the larger theatrical world in the period under discussion. The focus was therefore on the profession of “theatrical brokers”, agents and impresarios who functioned as crucial cultural mediators in the fields of the performing arts and media in Europe, the United States, Asia and Africa at the turn of the 20th century.

The papers in this issue address the idea of brokerage and brokers from different angles: contributors address, for example, the professionalisation of theatrical brokerage, its diversification, economic impact and legal limitations from the perspectives of theatre historiography, economic history, English studies, musicology and the history of law; they highlight heterogeneous ways of negotiating the theatrical and entertainment business by following their professional traces and by elaborating on the strategies of brokers understood as embracing agents, impresarios, *acteurs* and even institutions. Only a few agents of the period have been well-documented, primarily those based in North America and England (e.g. the Shubert brothers, Charles and Daniel Frohman,

Helen and Richard d'Oyly Carte, Martin Beck). Besides these, there are many more, both male and female, that need to be investigated, not only because of their effect on local practices, but also, and more importantly, because of their international reach and influence. In his article, theatre scholar Christopher Balme focuses on the managers and entrepreneurs Maurice Bandmann and J. F. Madan and their professional strategies for promoting theatre and cinema in colonial India during the early 20th century. Entrepreneurs such as Maurice Bandmann are fascinating examples of how artistic brokers facilitated the export of theatre, music, literature, vaudeville and opera to territories around the globe and contributed significantly to the proliferation of cultural values. Their "trade areas" did not remain within national borders, but had a truly transnational range. Based on musical theatre and opera, performance researcher meLê yamomo in his article addresses the role of theatrical brokers as cultural mediators in the colonial Asia-Pacific region from 1881-1940.

The theatre and entertainment business is not, and never has been an area free of regulation. During the period 1880-1930, laws and regulations of contracts and terms were subject to continuous changes, and both agents and their contractual partners had to follow juridical conventions and prescriptions. Law historian Louis Pahlow, provides valuable and elaborate insights into the copyright system in Germany between 1850 and 1930 with a special focus on the music industry of the time. By doing so, he expands the understanding of brokers as institutions that either established the new copyright regulations or benefitted from them themselves. Using the example of fire prevention initiatives as a result of new paradigms of risk and responsibility, Tracy C. Davis demonstrates in her article the influence of human agency not only in the transnational circulation of ideas, repertoires or performers but also in the international implementation of global standards.

Thus the overall goal of this issue is to initiate an interdisciplinary discourse on (theatrical) brokers. Particularly against the background of an emerging scholarly interest in the history of theatrical globalisation, studying the role of people and institutions who facilitated networks and connectivity worldwide appears crucial if we want to re-write cultural histories. The scholarly investigation of brokers as mediators, as agents, as entrepreneurs and institutions and their rapid professionalisation in the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries carries great potential for future research.

I would like to express my gratitude to the contributors for their insightful articles and for sharing my epistemological interest and curiosity in exploring the field of theatrical brokers. I am also much obliged to the Center for Advanced Studies and the German Research Foundation for supporting the symposium both at a conceptual as well as financial level, and to Victor Emeljanow and Gillian Arrighi for their confidence in and support of the idea to devote the September 2015 issue of *Popular Entertainment Studies* to the theme of cultural brokers, and for their practical advice and patient help in editing the issue.

¹ Robert Grau, *Forty Years' Observation of Music and the Drama* (New York, Baltimore: Broadway Publishing Company, 1909), 33.

² Hughes Le Roux and Jules Garnier, *Acrobats and Mountebanks* (London: Chapman and Hall Limited, 1890), 10.