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## Editorial

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Firstly, a very warm welcome to all readers of this, our inaugural issue, and secondly, an equally warm expression of appreciation to all those who sent material to us. If we haven't included your proposal in this issue, you should note that it has little to do with the quality of the submission but rather more with the specific focus of this issue. We would encourage you to submit your material for subsequent issues.<sup>1</sup>

In our call for papers we suggested that in the last 35 years “the nature of performance and [live] presence may well have changed,” and at the same time we recognised that there was an “ongoing debate and discussion about the nature and scope of popular entertainments.” It seemed likely to us that new genres and styles have emerged which may have extended the scope and consequent impact of these entertainments. In raising these issues we were not suggesting that a wheel needed reinvention but rather that the groundwork laid in the last 35 years by such scholars as Don Wilmeth, Laurence Senelick, Michael Booth, Baz Kershaw, Jacky Bratton, Richard Altick, Jane Goodall, David Mayer, Marvin Carlson, Joseph Roach, Jim Davis and of course, the late Brooks McNamara, has advanced our understanding of popular entertainments, their scope, their transnational significance, their practices and their reception, to a point where we need to evaluate where we are and where we might go in the future in terms of our scholarship. And this is where new scholars have an essential role to play. We hope that our journal may give them such an opportunity.

If we are to engage in a process of re-definition, it may be worthwhile to remind ourselves of some basic terms of reference. The terms “popular”, “popularity” and “entertainment” are central to our discussions. “Entertainment” derives from the Latin “intertenerere” and the French “entretenir” – “to hold mutually or between” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Thus in our context the term describes a bond which is established between two parties: performers and spectators, which they “maintain” throughout the event in which they participate. If the two parties “maintain” this bond – an interactive engagement takes place that can be defined as “entertainment.” There are no pejorative connotations nor value judgements embedded in these terms, merely the description of two contributing parties to an event in which they are both complicit. Equally, the terms “popular” and “popularity” need some qualification (*pace* Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams). Both derive from the Latin “popularis” and “popularitas” which originally pertain to notions of “fellow citizenship” (so Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, 1879).

In other words, the terms originally define a community of people who come from the same city or state and who thereby share common values. In their English translations, this commonality is expanded to mean “the fact of being liked, admired or supported by many people” (the *Oxford English Dictionary* again). Thus “popular” is defined as “belonging to the people as a whole.” To be sure “belonging to or used by ordinary people” emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when “ordinary” was positioned as the antithesis of the “noble” or the “aristocratic” or the “economically privileged.” Nevertheless, it seems that the fundamental meaning of the terms defined something, an artefact or even an experience, that is “available to the whole community regardless of status, political affiliation or taste.” It’s also true that the term “popular” assumes a meaning of something “intended for or suited to the understanding or taste of ordinary people as opposed to specialists in the field.” So we return to a definition of a work of art, a piece of music, or a performance “with general appeal intended primarily to entertain, please or amuse.” Perhaps significantly, the definition excludes any reference to the need for instruction. Thus when we come to define popular entertainments we are left with a performative event in which an interactive engagement occurs between performers and spectators (entertainment); the event is intended to appeal to a community, to people “as a whole” (popular). While there exists ongoing debate about the definition of “ordinary people”, the terms suggest immediate accessibility through commonalities of understanding. These commonalities, of course, have been profoundly affected by the relentless progress of globalisation, while the internet developments especially in the last 10 years, have redefined and challenged our understanding of “fellow citizenship.”

Two other terms need to be included among our basic concepts that underpin popular entertainment: “spectacle” and “performance.” They have, of course, been extensively investigated,<sup>2</sup> but for our purposes they embody two enduring aspects of all popular entertainments, the interactivity that takes place between those who exhibit themselves and those who wish to view those exhibitions. We are reminded of Eric Bentley’s proposition that all theatre involves the interplay between a group of exhibitionists and a group of voyeurs. More recently, semioticians like Marco de Marinis have reinforced the contribution made by spectators to the dramaturgic processes initiated by performers and directors. But does all this get us any closer to a definition of popular entertainments?

In 1974 Brooks McNamara developed a definition of popular entertainments:

“Traditional popular entertainments consist simply of live amusements aimed at a broad, relatively “unsophisticated” audience. Unlike folk forms, to which they are related, popular entertainments are created not by amateurs, but for profit by professional showmen. Typical examples of traditional popular entertainments from various periods include the circus, *commedia dell’arte*, vaudeville, pantomimes, the burlesque show, Grand Guignol, popular melodrama and farce, ...the minstrel show, the ‘amusement park, blackface minstrelsy...Today, many of these traditional

popular forms have been absorbed into or replaced by radio, films, and television, the media of contemporary mass culture.”<sup>3</sup>

Later in the same editorial he attempted to create an umbrella for “popular theatre” which included the various forms he listed and added that “The script of a popular theatre piece is often little more than a scenario or framework for improvisation, comic business, and spectacular effects.”<sup>4</sup> In the same year, David Mayer suggested some criteria for a definition of popular drama. He referred to such issues as intentionality (“a large general audience rather than a select group of spectators”), the status of the playwright (“is the author unknown?”), and inbuilt techniques (“is the dramatic plot embellished with actions and displays offered as much for their own effect as for their relevance to the plot?”)<sup>5</sup> In 1975, Heinrich Falk attempted to analyse popular entertainments in terms of a series of formulaic conventions: the nature of the performers, the manner of presentation, the nature of the spectators, the reception of the presentation, and the degree of chance as opposed to the predictability embedded in the presentation of the material.<sup>6</sup> From our perspective, these pioneering efforts to reclaim lost theatre forms, to validate and schematise popular entertainments in order to make them academically accessible, may appear agonisingly strained. I believe we would certainly now take exception to the identification of popular entertainments with a lack of audience sophistication and equally, the artificial binary of “professional” versus the “amateur” as a distinguishing feature of such entertainments. Yet as David Saltz points out in the editorial that prefaces the latest effort to come to grips with popular entertainments,<sup>7</sup> the disparagement of them remains all too visible: “class-based prejudices” and the identification of popular entertainments with commodification still inflect academic discourses despite the efforts of postmodernists to break down the artificial boundaries between high and low art.<sup>8</sup>

The essays included in this issue engage with the discourses surrounding the “popular” and “popularity” within the context of a performative society. David Mayer’s early attempt to define the nature of popular drama still retains a currency and Joseph Donohue is exercised by this very matter. In his article, he takes an unusual point of departure: the techniques employed by Oscar Wilde in his play *Salomé*, at first glance hardly an example of popular drama. Yet he makes a case for theatrical continuity, the use of theatrical techniques associated with the production style of Victorian popular theatre, melodrama in particular, to create an arc of recognition that would assist Wilde’s spectators to locate his unusual, and one might say avant-garde play, within traditions of popular theatregoing.<sup>9</sup> While much of popular entertainment does not incorporate a script, Donohue discusses the nature of popularity itself and the place of scripted drama in that context. Bruce McConachie is also concerned with continuities, taking issue with the binaries of live and mediatized performances and locating popular entertainments within a long tradition of “play.” In so doing, and coloured by his interests in cognitive science, he infers that popular entertainments, both live and mediatized, “share massive foundational continuities.” The differences between them, he argues, are matters of degree not of discrete ontologies. Millie Taylor also addresses the key matter of popularity

as well as liveness from the perspective of musical theatre, certainly the most frequented manifestation of legitimate theatre. She uses as her case studies two examples of musical theatre that share both live and mediatized credentials. Finally Danielle Szlawieniec-Haw discusses the significance of new technologies to our understanding of the scope of popular entertainments, and through her investigation of the Stickam phenomenon throws fresh light on the axiomatic notion of the co-presence of performers and spectators in popular entertainments.<sup>10</sup>

In 1979 Michael Booth pointed out that “the Victorian theatre of spectacle is very much a microcosm of...[a] larger world, a pictorial image of a greater reality.”<sup>11</sup> Just as the “visual expectations of Victorian audiences were conditioned by stimuli unknown to their ancestors” so in any attempt to define, let alone re-define popular entertainments, we too must place them within the contexts that stimulate us: the greater social reality that encompasses new electronic technologies and the instant accessibility of information on the one hand and visual gratification on the other. At the same time, we need to be sensitive to the ongoing appeal of live performance within a world that privileges virtual existence. Such an appeal which shows few signs of diminishment has much to do with the engagement between live performers and spectators, the basis of any form of “entertainment.” So where does this leave us? Do popular entertainments need to be re-defined? The essays included here suggest the need to re-position traditional entertainment forms to accommodate recent, massive technological changes. At the same time, they emphasise the presence of continuity and adaptability that help to preserve the universal appeal of these forms. In terms of future scholarship, we think there is much to be gained from investigations into the transnational mobility of popular entertainment forms, the spaces of performance, audience configurations, the engagement with scientific and historical discourses, the transmission of performance skills in both an historical and contemporary context, the influence of nostalgia and childhood memory upon both the construction and reception of popular entertainments, and as well the transgressive potential of such entertainments. There is still much to be done.

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<sup>1</sup> I would also like to record my thanks to the members of the IFTR Popular Entertainments Working Group for their scholarly support, enthusiasm and camaraderie. I am also indebted to them for suggestions regarding future scholarly investigations.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: an Introduction*. London & New York: Routledge, 2002 *passim*. Baz Kershaw has explored the relationship between spectacle and activism in “Curiosity or Contempt: On Spectacle, the Human, and Activism,” *Theatre Journal* 55 (2003): 591–61. Most recently Dennis Kennedy has explored the agency of the spectator in *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* and *Modes of Spectating* edited by Alison Oddey and Christine White, includes the changing relationship between spectacle and spectators within a digital culture. Both books were published in 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks McNamara, “Popular Entertainments Issue: an Introduction,” *The Drama Review* 18, 1 (March 1974):3.

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<sup>4</sup> McNamara: 4.

<sup>5</sup> David Mayer, "Towards a Definition of Popular Theatre," in *Western Popular Theatre*, ed. D. Mayer and K. Richards (London: Methuen, 1977), 264. His definitions were first expressed in a conference paper at the University of Manchester in 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Heinrich R. Falk, "Conventions of popular entertainment: framework for a methodology," *Journal of Popular Culture* (Fall, 1975): 128.

<sup>7</sup> David Saltz, "Editorial comment: Popular Culture and Theatre History," *Theatre Journal* 60:4 (December 2008):x-xii.

<sup>8</sup> See also David Savran, "Towards a Historiography of the Popular," *Theatre Survey* 45:2 (November 2004): 211-217.

<sup>9</sup> The attempt to reconcile avant-gardism with popular theatre practices also occurs in the 1974 *TDR* special issue referred to above.

<sup>10</sup> Thus she looks at a new instance of the significance of digital culture discussed in such books as Arthur Asa Berger's *Video Games: a popular culture phenomenon*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction 2002) and Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: surface play and spectacle in new media genres*, (London: Routledge 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Booth, "Spectacle as Production Style on the Victorian Stage," *Theatre Quarterly*, 8,32 (1979):8.