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If only ... Brooks McNamara, 1937 – 2009

A Personal Valediction

*Brooks McNamara began teaching at NYU's Graduate Drama Department in 1968, and was instrumental in its transformation into the Performance Studies Department, which officially was started in 1980. He founded the Shubert Archives in 1976 and served as its Director for 20 years. McNamara's research, writing, and curatorial pursuits resulted in numerous publications, exhibitions, productions, and archival collections. His life work spanned the fields of theatre history, popular entertainments, public celebrations, and New York performance history. After retiring in 1996, McNamara remained Professor Emeritus of Performance Studies and Director Emeritus of the Shubert Archive until his death in 2009. David Mayer is well-known for his work in popular entertainments. He is especially interested in the crossovers between theatre and film. His latest book is *Stagestruck Filmmaker: D.W. Griffith and the American Theatre (2009)*. He is Professor Emeritus of Drama at the University of Manchester, UK.*

If we had launched this journal a year earlier, one of the scholars we would have undoubtedly sought for our editorial board would have been Brooks McNamara. Probably more than any other theatre historian working in the English language, Brooks pioneered studies in popular entertainment, never defining (and thus restricting) its parameters because Brooks was forever expanding his searches, finding new examples, and exploring theories that explained the ubiquity, functions, and justifications for the popular. But Brooks, suffering a progressive illness that confined his body but which never stifled his mind, died in early May, 2009.

Brooks not only leaves behind a loving family of wife, children, and grandchildren, but also a cadre of distressed former NYU postgraduate students – known in academic circles as “McNamara’s band” – who hold prestigious appointments in theatre or film studies at American universities: Arnold Aronson (Columbia), Lisa Merrill (Hofstra), Jill Dolan (Princeton), Tom Gunning (Chicago),

Stephen Burge Johnson (Toronto), Kate Davy (Cal Irvine), Charles Musser (Yale), Dorothy Chansky (Texas Tech), Andrea Stulman Dennett (NYU), John Frick (Virginia). Individually and jointly, they carry Brooks' unremitting curiosity about the popular into new areas. Thus Brooks' legacy of studying the breadth, legitimacy, contexts, and cultural implications of popular theatre and unique popular genres continues even in Brooks' absence.

Additionally, our understanding of the popular grows from his numerous publications. Without *The American Playhouse in the Eighteenth Century, Step Right Up* (the American medicine show), *The Shuberts of Broadway, Day of Jubilee, Inside the Minstrel Mask, American Popular Entertainment, The New York Concert Saloon, and Theatres, Spaces, and Environments*, and many journal articles and chapters in scholarly anthologies, our access to popular entertainment would be more problematic. Interestingly and predictably, not one of these works has been superseded by a newer study. Further, Brooks' early training and work as a scene designer enabled him to read and interpret pictorial materials and to recognise the value of theatrical ephemera. He was a casual, but judicious, collector. A visit to his home was like entering a private gallery.

Brooks presided over an unstable subject, a field that was shifting and changing in methodologies right under our noses. Originally, perhaps most memorably with Hannah Winter and through the 1960s and early-1970s, we viewed popular genres and popular works as products or objects to be studied in themselves. We could write essays and even books about the popular, but the objects and genres discussed remained separate from the societies that generated them. It was Brooks, probably more than any other theatre historian, who, with Myron Matlaw, shaped the first major American conference (American Society for Theatre Research, 1977) to address popular entertainment and to change our perception of this sometimes-despised and often-neglected subject. More than a decade before either Ronald Vince or Bruce McConachie was to advocate a postpositivist theatre historiography, Brooks was explaining popular genres as inseparable from their environments: these performances and performers and audience explained their environments; their environments explained them. He grasped and explained the necessary ratifying function of an audience – the presence of a continual unspoken dialogue between performer and spectator. The New York ASTR conference, into which Brooks introduced burlesque performers, was the first to study popular entertainments not as self-contained objects divorced from their cultural and social contexts, but as evidence of intricate social processes. His commissioning and choice of papers located popular entertainments at the cores – as indices – of their cultures. For Brooks – and now for us – the matrix from which the entertainment arose is as significant and as worthy of study as the recovered entertainment.

Brooks' other gift was to make the popular respectable in academic eyes. I can recall when librarians were sharply criticised for acquiring comic books and

pantomime libretti and a Yale student condemned for writing a dissertation on the Barbie Doll. Brooks was one of the first who, without apology or any sense of genuflection to offended literary standards, instituted undergraduate and postgraduate courses in popular forms. Many of us were happy to follow in his train.

My encounters and friendship with Brooks spread over many years and various locales. I several times imagined myself the first modern theatre historian to venture into fresh research, most noticeably, but not uniquely, when I began to explore the Victorian stage's links with early film. To my chagrin – and subsequent pleasure – Brooks appeared at an early film conference to guide my errant steps and to be acknowledged by film scholars as an old hand, familiar, informed, competent. When I finished my recent book on the theatre and early film, Brooks had strength enough to read it in manuscript and to wave an o.k.

Brooks, with his wife Nan, has given us much for which to be grateful. I remember him and thank him for all of the above and for some years of a deep and enjoyable friendship. I cannot express how often his wit, perceptions, acumen, knowledge, and humanity will be missed by many of us carrying on in his shadow.