

What James Boswell tells us about 18th-century acting theory

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Abstract

This article reads a series of essays on the actor by James Boswell through recent scholarship on the theory of acting in order to elaborate an expansive and historically grounded definition of what was and is meant by '18th-century acting theory'. I thus show how 18th-century texts on acting are important documents that should be read not as isolated phenomena but as works that can illuminate contemporary stage performance and the culture that produced it. In particular, I follow Boswell by placing a specific, illustrative emphasis on three key themes of professionalism, theatrical expression and ephemerality: each theme is both essential to thinking about the stage (and criticism on this topic) while also, like so much about the 18th-century theatre, applicable far more widely both then and now.

KEYWORDS

18th-century, acting, Boswell, rhetoric, theatre

1 | INTRODUCTION

One sometimes sees the study of 18th-century theatre divided into two complementary processes of extraction and reintegration. The former, by cutting 'the theatrical notices out of newspapers' and other such work, has allowed the construction of vital calendars and profiles, now given new life as online databases (Burkert, 2019; Roach & Robinson, 2020, p. 188). The latter has endeavoured to return such data to its original place and freshly observe how they functioned 'as significant elements within a wider social and cultural context' (Roach & Robinson, 2020, p. 188). This second way of thinking about 18th-century theatre has been particularly important for the

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recent study of 18th-century acting theory. Early work on this topic extracted information or treated the theatre in isolation, dividing the period into distinct styles of performance (Downer, 1943), for instance, or showing how pantomime practice inspired the theory of Aaron Hill (Marker & Marker, 1975). More recent work has extracted and reintegrated theory, connecting styles of acting to stylistic trends in other artforms (West, 1991), or long histories of rhetoric (Wiles, 2020), and revealing pantomime's influence on society and not just on new ideas about effective acting (O'Brien, 2004). As these examples indicate, I am using here a broad and loose definition of acting theory, one which incorporates everything from concepts employed by those writing about the stage to ideas embedded in professional and amateur practice. I do this for two reasons. First, because such a broad definition is necessary for demonstrating how acting theory affords contemporary scholars the opportunity to connect the 18th-century theatre to its wider social and cultural context. Second, because those writing about the stage in the 1700s did not restrict their reflections, and the contents of their publications, as the modern editor of many of them has observed, often 'belied that narrow orientation' claimed on their title pages (Zunshine, 2017, p. 4).

I argue here therefore that current research on 18th-century acting theory has revealed both the distinctive features of this topic and its contribution to the general embeddedness of the stage within the culture and society of the period. To ground this necessarily expansive argument, I structure it around an 18th-century evaluation of both acting and what its author calls 'literary productions relative to the art of acting' (1770, p. 513): James Boswell's three essays 'On the Profession of a Player', which were published in the widely read pages of *The London Magazine* during the Autumn of 1770. Boswell's interests in these essays, no doubt partly cultivated through his extensive theatre-going and socialising (Gavin, 2010), provide three overlapping topics for my argument about the wide remit of acting theory. First, the relationship between theory and professional status and practice; second, the extent to which theoretical definitions of acting lead to larger questions about understanding human behaviour and third, how theory, as something widely applicable and transmissible, resists the ephemerality not just of the performer and their performance, but of their audiences also. Having shown how modern scholarship might inform our understanding of these indicative aspects of acting theory, I abandon Boswell to conclude with my own thoughts on future work in this domain.

2 | ACTING AS A PROFESSION

Boswell (1770, p. 397) opens his first essay with the claim that 'the present age beholds the profession of a player in its proper light'. This is in clear contrast to past and foreign denigration of actors, as evinced by Jeremy Collier and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, both of whom are 'agreed in decrying the profession of the player' (1770, p. 514). Despite his sanguine opening, however, Boswell still often makes defensive arguments about the actor's status: his explanation of what happens when you act is used to counter claims that the actor lies (1770), and he stresses that the discipline of the actor is 'as laborious, and perhaps even more so, than either law, physick or divinity' (1770, p. 515). Indeed, such is the labour of learning parts and forming 'a just conception of the spirit of the character' for both actors and actresses that the latter are among those 'very few ladies out of the walls of a convent, whose time is so regularly portioned out, and whose minds are so occupied with innocent subjects as theirs' (1770, p. 515).

Boswell's argument here, streaked as it is with irony, nevertheless exemplifies the complex position of women in 18th-century discussions of acting. Numerous studies of female performers at this time (including Straub, 1992; Asleson, 2003; Nussbaum, 2010; Engel, 2011; Pascoe, 2013) have helped to make the theatre culture of this period at an essential topic within the field of 'actress studies' (Engel, 2016). Actresses – from their appearance on the professional stage at the Restoration onwards – were highly visible female workers, the subjects of opprobrium and adoration in equal measure, and as much an inspiration and a challenge for those thinking about acting as they were for portrait artists, satirists, and playwrights planning new plotlines set in exotic locations or featuring gendered trauma. Brooks (2015) has argued, for instance, that when 'Figured as rational agents with control over their bodies' – that is, as professional artists – actresses like Elizabeth Barry or Mary Porter 'seemed to embody the very

antithesis of contemporary stereotypes of femininity as irrational and uncontrolled'—even as they performed such stereotypes in plays like *Jane Shore* (1714) and other she-tragedies (p. 51). As Brooks goes on to argue, there were two kinds of responses to successful actresses: either they were painted as 'alluring figures who seduced hapless male spectators' (pp. 60–61) or their achievements were dismissed as merely the result of a man's tutelage (pp. 58–59). There is thus a misogynistic element to some writing about acting in this period, as male pens police the actions of women's bodies: Hiffenan (1770, p. 81) deplores actresses interacting with the audience in his *Dramatic Genius* and even Boswell, after his witty comparison between actresses and nuns, pays little further attention to the gendered nature of theatrical labour.

This is partly because Boswell's primary concern is the legitimacy of such labour, regardless of who is doing it. In her *Inventerl'acteur* (2019), a study of the evolution of ideas about acting across Europe during the 18th century, Laurence Marie groups nations according to those figures at the forefront of efforts to legitimise performers. In France and Germany, such philosophers as Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Lessing and Goethe drove this debate; in England and Italy, however, theatre professionals were at its centre: Boswell himself repeatedly evokes the leading actor and manager of Drury Lane, David Garrick and names many other performers in the course of his essays.

The centrality of theatre practitioners to wider debates in English (and Italian) about the place and nature of performance, as observed by Marie, leads to an important connection between acting theory and acting practice, which we might encapsulate with the intermediate term of *technique*. As Spatz (2015) has argued, technique is 'a network of fractally branching pathways that vein the substance of practice' (p. 44). Practice, as Spatz defines it, is a specific action in place and time (swimming in the sea at Whitley Bay) and technique is transmissible knowledge (how to do front crawl). Many texts we might consider 18th-century acting theory either describe professional practice and so also describe technique embedded in that practice, or, operating in the other direction, purport to offer techniques that will produce professional practice. Such a focus means that those interested in the theories of 18th-century acting have much to learn from research into what professionals like Garrick did or might have done. One such study is Dene Barnett and Massy-Westropp's (1987) *Art of Gesture*, which Barnett presents as a 'descriptive and critical catalogue' of techniques (p. 11). Others have instead proposed more analytical discussion of how, in Robinson's (2015, p. 57) words, '18th-century aesthetic theories ... become tied to actors' use of them'. Stern's (2000) *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* thus examines shifts and continuities within professional practice across two centuries of professional theatre. Garrick's "'new" performances' of well-known plays were, for instance, 'carefully crafted into immutable "fixed" entities' so that while the actor-manager himself 'broke with the old imitative tradition, he very seldom encouraged others to do likewise' (p. 262).

As its title indicates, Wiles's (2020) *The Players' Advice to Hamlet* is also interested in the techniques and viewpoints of professional actors, distinguishing the writings and actions of practitioners from such Hamlet-like figures as Diderot, whose provocative claims about acting have disguised both the richness of the player's actual work and its continuity through time. Such continuity owes its existence to a resilient shared heritage in Roman rhetoric, where the aim of the performer, like the orator, remained that of shaping the emotions of a gathered public. Not only does Wiles's approach thus connect the 18th century to a long history of performance, it also casts key theoretical debates of the period in a new light. Riccoboni's (1971 [1750]) *L'Art du théâtre*, long understood by scholars like Vicentini (2012) as spearheading an anti-emotionalist backlash against those who held that the best actors must be the most feeling, in fact appears now as a further extension of the rhetorical tradition and its techniques. Wiles's emphasis on the enduring proximity of acting and oratory also allows for other connections to be redrawn. Religion becomes an important context for actor training: theories of performance in Protestant cultures—be they for priests or players—have, for example, a greater reticence to explain how one might manipulate a supposedly sacrosanct soul.

Elsewhere, the training of actors appears totally continuous with the teaching of public speaking: Sheridan (1762) both prepared Sarah Siddons for the stage and sold oratory to the bourgeoisie in his *Lectures on Elocution*. Brunström (2011) captures such a unity between stage and society when he writes of Sheridan's 'lifelong performance of "speech acts"' in a career that operated on a 'rhetorical continuum' between 'theatre manager and

educational reformer' (p. 10). Williams (2017) and others (e.g., Jajdelska, 2010) interested in what she calls the 'history of sociable reading' (p. 2) make a similar point. Burgh's (1761) *Art of Speaking*, a book whose careful annotation of the passions in famous stage scenes and other texts is often cited as evidence for the priority of emotion in this period's stage aesthetics (e.g., Hoxby, 2012), is, in Williams's eyes, in fact typical of 'home guides on reading' (pp. 26–27). From such analyses the theory of acting, even as embedded in the work of stage professionals, extends beyond the theatre, to the Church and the drawing room, all thanks to a common rhetorical heritage as a theoretical foundation.

For all his mentions of David Garrick, Thomas Betterton, Hannah Pritchard and other professionals, Boswell himself does not engage directly with contemporary stage practice in terms of the rhetorical tradition that underwrites and connects it to wider society. He is more Hamlet than Player. Boswell does, however, replicate some of the same ideas that such a tradition enables, notably the association between the actor and other professions, and the importance of emotion. As concerns the former, Boswell includes a comparison between the actor, lawyer and priest in the first of his essays. Yet rather than focus on how each profession entails public speaking, he emphasises instead the particular knowledge each career requires and claims that 'in order to be a good player, there is a greater share of genius, knowledge and accomplishments than for any one profession whatever' (1770, p. 397). While practitioners of the three 'learned professions' (not just law and divinity, but also medicine) possess expertise in a single domain, the player who imitates these figures needs knowledge of all three, and so ultimately requires a greater level of accomplishment than any of them. Garrick, notes Boswell, is exemplary in this regard, for he 'is continually adding to his stock of science, and enriching his mind with new ideas' (1770, p. 397). The question here of what the performer should or should not know goes back at least as far as Plato's (1996 [4th Century BCE]) *Ion* and represents a different strand of theoretical thinking about the professional stage. Rather than trace the practical rhetorical advice that circulated in Europe, this strand concerns instead broader systems of thought, such as the question of what it means to 'know' something, and their impact on past understandings of performance.

Garrick's potential 'stock of science' is one of the subjects of Roach's (1985) *Player's Passion* which offers many illuminating connections between epistemic shifts in the history of the scientific understanding of emotion and new ways of writing about acting. Roach has been criticised by Hume (1999) for emphasising paradigm shifts at the expense of continuities in practice, and by Wiles (2020) for privileging science over religion as a driver of human behaviour. Yet Roach's work is still valuable for demonstrating the potential range of 18th-century thinking about acting, and for the story he tells of science and emotion in the long 18th century as it intersects with past ideas about performance. That story runs from the oratorical and Galenic world of the 17th century where performance conventions were 'a coherent physiological system to regulate the great natural forces of the body for artistic and hygienic effect' (p. 55); through the early 18th-century understanding of physical performance where 'the words *mechanical* and *natural* ... become synonyms' (p. 60) for thinkers indebted to Galileo, Descartes and Newton; to the mid-18th-century pivot towards vitalism and sensibility that sharpens the tension between understandings of the actor that value either 'spontaneity and sincerity' or 'calculation and artifice' (p. 114).

Such an intersection between science and emotion is visible in Boswell (1770, p. 398), for he notes that 'not only are learning and science necessary for an universal player ... he must have an elevation and tenderness of sentiment, dignity and ease of deportment' too. Again, though, this emphasis on the importance of a performer's 'tenderness of sentiment', while a typical late 18th-century subject, is not so much practical advice to the actor, but rather an attempt to sketch an ideal performer, a 'universal player' against which other actors might be judged (1770, p. 398). This is acting theory intended to inform critics and thinkers more than practitioners. The profession of the actor, and the theoretical work bound to this idea, thus has two aspects: the body of professional techniques and skills (the main subject of work by Wiles, Stern and others) and the set of concepts through which others appreciate or denigrate the work of professional performers (the main subject of Roach and other cultural historians, like Vicentini). These aspects are not always distinct, and this is particularly clear when it comes to the use of other artforms within acting theory, like painting, statuary, dance and music.

West's (1991) *The Image of the Actor*, and recent work by McPherson (2017), has demonstrated the significance of acting theory's growth in an environment of what Wilson (1990) calls 'inter-arts experiments' (p. 394). Observing that 'the primary obstacle in the establishment of the 18th-century actor's importance was the lack of language with which to express or visualize' it (p. 149), West reveals the extent to which art theory provided that language. Earlier critics, like Hughes (1987, 1987, 1987), had themselves used art historical terms to re-describe the trajectory of the 18th-century stage from a baroque style associated with Betterton and, later, James Quin, to Garrick's 'rococo' acting and then the 'classical' work of John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons. West's work, however, provides a far richer conceptual overview, tying together major trends in 18th-century art and the changing ways of understanding theatre. Thinking about comic acting, she argues, was informed less by clumsy adaptations of Aristotle, than by Hogarth's experiments with comic painting; and the prestige of tragedy over comedy was strengthened by the implicit and explicit appropriation of the hierarchies embedded in the work of Joshua Reynolds and other members of the Royal Academy. As for acting practice, evidence remains of actors' on-stage imitation of works of art (a practice pioneered by Barton Booth, and inspired by the poses struck by the Italian castrato Nicolò Grimaldi [Roach, 1985]), but West warns us to be careful when that evidence takes the form of paintings and engravings: her work on the theoretical concepts shared between these media has made it clear that such images 'did not convey the specific nature of performances, but were coded responses to the performances which had as much to do with prevailing tendencies in art as with the minutiae of theatrical presentation' (p. 26).

Boswell himself makes use of painting in his essays as part of a three-way comparison between the player, poet and painter. The 'works of the painter and poet are transmitted down from age to age', but the achievements of those in the acting profession, 'by which multitudes have been affected, leave no trace behind them' (1770, p. 469). Such ephemerality will become a major concern of Boswell's third essay, but the introduction of this theme here already testifies to one of the many ways in which—both in this essay and more generally in the 18th-century—the particularities of the player's profession are articulated through theoretical reflection that stretches into domains we might now consider separate. Criticism has helped us to appreciate such connections, be they to the world of fine art, the development of modern science, or the long history of oratory and rhetoric. At the same time, that criticism also reveals an essential doubleness to theories of acting: there is an aspect of theory embedded in practice as technique and an aspect of theory that shapes how one might think critically about and with that practice. Both exist simultaneously: a technical understanding of breath will change one's thinking about soliloquies, and prevailing ideas about the importance of serious art or the origins of our emotions constrain not just the reception but also the execution of actions on a stage.

3 | ACTING AND EXPRESSION

The primary sources gathered in Zunshine's (2017) five-volume *Acting Theory and the English Stage, 1700-1830* range from poems about actors to manuals for spouting clubs, through essays on dance history, human physiognomy and the shape of a theatrical career. The diversity of these texts reflects the range of places in which reflections on the 18th-century stage appeared. In her introduction to this collection, Zunshine observes two source discourses for her materials: one 'focused on the personalities, social lives and specific performances of famous entertainers' and one concerned with 'acting theory as a science and the oratorical skills of actors and actresses as compared with those of other professional speakers' (p. 2). These two discourses map roughly onto the two aspects of professionalism examined in the previous section: Boswell wonders about Garrick's 'stock of science' and the amount of sentiment necessary to the ideal player; while Burgh, Sheridan and others detail a technical knowledge common to orators and players. Zunshine also questions, as I do here, the claim of acting theory as a distinct genre: texts about acting may be quite self-conscious and share similar attributes (a historical retrospective, extracts from famous plays used as exercises, etc.), but they rarely offered extensive practical advice and, churned out by many different publishers, often fed instead a 'broader appetite for thinking about actors and acting' (p. 5).

One key way in which they did this was through attempts at defining acting itself, as the definitions thus generated, in their broader applicability, helped such publications achieve the status Zunshine ascribes to them as 'a crucial part of this period's cultural imagination' (p. 6).

'I take it for granted', writes Boswell (1770, p. 469), 'that a good player is indeed in a certain sense the character that he represents during the time of his performance'. He explains the 'certain sense' in which this is true as follows:

If I may be allowed to conjecture what is the nature of that mysterious power by which a player really is the character which he presents, my notion is, that he must have a kind of double feeling. ... The feelings and passions of the character which he represents, must take full possession as it were of the antechamber of his mind, while his own character remains in the innermost recess (1770, p. 469).

Boswell advances this model of acting as the exercise of a 'double feeling' with great care: it is 'conjecture' and his own 'notion'. As Parker (2019) has observed, this was indeed a very personal notion, since Boswell's spatial imagery adapts a description he made of his own mind for his journal two years earlier. This means that Boswell's description of acting was also a description of himself, and such a personal dimension already offers one way in which this definition extends beyond the work of the stage. Another way in which this is true is also demonstrated by Boswell (1770, p. 469), who follows his exposition of the actor's double feeling with the observation that it 'is experienced in some measure by the barrister' and even by 'many men in the common intercourse of life'. Indeed, such double feeling might even be necessary to the functioning of (male) society: 'we, insensibly, for our own ease, adopt feelings suitable to every occasion, and so, like players, are to a certain degree a different character from our own—at least, that is, as far as 'the antechamber of our mind' is concerned (1770, p. 469). Boswell's definition of acting thus becomes a definition of appropriate behaviour in public life.

In his postscript to *The Idea of the Actor* Worthen (1984) writes that 'The actor relates the self to its actions and subverts that relation; from this dramatic action flows' (p. 231)—and so, might one also say, flows an opportunity to interrogate the relationship between self and action more generally. In those pages of his book devoted to the 18th century, Worthen himself observes that 'In Garrick's heyday' attempts 'to relate the actor's feelings to his expression informs' not only 'a burgeoning acting literature' but also 'the incipient theory of the benevolent society, which demands a thorough identity between the inborn social passions and their outward expression in action and gesture' (p. 4). Boswell's essay has a more complex approach to identity than this, and is closer in spirit to Diderot's (1975 [c. 1773-1777]) *Paradoxe* and its recognition of the power of cold calculation over unmediated expressions of sentimental fire (Fumaroli, 1993). Diderot's argument inspired Sennett's (1977, p. 107) claim that, in the 18th century, actors were 'the kind of men who inhabited the public realm', and Sennett's work lies behind both Worthen's and more recent studies, like Goring's (2005) *Rhetoric of Sensibility* and Leichman's (2015) *Acting Up*. Leichman focusses on French society and demonstrates how persistently the actor troubled Enlightenment conceptions of selfhood. As for Goring, his study of principally English materials repeatedly shows 'how performers and commentators on stage performance ... invested the actor's body with the power "to civilize" and treated it as a textual space for the inscription of politeness' (p. 118). Hill's (1750) *The Actor*, for instance, offers a clear example of how 'it is not just the possession of necessary qualities but the control of them which is impressed upon the actor' (Goring, 2005, p. 137).

The Actor is often quoted in the texts that comprise Zunshine's collection of English acting theory. It is thus a work that not only exemplifies the capacity of acting theory to offer definitions of acting with broader social ramifications, but, in Zunshine's view, a suggestive example of the cohesive self-consciousness of such material. Further to this, however, Hill's work also exemplifies the international circulation of ideas about acting. The first edition of *The Actor* (in 1750) was a close translation of Rémond de Saint-Albine's *Le Comédien* (1747), and the extensive alterations made by Hill for his second version of the text (1755) do not fully obscure the debt to his French source (Harriman-Smith, 2015). More than the details of such debt, I wish instead to emphasise here the

extent to which ideas about acting moved between different countries in the 18th century. Forty years before Hill, Gildon's (1710) *Life of Thomas Betterton* drew heavily on 17th-century French treatises (Wiles, 2020); 50 years after Hill, Siddons (1807) adapted Engel's (1785) *Ideen zueiner Mimik* into his *Illustrations of Gesture and Action*. Such circulation speaks to a theoretical understanding of acting as, on some level, consistent across cultures. German and French descriptions of what acting is can inspire English ones because excellent performance is held to share certain universal qualities. These kinds of claim to the universal applicability of acting theory themselves rely on an Enlightenment interest in defining our common human nature, especially as concerns our modes of expressing thought and feeling. No wonder, then, that acting theory participates so fully in models for understanding the world that the theatre imitates. There is perhaps no more suggestive example of such participation than the chain of influence discerned by Smith (2006), which reveals the impact of Engel and Siddons's illustrations of the passions on Darwin's (1872) choice of plates for his *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

4 | ACTING AND EPHEMERALITY

Boswell (1770, p. 513) begins his third and final essay with a bibliography of recent 'literary productions relative to the art of acting'. These works are all evidence of 'The stage being an object of much attention amongst us' (p. 513), and, like those collected by Zunshine, their diversity indicates the breadth of material associated with the theatre in the 18th century. Recent studies have explored the range of theatrical media in new depth (O'Quinn & Russell, 2015), demonstrating, for example, how Garrick built his own media empire in the periodical press (Ritchie, 2019), and how theatrical biographers revived their subjects (Weldy Boyd, 2018). As for Boswell, this life-writing periodical columnist lists treatises like John Hill's and Charles Pickering's (1755), but also referred readers to works in French, periodical essays by Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, memoirs and biographies and poems on actors and acting. Lloyd's (1760) verse essay *The Actor* even 'holds the same system with regard to the players that I have attempted to illustrate' (p. 513). Yet as well as bolstering Boswell's own authority, this essay's interest in publications about acting also leads it towards discussion of the ephemerality of performance. Boswell praises Gentleman's (1770) *Dramatic Censor* for its 'very good observations on the performance of many of the famous characters on our stage' (p. 514), and wishes for more work of this kind since it 'would not only be of service to our present players; but would preserve many curious and useful hints for future performers' (p. 514). Writing like Gentleman's, and other pieces included under the broad category of acting theory, thus appear to offer an impermanent and highly localised artform the possibility of endurance and transmission.

All through Boswell's essays there runs a concern for preserving the knowledge of the actor. When talking about 'double feeling', Boswell (1770, p. 469) breaks off and tells us 'I heartily wish that Mr Garrick would give us an Essay on the subject'. Not only would this create a work as authoritative as 'Caesar ... on the art of war', but it would also mitigate what 'Colley Cibber justly regrets, that the talents of the actor die with him' (p. 469, quoting Cibber, 1740). The same point is made about Garrick again a few paragraphs later and a third time at the end of this essay, when Boswell prays that 'that love of fame, which hath ever warmed [Garrick's] breast ... may prompt him to leave succeeding ages an account of that art, the effects of which have been so wonderful in this' (p. 471).

This repetition, however, introduces a third term to Boswell's argument: written acting theory does not only preserve this performer's knowledge from death, it might also represent (yet another) extension of his 'fame'. Lilti (2014, 2017) reminds us that, in classical terms, fame is for the living and glory for the dead: what Boswell is doing here, then, in proposing a way for Garrick's fame to outlast his life, is actually an example of the new phenomenon of *celebrity*, which (to apply Lilti's schematisation) emerges in the 18th century between the categories of living fame and posthumous glory. The close links between acting theory and celebrity phenomena are evident in a range of recent scholarship (e.g., McPherson, 2017), much of it coloured, like Boswell's essay, with intimations of human frailty. Emily Anderson (2018) has argued, for instance, that Garrick, having 'predicated his desire to live forever on

an art form her knew could not be preserved' (p. 2) ultimately 'sought in Shakespeare a model for his own endurance' (p. 8). Elsewhere, Roach's (2007) *It* uses accounts of Garrick's performances and person to illustrate how celebrity is generated by a mix of attractive *charismata* and repulsive *stigmata* (the actor-manager's eyes and diminutive stature respectively). Fawcett (2016), building upon Roach and Felicity Nussbaum's notion of 'public intimacy' (Nussbaum, 2005; Roach, 2005), examines how 18th-century performers, from Colley Cibber on, adopted strategies of 'overexpression' in order to defend themselves from new levels of public scrutiny. This worked particularly well for Garrick, but with mixed results for actresses like George Anne Bellamy and Mary Robinson. In both Roach and Fawcett's work, the actor's mortality is ever-present: Roach's last chapter connects *It* to the death-drive, and Fawcett opens her work with newspaper reporting of Garrick's autopsy.

As for Boswell, the exhortations of his second essay set the stage for the bibliographical work of his third piece: these texts are examples of the kind of thing that Garrick could write and which offer theory's promise of transcending mortal limits. Yet for all that promise, Boswell concludes his series in a melancholy, sentimental mode:

How curious it is to think that they who have so often counterfeited death, and again appeared in all the lively activity and cheerfulness of life, must at last arrive at that awful scene when life is to be no more; when they are really to die? (1770, p. 516)

This half-question emphasises the uniqueness of the actor, as one who lives and dies a thousand times on the stage and so—as Boswell and many other theorists of this period have to tell us—represents an important figure in and for society. At the same time, however, the final lines of the essay remind us that, despite their uniqueness as performers, actors nevertheless are human and 'must suffer like the rest of their fellow creatures' (p. 517). Such a divided conclusion illustrates what I have argued to be the central fact of 18th-century acting theory: that it recognises both the unique value of the actor (as one who dies and lives many times over, as one endowed with extraordinary feeling and as one possessed of wide-ranging knowledge) *and* the extent to which we all share the actor's experience (we all can learn to judge performance, we all execute double feeling in public life, and we are all as transient as they).

5 | CODA

Reading Boswell's essays through recent scholarship, and vice-versa, reveals the extent to which a focus on acting theory—broadly and loosely defined—can illuminate both 18th-century stage practice and the culture that produced it. Such work can be extended by turning to new or still under-utilised sources, particularly those associated with questions of gender, class and non-European cultures. As this field continues to develop, however, there are two issues it must not neglect. The first concerns the international and interdisciplinary scope of acting theory. Marie's observation that 'Acting theory develops progressively through exchanges between the countries of Europe and from hybridisation with painting, dance, sculpture and music'¹ requires those scholars who interact with this subject to be themselves alive to material in a range of languages and media, or, at the very least, to explain their focus on a specific nation or artform.

The second issue stems from the recent work of Wiles and a few others (Sauter & Wiles, 2014; Wentz, 2010; Wiles, 2020). Throughout *The Players' Advice* he notes the continuities between 18th-century acting practice and contemporary training: Eugenio Barba still gives advice that would have been familiar to Hippolyte Clairon three centuries ago, while Engel's images 'epitomize ... what we might describe today as televisual acting' (p. 222). Yet these continuities have not been exploited as fully as they might, and so little has been done to test whether scholarly work on acting theory of the past has the potential to inform both the theory and practice of contemporary acting. As Wiles himself puts it, 'looking to the past can be a way to look forward' (p. 8). There are clear

benefits to such an endeavour: it offers both an opportunity to embed the history of the stage in today's theatre as a source of strength and renewal, and, at the same time, a prompt to scholars and Boswells of the future to enter into new forms of dialogue and collaboration.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ My translation of 'La théorie du jeu s'élabore progressivement, à travers des échanges nourris entre les pays européens et à partir d'hybridations avec la peinture, la danse, la sculpture et la musique' (2019, cover).

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How to cite this article: Harriman-Smith J. What James Boswell tells us about 18th-century acting theory. *Literature Compass*. 2020;17:e12600. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12600>