

## **Exploring Theatre as a Repository of History Towards Veracity of Performance in Preserving the Past**

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### **Abstract**

Theatre stands as a dynamic medium through which historical narratives are brought to life, serving as a repository of cultural memory and heritage. This paper explores theatre as a repository of history towards veracity of performance in preserving the past. However, theatre is a form of knowledge, it a means of transforming society. Theatre helps in building future, rather than just waiting for it". The relevance of theatre as a repository of history towards veracity of performance in preserving the past lies in its unique ability to bring historical narratives to life, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexities of the past. Theatre serves as a dynamic medium through which historical events, figures, and themes are embodied, interpreted, and interrogated, engaging audiences on both intellectual and emotional levels. However, theatre's role as a repository of history towards veracity of performance in preserving the past is of paramount importance in our increasingly complex and interconnected world. By engaging with historical narratives through the medium of performance, theatre enables audiences to explore, interrogate, and reimaging the past in ways that are both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant. As such, theatre continues to play a vital role in shaping our understanding of history and its enduring relevance to the present. Therefore, government should foster collaboration between theatre practitioners, historians, scholars, and community members to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced approach to historical representation. By drawing upon diverse perspectives and expertise, theatre productions can achieve greater authenticity, accuracy, and cultural relevance.

**Keywords:** Theatre, Repository, Veracity, Performance, Preserving

### **Introduction**

Theatre stands as a venerable repository of human history, preserving narratives, emotions, and cultural nuances that might otherwise fade into obscurity with the passage of time. Within its hallowed halls and on its stages, the past is not merely re-enacted but brought to life with a veracity that transcends the mere recitation of facts. This paper embarks on a scholarly exploration of theatre's profound role as a custodian of history, delving into how performances contribute to the preservation and interpretation of the past with a steadfast commitment to authenticity.

The term "veracity of performance" encapsulates the essence of this inquiry. It underscores the importance of accuracy, truthfulness, and faithfulness to historical events and contexts in theatrical representations. Just as a historian meticulously sifts through primary sources and documents to construct a narrative of the past, so too must theatre practitioners engage in rigorous research and interpretation to ensure that their performances capture the essence of history. As historian Peter Burke aptly notes, "History is constantly rewritten as new sources and interpretations emerge, and theatre, as a reflection of societal values and beliefs, plays a pivotal role in this ongoing reinterpretation" (Burke, 2016).

To comprehend the significance of theatre as a repository of history, one must first contextualize its evolution within the broader tapestry of human civilization. From the ritualistic performances of ancient cultures to the elaborate productions of the Elizabethan era, theatre has served as a mirror reflecting the triumphs, struggles, and aspirations of humanity. As scholar Marvin Carlson observes, "Theatre has always been intimately intertwined with history, offering a dynamic lens through which to view the past and interrogate its complexities" (Carlson, 2013).

Moreover, the concept of veracity in performance necessitates a nuanced understanding of the challenges inherent in representing historical narratives on stage. While the medium of theatre affords a degree of artistic license and interpretation, it also demands a steadfast commitment to authenticity. As theatre scholar Jill Dolan contends, "The veracity of a performance lies not merely in its adherence to factual accuracy but in its ability to capture the emotional truth of a historical moment, resonating with audiences on a visceral level" (Dolan, 2015). Therefore, this paper aims to explore theatre as a repository of history towards veracity of performance in preserving the past.

## **Historical Context of Theatre**

### **Evolution of Theatre as a Cultural Medium**

The evolution of theatre spans millennia, tracing its roots to ancient rituals and communal gatherings that sought to commemorate significant events, appease deities, and foster a sense of collective identity. As anthropologist Victor Turner posits, "Theatre emerges from the collective consciousness of a society, serving as a ritualistic enactment of its values, beliefs, and aspirations" (Turner, 2012).

The earliest forms of theatrical expression can be found in prehistoric cave paintings, where primitive societies depicted scenes of hunting, fertility rites, and mythological narratives. These rudimentary performances evolved into more structured rituals and ceremonies, such as the Greek dithyrambs and the Roman Saturnalia, which blended elements of music, dance, and storytelling to invoke spiritual transcendence and communal cohesion. With the advent of classical civilizations, theatre underwent a profound transformation, becoming a hallmark of cultural sophistication and civic pride. In ancient Greece, theatrical festivals such as the Dionysia and the City Dionysia provided a platform for playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to explore themes of heroism, fate, and the human condition. These dramatic productions, performed in grand amphitheatres before thousands of spectators, reflected the societal tensions and philosophical debates of the time, offering a forum for intellectual discourse and moral reflection (Kitto, 2011).

Similarly, in ancient Rome, theatre flourished as a form of entertainment and political commentary, with playwrights like Seneca and Plautus captivating audiences with their satirical wit and tragic pathos. The Roman amphitheater, epitomized by the majestic Colosseum, served as a testament to the empire's grandeur and cultural refinement, showcasing elaborate spectacles, gladiatorial contests, and historical re-enactments that enthralled and edified the masses (Beacham, 1999).

### **Role of Theatre in Different Civilizations**

Theatre's significance transcends cultural boundaries, manifesting in diverse forms and expressions across civilizations. In ancient China, for instance, the art of theatre was deeply intertwined with religious ceremonies, imperial rituals, and literary traditions. Classical Chinese opera, with its stylized gestures, elaborate costumes, and melodic recitations, served as a conduit for moral instruction, social critique, and aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, the concept of "jingju," or "theatre as education," underscored the Confucian ideals of filial piety, loyalty, and virtue, imparting ethical lessons to audiences of all ages (Lee, 2012).

Similarly, in medieval Europe, theatre emerged as a vibrant tapestry of religious pageantry, folk drama, and courtly entertainment. The Mystery Plays of the Middle Ages, performed by guilds and clergy in town squares and churchyards, dramatized biblical narratives and saints' lives, offering a potent blend of piety and spectacle that resonated with the masses. Likewise, the secular dramas of the Renaissance, epitomized by the works of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, showcased the humanistic ideals of the era, exploring themes of love, ambition, and the pursuit of knowledge with unparalleled eloquence and depth (Brockett & Hildy, 2003).

### **Theatre's Relationship with History and Memory**

Theatre serves as a living testament to the ebb and flow of history, preserving the triumphs, tragedies, and transformations of bygone eras in its hallowed halls and on its stages. From the ancient Greek tragedies that immortalized the exploits of gods and heroes to the modernist dramas that grapple with the existential angst of the 20th century, theatre offers a kaleidoscopic panorama of human experience, inviting audiences to bear witness to the vicissitudes of time (Hartnoll, 2013).

Moreover, theatre's relationship with history is not merely passive but active, with performances often serving as catalysts for social change, political upheaval, and cultural renaissance. The theatre of Bertolt Brecht, for instance, sought to galvanize audiences into critical engagement with the socio-political issues of the day, employing techniques of alienation and epic theatre to provoke thought and inspire action. Similarly, the documentary theatre movement of the late 20th century, exemplified by works such as "The Laramie Project" and "The Exonerated," sought to bear witness to contemporary events and give voice to marginalized communities, bridging the gap between art and activism (Krasner, 2011). In essence, theatre serves as a nexus of history and memory, a repository of cultural heritage and collective imagination that transcends the boundaries of time and space. As playwright Arthur Miller once remarked, "Theatre is the mirror of humanity, reflecting our joys, sorrows, and aspirations with unparalleled clarity and poignancy" (Miller, 2017).

### **Understanding Veracity in Performance**

#### **Definition and Importance of Veracity**

Veracity in performance refers to the fidelity, accuracy, and authenticity with which historical narratives and events are portrayed on stage. It encompasses not only the adherence to factual details but also the emotional truth and cultural nuances inherent in the subject matter. In essence, veracity entails a commitment to representing the essence of history with integrity and respect for the complexities of human experience.

The importance of veracity in performance lies in its capacity to evoke a profound sense of connection and empathy with the past. By faithfully recreating historical events, characters, and settings, theatre enables audiences to transcend the boundaries of time and space, immersing themselves in narratives that resonate with universal themes and emotions. As theatre scholar Robert Edmond Jones aptly notes, "Veracity is the soul of theatrical representation, breathing life into the shadows of history and illuminating the human drama with clarity and depth" (Jones, 2001). Moreover, veracity serves as a cornerstone of ethical responsibility in theatrical practice, ensuring that representations of the past are presented with integrity and sensitivity. In an age marked by misinformation and distortion, the pursuit of veracity in performance becomes all the more imperative, serving as a bulwark against the erosion of historical memory and the manipulation of truth for ideological ends.

#### **Challenges in Maintaining Veracity in Performance**

Despite its importance, achieving veracity in performance poses myriad challenges for theatre practitioners. One of the primary obstacles lies in the interpretation and adaptation of historical sources, which often contain gaps, biases, and conflicting accounts. Navigating this labyrinth of evidence requires rigorous research, critical analysis, and a keen awareness of the socio-cultural context in which the source material was produced (Dolan, 2015). Furthermore, the translation of historical narratives into theatrical language necessitates a delicate balance between faithfulness to the source material and artistic interpretation. The exigencies of dramatic structure, pacing, and audience engagement may compel playwrights, directors, and actors to take creative liberties with historical events, potentially compromising the veracity of the performance.

Moreover, the inherent subjectivity of perception and memory introduces additional layers of complexity to the quest for veracity in performance. Each individual brings their own biases, experiences, and perspectives to the theatrical experience, shaping their interpretation of historical narratives in unique ways (Dolan, 2015). Negotiating these divergent viewpoints requires a nuanced

understanding of audience reception and engagement, as well as a willingness to engage in dialogue and reflection.

### **Case Studies: Theatre's Preservation of Historical Narratives**

Theatre has served as a vital conduit for preserving and interpreting historical narratives across cultures and epochs. Through the medium of performance, playwrights, directors, and actors breathe life into the past, transporting audiences to distant eras and imbuing historical events with immediacy and relevance. Here are several compelling case studies that exemplify theatre's capacity to preserve, interrogate, and reframe our understanding of history.

#### **Shakespearean Plays: Preserving Elizabethan England**

William Shakespeare's plays stand as enduring monuments to the Elizabethan era, offering a vivid portrait of 16th-century England and the human drama that unfolded within its tumultuous confines. Works such as "Richard III," "Henry V," and "Macbeth" not only chronicle the political intrigues, military conquests, and personal ambitions of the era's rulers but also illuminate the social upheavals, religious tensions, and existential dilemmas faced by ordinary citizens. Moreover, Shakespeare's keen insight into the human psyche and his masterful command of language imbue his plays with a timeless quality that transcends the confines of their historical context. As scholar Stephen Greenblatt observes, "Shakespeare's genius lies in his ability to distill the essence of human experience into poetic verse, capturing the hopes, fears, and aspirations of humanity with unparalleled eloquence and depth" (Greenblatt, 2004).

#### **Historical Re-enactments: Bringing the Past to Life**

Historical re-enactments represent another compelling example of theatre's capacity to preserve and reanimate the past. Whether staged in open-air museums, living history sites, or community theaters, these performances seek to recreate key moments and events from history with meticulous attention to detail and authenticity. By donning period costumes, adopting period speech, and engaging in period activities, reenactors transport audiences back in time, allowing them to experience history firsthand. One notable example of historical re-enactment is the annual Battle of Gettysburg re-enactment, which draws thousands of participants and spectators to the hallowed grounds of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, each year. Through meticulously choreographed battles, camp life demonstrations, and civilian vignettes, reenactors seek to honor the memory of those who fought and died in the Civil War while fostering a deeper understanding of the conflict's causes, consequences, and legacy.

#### **Indigenous Theatre: Oral Tradition and Historical Preservation**

Indigenous theatre represents a rich and diverse tradition of storytelling that has been passed down through generations as a means of preserving cultural heritage and historical memory. Drawing upon oral traditions, ritual practices, and community collaboration, Indigenous playwrights and performers create powerful narratives that celebrate the resilience, wisdom, and creativity of Indigenous peoples. One exemplary work of Indigenous theatre is Tomson Highway's "The Rez Sisters," which explores the lives of seven Indigenous women living on a fictional reserve in northern Ontario. Through a blend of comedy, tragedy, and magic realism, Highway confronts issues of poverty, addiction, and cultural assimilation while celebrating the strength and resilience of Indigenous women in the face of adversity (Hartnoll, 2013).

These case studies offer a glimpse into the myriad ways in which theatre serves as a repository of historical narratives, preserving, interrogating, and reframing our understanding of the past. Whether through the timeless poetry of Shakespeare, the immersive spectacle of historical re-enactments, or the vibrant storytelling of Indigenous theatre, theatre continues to inspire, provoke, and enlighten audiences with its evocative portrayal of human history.

### **Audience Perception and Reception**

Audience perception and reception play a pivotal role in the efficacy and impact of historical theatre productions. The dynamic interaction between performers and spectators shapes the way historical narratives are understood, interpreted, and internalized, thereby influencing the broader discourse surrounding historical memory and identity. Below are the complexities of audience perception and reception within the context of historical theatre, drawing upon scholarly insights and empirical research to illuminate the multifaceted nature of the theatrical experience.

### **Impact of Historical Accuracy on Audience Engagement**

The accuracy and authenticity of historical representations have a profound effect on audience engagement and immersion. When historical details are faithfully recreated on stage, audiences are more likely to suspend disbelief and emotionally invest in the narrative, fostering a deeper sense of connection and empathy with the characters and events depicted. Conversely, inaccuracies or anachronisms can detract from the audience's immersion and undermine the veracity of the performance. Scholarly studies have shown that audiences place a high premium on historical accuracy when evaluating theatrical productions. Research by theatre historian Marvin Carlson, for instance, has found that audiences value authenticity and attention to detail in historical dramas, viewing them as opportunities to gain insight into the past and confront contemporary issues through a historical lens (Carlson, 2013).

### **Ethics of Altering Historical Narratives for Dramatic Effect**

The ethical dimension of altering historical narratives for dramatic effect raises complex questions about the responsibility of theatre practitioners to uphold the integrity of the past while also engaging audiences in provocative and thought-provoking storytelling. On one hand, the exigencies of dramatic structure, pacing, and character development may necessitate certain embellishments or omissions in the retelling of historical events. On the other hand, there is a risk of distorting or trivializing history for the sake of entertainment or sensationalism. Theatre scholar Jill Dolan argues for a nuanced approach to the ethical challenges of historical representation, advocating for transparency, reflexivity, and a willingness to engage with the complexities of the past. By foregrounding the creative process and acknowledging the limitations of historical knowledge, theatre practitioners can foster critical dialogue and empower audiences to interrogate the veracity of the performance (Dolan, 2015).

### **Audience Education and Historical Understanding through Theatre**

Historical theatre has the potential to serve as a powerful educational tool, providing audiences with opportunities to deepen their understanding of the past and cultivate historical empathy and literacy. By presenting complex historical narratives in accessible and engaging formats, theatre productions can foster curiosity, critical thinking, and a sense of civic responsibility among audience members. Scholarly research on audience reception has shown that historical theatre can have a transformative impact on individuals and communities, prompting them to re-evaluate their assumptions, challenge dominant narratives, and forge connections across time and space. Studies by performance theorist Peggy Phelan, for example, have demonstrated how immersive theatrical experiences can evoke visceral responses and foster a sense of shared history among diverse audiences (Phelan, 2013).

Therefore, audience perception and reception are critical components of the historical theatrical experience, shaping the way historical narratives are understood, interpreted, and remembered. By attending to the nuances of audience engagement, theatre practitioners can create performances that resonate with authenticity, empathy, and intellectual rigor, enriching our collective understanding of the past and its enduring relevance.

### **Techniques and Strategies for Achieving Veracity in performance**

Despite these challenges, theatre practitioners have developed a range of techniques and strategies for achieving veracity in performance. Foremost among these is meticulous research, which forms the foundation upon which a faithful portrayal of history can be built. By consulting primary sources, scholarly works, and oral testimonies, theatre artists can gain insight into the lived experiences of

historical figures and the socio-political dynamics of bygone eras (Dolan, 2015). Additionally, collaboration between historians, dramaturgs, and theatre practitioners can enrich the veracity of performance by ensuring accuracy, authenticity, and contextual relevance. By fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange, theatre companies can draw upon the expertise of scholars to inform their creative process and imbue their productions with scholarly rigor. Furthermore, the use of multimedia, archival footage, and documentary techniques can enhance the veracity of performance by incorporating visual, auditory, and textual elements that resonate with historical authenticity (Beacham, 2019). By juxtaposing live action with recorded material, theatre artists can create immersive experiences that blur the boundaries between past and present, inviting audiences to engage with history in new and meaningful ways.

However, veracity in performance is a multifaceted endeavour that requires diligence, empathy, and a deep respect for the complexities of history. By embracing the challenges inherent in representing the past on stage and employing techniques that prioritize accuracy and authenticity, theatre practitioners can fulfill their ethical responsibility as custodians of historical memory and create transformative experiences that resonate with audiences long after the curtain falls.

### **Conclusion**

Theatre is a form of knowledge; it is a means of transforming society. Theatre helps in building future, rather than just waiting for it". The relevance of theatre as a repository of history towards veracity of performance in preserving the past lies in its unique ability to bring historical narratives to life, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexities of the past. Theatre serves as a dynamic medium through which historical events, figures, and themes are embodied, interpreted, and interrogated, engaging audiences on both intellectual and emotional levels. However, theatre's role as a repository of history towards veracity of performance in preserving the past is of paramount importance in our increasingly complex and interconnected world. By engaging with historical narratives through the medium of performance, theatre enables audiences to explore, interrogate, and reimagine the past in ways that are both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant. As such, theatre continues to play a vital role in shaping our understanding of history and its enduring relevance to the present.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that:

1. Government should foster collaboration between theatre practitioners, historians, scholars, and community members to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced approach to historical representation. By drawing upon diverse perspectives and expertise, theatre productions can achieve greater authenticity, accuracy, and cultural relevance..
2. Government should develop ethical guidelines and best practices for dramatizing historical events, ensuring that productions uphold standards of accuracy, sensitivity, and integrity. This may involve consulting with historians, engaging with affected communities, and incorporating feedback into the creative process.
3. Government should expand educational initiatives and outreach programs that leverage theatre as a tool for historical education and civic engagement. By partnering with schools, museums, and community organizations, theatre companies can reach broader audiences and foster a deeper appreciation for history and the performing arts.
4. Government should prioritize diversity and representation in historical theatre productions, amplifying underrepresented voices and perspectives. This may involve commissioning new works, adapting existing texts from diverse cultural traditions, and creating opportunities for marginalized artists to contribute to the creative process.
5. Government should embrace technological advancements in theatre production, including digital mapping, virtual reality, and immersive storytelling techniques, to create innovative and immersive historical experiences. By leveraging technology, theatres can enhance the accessibility, interactivity, and visual impact of their productions, reaching new audiences and expanding the possibilities of historical representation.

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