

Maggie Gale

Please Don't Burn Those Letters

When my grandmother died, her son, my father, inherited a bundle of letters written between her and his father. The youngest of a large rabbinical family - impoverished but intellectual - hers was an arranged marriage to a man who, as far as I could tell, was her social and intellectual inferior. He did, however, have a trade and over the years secured her a lifestyle which, if not lavish, was certainly one of wealth and comfort. I remember being very angry when my father and mother told me that they had taken the bundle of letters to the bottom of the garden and burnt them, ceremoniously, without ever having read them. For me, the letters held secrets, the access to which I, her granddaughter born of a non-Jewish mother, felt I had some inherited right. I wanted to know more about her, but also more about her marriage to a man who was notoriously violent, feverishly religious and, according to my father, cruel. I had seen a whole batch of photographs which my father had claimed after her death, but there was something more offered by these letters, with their words, their secrets, their confessions, their lies, their...? I expect, looking back now, over fifteen years later, that the letters were full of everyday gossip about the family, about sick relatives, about the weather and so on. But they might have held the key to something I was looking for, from and about a woman who never liked or accepted me comfortably. The inherited photos told me a great deal I did not know, and I think my father was surprised by the woman, his mother, that some of the photos revealed, but the letters, I know, would have said much, much more.

As a theatre historian - a title in part given to me by others but a title which, in these days when history seems so easily muddied or forgotten, I am more and more happy to own - letters have an invaluable place amongst the documents and ephemera from which I try to understand and write about theatre as culture and the culture of theatre through time. Whilst some would question their use - are they truthful? Are they authentic? Do they say

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anything 'significant'? I have found letters to be amongst the most revealing documents out of which I, as theatre historian, feel I have a remit to 'make meaning'. We have to remember that for many actresses from previous centuries, letters and an engagement with a process of correspondence was often one of the few means by which they might write about their work. Often, mixed in with comments about friends, lovers, children and family, we find almost throw-away notes or observations on their professional practice, on what they think of others they are working with and so on. Some actresses and performers might even go further and use letters as a way of almost documenting their career to close friends and acquaintances. Thus in the case of one performer from the earlier part of the twentieth century whose professional career I was researching, her published letters reveal an extraordinary journey of self-discovery in terms of her 'art' as a performer. From this perspective the letters are rather self-consciously constructed, but as long as we acknowledge this, then they are the most useful kind of archive of the personal and the professional and, if we are lucky, the interaction between the two.

Some might say that letters are private and reveal a private side to a person which may undermine or compromise their professional standing. But as historians, this sense of privacy means very little, if we are being honest. Any kind of historical biographical research necessitates a level of intervention or interference, of cracking open a safe to find a key, a key to something crucial in the subject's life. Letters can offer a shift in perspective and if they are left in a public place, well then, they are going to be read by the public. Oddly, though, I was recently working on a book about a well-known playwright and found boxes and boxes of letters between himself and his

family. I made a decision not to scan them in any detail because so much had already been made of the relationship between his private life and his work. His relationships with his children were largely problematic - he had been in three marriages; few of his children were making a substantial living and he was continually financially bailing them out; one of them had found out rather late in life that he was in fact her 'real' as opposed to her adopted father, and this, I believe, was at the root of her psychological problems, for which her father had sought advice from Carl Jung - but I wanted to look at his work which although hugely popular and successful in his day, had been relegated to the patronising nod of history, "he was a populist"; "he wrote for the commercial theatre" and so on. So I ignored these letters and looked only at those between himself and other professionals. Had I been writing his biography, I would have of course spent hours pouring over private correspondences, but this was a theatre man who wrote about his work elsewhere - in pamphlets and articles, in autobiographies, in books about theatre. My approach with this 'subject' of research was different to the one I normally took when researching whereby all letters found have to be assessed - but then this is because my research has largely been around women's work.

My point here is that, I have found, the use of letters historically is related to gender and so they have been of particular use to me in my writing about women theatre workers from the past. As in the case quoted above, some women theatre practitioners have historically used the form of the letter as a kind of diary, as a kind of workbook on practice mixed in with reports on everyday domestic life. As the twentieth century progresses we find less and less use of letters by women for this means. There

are more avenues for reflection and revelation. Similarly, these days it is rare to get letters which say much more than a post-card might. Letters require time and space, emails do the job quicker - but the sentiments expressed are often common to both. As an historian, of course, I prefer the paper version - there is nothing like the feeling of opening a bundle of unsorted letters in an archive, or of picking up a piece of paper which has fallen out of a book and then discovering it is a letter to or from the author. What we then do with these documents is another matter altogether, thus we have to remember the guiding principle that "it's not what you have but what you do with it".

I have found recently that letters in the public domain - those for example newly available through the digitalisation of newspapers and periodicals - offer real insights into the everyday working lives and ideological beliefs of a number of late nineteenth, early twentieth century women playwrights whose work I have been researching. These are women about whom very little is written, or whose work is written about in relation to the work of others only. In England there exists a strange, from an anthropological perspective, tradition of writing letters to the "Editor of *The Times*", one of the oldest, establishment newspapers. And a number of the women playwrights whose work I am looking at, consistently wrote letters to *The Times*, not about theatre, but about social and political policy, the changing of laws, setting up organisations to help the poor of East London, managing resources during war time and so on. These letters reveal a great deal about the "they also thought/they also did" aspect of artists, they help to recontextualise their theatre work, to tell

their story.

I wish I'd had my grandmother's letters still, that I had kept letters sent to me over the years, that I had written more letters to my own father before he died. They can be such precious things which allow us to share private moments, thoughts and observations. They make us tell a story in a different way, read lives through a slightly altered lens. To burn letters is both a symbolic and a real act; for my father it was important to keep the past as it was and to bury anything which might shift his own perspective. An historian, and especially a theatre historian - where so much of the thing we study disappears, is momentary and barely graspable - would run to the fire and pull the letters out. Our impulse, however intrusive, is to uncover, to discover, to remake and letters are one of the vital tools which can help us satisfy this impulse.



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