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## »Moving Performance: The British experience of early cinema«

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## »Moving Performance: The British experience of early cinema«

»Moving Performance«, timed for the beginning of the year celebrating the centenary of the cinema in Britain (held at the University of Bristol, Department of Drama, Theatre, Film and Television, January 5-7, 1996), affirmed, extended and sometimes questioned the emphases of many previous histories, as well as exemplifying the possibility of further links between theatre and film studies. The focusing upon similar topics both within and across sessions helped to draw out connections among contributors' work and between the two disciplines.

The opening plenary, well illustrated with video clips, focused on transformations, or the lack thereof. Jackie Bratton (Royal Holloway College), an expert in drama studies, provided an outsider's perspective on one of the central issues that concerns early film scholars: the interaction between the cinema and other theatrical forms. Her intriguing talk explored the way in which film and television change the dynamics of theatrical variety performances. She called attention for example, to Anthony Hopkin's appropriation of British variety comic Tommy Cooper's delivery and the mediation/transformation of the cruel variety hall audience and »trouper« in the British live television program, *DON'T GIVE UP THE DAY JOB*. Christine Gledhill (Staffordshire University) presented a speculative paper on her recent research on early British cinema, the main point of which was to challenge the now common assumption of a major formal transformation between the early and the classical cinema. She suggested scholars have not considered that the emphasis on an increasing verisimilitude and realism and a rejection of the previous melodramatic mode fails to acknowledge how melodrama related to the world of its audiences, as well as the ways in which codes of verisimilitude change. She argued that the model of the classical realist text has been constructed primarily from the Hollywood cinema, thus relegating national cinemas, such as Britain's, to a deviant position. Clips from the British film *THE RAT* (1925) illustrated her thesis.

Three concurrent presentations, by Ian Christie (BFI), John Dovey and David Mayer (Manchester University) followed the plenaries. Unaware they would be writing this report, both authors attended Christie's presentation. But this was a good opportunity for those who had missed the insomniac scheduled

THE LAST MACHINE (a history of early cinema) on Channel Four in Britain, to hear Christie outline the series' aims of exploring cinema as the last Victorian invention, linked to changes in visual and cultural perception brought by railways, cities and other aspects of modernity. Christie acknowledged the debt he and the rest of the program's producers owed to Yuri Tsivian's work on early Russian cinema and its viewers, which pleased those who would like to see early cinema scholarship made accessible to a wider audience.

The rest of the day and the next was taken up with concurrent panels. Some sessions retrieved/produced lost histories, such as Kate Newey's (University of Wollongong) on the huge presence of women scriptwriters and producers in early theatre, and, to a lesser extent, cinema. This history has been marginalized through the general devaluation of scriptwriters and by the often familial structure of early production companies, such as Hepworth's, which worked to make women anonymous. Luke McKernan spoke about the discovery of the long-lost KING JOHN (1899), a brief scene from Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree's stage play. McKernan's comparison between the play and the filmed scene illuminated how theatrical types might have conceived of the new medium during its infancy.

Other panels provided much new and fascinating information on early exhibition practices in Britain. Sue Dinsmore suggested that the emphasis on public exhibition needs to be supplemented by considering the development of technologies and audiences for home screenings, perceived at one time as the future of cinema. This of course would mean that the study of early cinema becomes also the study of early television, an intriguing possibility for another centenary event. Nicholas Hiley (British Universities Film and Video Council) outlined the development of censorship and other means for controlling performance in British theatres, music halls and cinemas from the 1880s to 1910s, including the imposition of organized queuing and the redesign of auditoria. Dave Berry (Wales Film Council) and Mervyn Heard both discussed the fair-ground bioscope show. Adrienne Scullion (Glasgow University) discussed exhibition in Scotland, showing that the pursuit of respectability that consumed American nickelodeon managers also concerned their European counterparts.

The conference was enhanced by a well-mounted exhibition from Bristol University's Theatre Collection, a magic lantern show presented by two devoted amateur enthusiasts, and screenings of silent shorts at the Bristol Regional Film Theatre. Most intriguing was a third-year student multi-media performance of the hoary old melodrama, TEN NIGHTS IN A BARROOM. The students had previously shot lantern slides and video footage which they integrated with a live performance to illustrate the transformation of both theatrical and cinematic performance style during the cinema's first decades. Their tutors and conference organizers, John Adams, Sarah Street and Janet Thumin, are to be commended for helping the students to produce an extremely educational and informative evening, part of a well focused and enjoyable event.