Chapter 7. Outlook

In twenty-first-century European theatre, prompting[1] is often done electronically. At some "grand houses", actors receive their prompts via earbuds while prompters communicate via headsets. Sometimes, there is no prompter, and actors are expected to help each other out if they forget their lines. In German theatre, however, some of the bigger houses still employ more than one prompter,[2] and in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century tradition of "postdramatic theatre", appearances by the prompter have sometimes been incorporated into the performance as a self-referential device.[3] The Hamburg theatre audience of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was made aware of the box-like elevation at the front of the stage on a regular basis – of a peculiar disembodied voice that did not seem to belong to any of the actors. On the contrary, whoever was standing on stage was clearly not the one speaking in those moments and seemed eager to avoid revealing how carefully they were listening to the words, which only at first glance appeared to lack a specific location. In fact, the words were coming directly from the prompt box, which may not have been particularly eye-catching. They were spoken by a voice that was sometimes clear, sometimes less so, but always audible precisely when the dialogue being spoken on stage seemed to falter, an actor fell strangely silent, or the action on stage was in danger of coming apart at the seams. It is not without irony that the prompter ensured the progress of the performance while their – necessary – interventions completely suspended one of the principles deemed absolutely essential in the new theatre-aesthetic discourse of the time: the demand for scenic illusionism, i.e., a stage performance that would make the audience forget as much as possible that they were attending a theatre performance. This requirement was an integral part of the concept of theatre that redefined prompting and the profile of the prompter, regardless of the degree to which those aesthetic considerations were applied. After all, in theatre based on

1 Culturally, prompting as a concept has made its comeback in the work of "prompt engineers" who programme artificial intelligence prompts. Cf. Harwell 2023.

2 Cf. Oltmann 2023.

3 Cf., for the case of René Pollesch, Matzke 2012b, 127–129.

plays, i.e., dramatic texts created in line with literary standards, the prompter was not only entrusted with the task of feeding the actors lines. Rather, during the Hamburg era shaped by Schröder, they were also required to keep the respective text up to date with the latest content and technical revisions and, because the master copy in the prompt book was the foundation of the performance, to guard it like a treasure. It was therefore not just during the performance – where they were ever-present, even when they were not needed and remained silent in their box – that the prompter carried out their tasks. They did so throughout the process of preparing the play for performance,[4] while it remained in the repertory, and when it was taken up again after a hiatus.

There are a great number of aspects to consider here, such as the performances in the theatre and their preparation as well as the associated tasks and processes. But we also need to examine the demands that were made of the prompter, some of which had to do with the technical requirements of the stage, some with the overall cultural standing of the theatre. This relates to the aesthetic, cultural, and political expectations and stipulations that shaped the theatre as well as those which the theatre, vice versa, tried to shape for its part, in line with its new forms and aspirations. The intersections and interdependencies between these aspects can be examined by looking over the prompter's shoulder, as it were, and observing their most important tool: the prompt book. Through its use, this written artefact has become the scene of an entanglement between theatrical work, traditional as well as context-specific writing practices, and the norms and expectations that affected the theatre of the time. Accordingly, we have to focus our view over the prompter's shoulder to detect the corresponding relationships and connections. To put it in more general terms: the analysis of theatrical written artefacts requires us to take a special perspective that our study has attempted to develop.

In order to characterise the particularities of these prompt books and to situate them within their specific contexts by going beyond the respective written artefacts, the perspective we take has to be an interdisciplinary one, for which the specific, tangible written artefacts are the starting point. In this volume, we have applied a manuscript studies approach initially developed for objects preceding the European "age of print" and "age of books" to manuscripts that were often bound in a modern book format and sometimes formed hybrids with print copies. This approach has focussed on the specific materiality of the prompt books as well as the practices and techniques that shaped their daily use. Questions and perspectives at the intersection of literary and theatre studies are negotiating the causes, parameters, and effects of their use both in the practical terms of day-to-day operations and in the dramaturgical terms of performing a literary text in an

4 In the period examined here, significant parts of this process began to take the shape of rehearsals, cf. Matzke 2012a.

environment that was constantly changing. Sometimes these changes were considerable, as with the arrival of the French censor in Hamburg, sometimes ever so slight, as with respect to varying tastes and fashions. As we have elucidated over the course of this study, using a prompt book like this usually became a continuous process of revision that could never actually be said to come to an end.

We hope that our interdisciplinary analysis has not only grasped the specific features of prompt books and the practices associated with them but will also help to define and shift research questions and approaches in neighbouring disciplines. Our analyses have aimed to exemplify an understanding of written artefacts that not only encompasses how they were created, the materials they used, how they were made up, and the external shape they took but also the wider cultural contexts of their use. At the same time, we hope that our analyses have provided an example of what an examination of the mutually illuminating interplay between materiality, (writing) practices, and cultural contexts could look like.[5]

Conversely, prompt books have long been analysed in theatre studies with respect to their context rather than as material artefacts. From this perspective, prompt books have broadened our knowledge of historical performance practices. They have provided information about the shifting validity of agreements regarding stage procedures and their textual basis over a production's performance history as well as about the ways in which stage equipment and machinery were used. At what points was the stage set rearranged or changed, and how? At which point was which lighting mood to be used? Which scene sequences had to be changed and reworked for which dramaturgical or technical reasons? Which information from which parts of the text had to be redistributed or completely rewritten due to which kinds of updates concerning characters or dramatic scenes? Prompt book dynamics thus make tangible in equal measure what happened on stage, what was supposed to happen on stage, and what no longer had to happen there.

To a large extent, this is exactly how we have made use of the prompt books at the Hamburg Theater-Bibliothek. However, the preceding chapters have also drawn attention to how the prompt books that theatre practice depended upon were themselves reshaped by their practical use. Because it was always conceivable that further changes would be made, the process essentially always remained unfinished. It was limited only by the edges of the paper, which, at some point, were filled up, only for the content to continue further on sheets that were pasted in, pinned in, or attached in other ways. This process, however, exposes the specific materiality of the prompt books as something performative. Informed by media and cultural studies, our analysis of prompt books as performative mate-

5 For another example of an interdisciplinary approach to analysis, cf. Piquette/Whitehouse 2013. The volume brings together perspectives from archaeology and philology with a focus on the materiality of writing processes.

rial objects has thus built and expanded on the understanding and use of an essential theatre studies concept: materiality as performance. The use of the written artefacts led to the creation of multiple layers of revision; the written artefacts thus became the secret centre of the performances of literature-based theatre as it increasingly took shape in the course of the eighteenth century. Therefore, the materiality of prompt books was accompanied by a performative dimension from the outset, which not only emerged when prompters used their books to feed actors lines.[6] These kinds of material performances allowed for, informed, and determined the ways in which dramatic texts were adapted to the demands of the stage or, depending on one's point of view, the ways in which theatre as a cultural institution made literature performable. Either way, prompt books were objects of utility in the everyday business context of a theatre. Their specific materiality not only provided the infrastructure[7] for all artistic aspects of day-to-day operations but was in turn reshaped and transformed by them.

This materiality allows us to expand upon concepts and notions important for the study of literature as well. After all, prompt books were a central element of a theatre that, at least in the vision of some critics at the time, was to replace improvisation and loose scene sketches with dramatic texts containing firmly defined characters, elaborate psychologies, and distinct plots. However, the treatment of these texts within the cultural context of theatre conceived of them as the ever-adaptable foundations of what was to take place on the stage. The adaptation of literature in theatre practice thus undermined any understanding of literary texts as closed, untouchable entities. When they were performed on stage, dramatic texts were no longer finished works of art but one of many functional elements. This also had consequences for the status of the "authors" to whom these texts were attributed. Our analysis of selected prompt books has shown that there was often more than one person behind a performance once a dramatic text was in the process of being prepared for the stage. After all, the circumstances of the theatre – technical conditions, norms, expectations, and reactions – sometimes made it necessary to rewrite the dramatic text radically, sometimes at very short notice. At times, this had an impact on the progression of scenes, gave rise to new additions to the text, or even affected the plot of the play itself. The process of creating and updating a prompt book tended to involve several people, usually

6 In the sense of the somewhat earlier terminology coined by Paul Zumthor, they exhibit a special "degree of performance" ("Performanzgrad") in relation to other written artefacts (Zumthor 1988, 706). This stems not only from the many different ways that they were used during a specific theatrical performance but also and in a special way from the process of materially revising and updating them. This process points beyond the individual performance, but at the same time refers decidedly to the function of the prompt book over the course of the performance as a specific context.

7 For "infrastructuralism" as a perspective, cf. Peters 2015, 30–33; cf. Etzold 2023.

distinct from the person credited as the author of the dramatic text presented on stage (and even canonised) later in literary historiography. Under the name of the author printed on the playbills of the time, adaptations and revisions were made by prompters and principals within the scope of their everyday work.[8] This reveals a particular tension in the way that authorship took effect and lasting shape in the period around 1800 as a singular, often ingenious, individual achievement. However, the material performance of the prompt book, which the operation of literature-based theatre – which also took effect and shape in this era – ultimately depended on, points to how the work done on the dramatic text within the institution of theatre was always pluralistic from the outset. Consequently, analysing prompt books helps us to deepen our understanding of authorship in literary and cultural studies. In recent years, scholarship has been increasingly devoting itself to forms and constellations of non-individual authorship.[9] It is precisely because each prompt book remained tied to a particular author that examining them can contribute to research on the nature of authorship as well as to the scholarship of the particular authors analysed here. Prompt book research brings to light new text versions, contributes to their philological indexing, and in some cases allows us to catch a glimpse of the working methods of the people who created and worked on them. At the same time, it stimulates the productive scrutinization of the corresponding concept of the artistic or literary work (*Werk*), precisely because of the special way in which these texts were handled in the theatre.

Many of these cross-disciplinary impulses and lines of questioning have arisen from our specific, interdisciplinary focus on the actual practices of prompt book use. The previous six chapters have covered the writing and paper practices of prompt book production and revision, the adaptation of literary texts, and the theatrical and cultural practices that have manifested themselves in their materiality.[10] The emphasis we have placed on these practices has often been at odds with the concepts of and discourses on theatre, literature, and related written media that

8 Christof Hoffmann suggests a distinction between "writers" ("Schreiber") and "composers" ("Verfasser") for "writing positions" ("Schreibpositionen") outside of authorship, which, according to him, is based primarily on attribution. In the case of prompt books, "writers" are those who carry out the necessary updates – usually the prompters – while "composers" are also responsible for making those updates. Composers were usually the theatre directors (Hoffmann 2017, 166). In a related sense, Tobias Fuchs speaks of authorship as an "offer of roles" ("Rollenangebot") (Fuchs 2020, 11).

9 Such forms and constellations can be identified in many ways in the period around 1800. For an overview of forms of plural authorship, cf. Barner/Schürmann/Yacavone 2022. For concrete constellations around 1800, cf., for instance, Spoerhase/Thomalla 2020 or Ehrmann 2022.

10 Andreas Reckwitz has stressed the importance of artefacts for the analysis of social practices, as such practices are sometimes dependent on artefacts or can only take place at all by using them, cf. Reckwitz 2003, 282–301, in particular 290f.

emerged in the eighteenth century. There is often a glaring discrepancy between the purely functional adaptations of dramatic texts to the technical conditions of the Hamburg stage and the efforts made to elevate them in their integrity to cornerstones of literature-based theatre; between the open-ended material revisions of dramatic texts in prompt books and claims that the final versions of these texts are the ones that can be found in commercially available print copies; between the multiple agents involved in these revisions to varying degrees and the individual authors' names to which these literary texts are still attributed (e.g., on the front covers of print copies, on playbills, and on the title pages of prompt books).

What took place on the level of practices sometimes clearly differed from what simultaneously emerged on a discursive level and was then applied to, and sometimes superimposed upon, those practices. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that these two levels diverged and remained independent of each other. On the contrary: the material performance of a prompt book certainly takes place in something that, following Andreas Reckwitz, can be identified as a "practice/discourse formation".[11] In our case, the practice/discourse formation of prompt book practices means an area of contact rather than the separate identities of both levels. Prompt book practices and the discourses that permeated theatre as a cultural institution touched upon each other within the materiality of the prompt book: literary and theatrical, cultural and habitual, but also political norms, claims, and values circulated and took shape on a discursive level. All of them had an impact on the performance of the play that went beyond spatial, technical, or personnel factors. Accordingly, they determined how prompt books were created and revised, which left behind material traces in the processes of their use. The operations carried out for this purpose hardly differed in each case. It did not matter if there was a lack of actors, a problem with the length of the play, or a break in decorum: the contents of prompt books were retracted, added to, pasted over, etc. The practices involved in these revisions were generally the same from prompt book to prompt book. Knowledge of the discursive environment of prompt books and the norms and requirements that governed that environment make it (more often than not) possible to declutter, decipher, distinguish, and reconstruct how the layers of use came about and how, together, they have contributed to a unique material biography for each prompt book.

It is in these layers that the theatrical adaptations of literary texts performatively materialise. On a discursive level, claims were being made about literary texts forming the foundations of a theatre that was in the process of becoming socially acceptable, in part because it was increasingly passing as "high art". The use of prompt books in practice, however, shows that they were one functional element in processes of adaptation and revision which had to meet a great varie-

11 "Praxis-/Diskursformation"; cf., for example, Reckwitz 2016, 49–66.

ty of pragmatic, technical, and discursive requirements. Our study has retraced these connections, dynamics, and influences in selected individual prompt books and their respective material performances. In other words, it has attempted to shed some light in the dimness of that box at the front of the stage. It was only when something on that stage came to a standstill or got out of hand, and a disembodied whisper had to intervene, that the quiet voice caught the spectators' attention, and they heard the person reading from the prompt book. Without the prompt books that came into play from the box in those moments, the stage would have remained truly silent or would have become mired in utter chaos. The performance, the play, and the theatre itself depended on these written artefacts that were completely pragmatic at the time but that are equally enigmatic and fascinating today.