The Canon Project: promoting a cross-European understanding of the history of technical theatre

Nick Hunt, March 2023

The lighting designer and educator Francis Reid often repeated his mantra, 'to move forward, first look back'. This phrase is perhaps a positive take on philosopher George Santayana's darker warning that 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' Either way, history *matters*. It matters not just for the pleasure its study can bring, satisfying our curiosity about the past, but because we can learn from it. We can learn from past ideas and techniques, which can be renewed and reinvented in the present. Above all, we can learn where we have come from, and therefore who we *are*, as technicians, craftspeople, designers and managers. While things have improved greatly, the work of those in backstage roles continues to be frequently misunderstood, overlooked, undervalued, and uncredited. In a time of rapid change, to have a context, a hinterland, to our work is more essential than ever for our professional standing and – most importantly – our self-belief.

The Canon Project, which ran between August 2019 and December 2022, was funded by the EU's Erasmus+ and involved eight partner organisations: seven education institutions from six countries across Europe and the Arts and Theatre Institute, Prague (the parent organisation of the Prague Quadrennial). The project took the big ideas I have just sketched out, and sought to make them concrete, asking what the history of technical theatre (including design and architecture) can mean to us today, how we preserve it, how we teach it, and how we communicate it to various audiences.

The project was built around five 'outputs'. The first began with the idea of a timeline, so that key moments in technical theatre history (people, buildings, equipment, innovations, publications) could be placed onto a timeline together with wider historical information. For example, one might look at 19th century theatre architecture and stage machinery before and after the invention of the Bessemer converter, to see the impact of cheap and readily-available steel. Or one might plot the introduction of various types of moving light in different countries and regions, to see the relationships. During the project, the timeline

concept evolved into an online database, canonbase.eu, with over 30,000 entries, some created by the project team, and many drawn from existing databases such as the European Theatre Architecture database of theatre buildings (www.theatre-architecture.eu).

Canonbase uses the same software platform as wikidata (the database that underlies Wikipedia) and can exchange data with it. Entries in the canonbase vary in their level of detail, from short essays with extensive metadata, to the most basic entries with just a title and date, and a link to further information. The thinking behind the database is not to compete with existing sources, but to develop into a 'one-stop shop', making other material easier to find. The database also fulfils its original planned purpose, as it can display a timeline, and also a map, if relevant geographical data is present.

The Canon project's second output is a collection of 100 'stories', each one a way in to the bigger story of theatre design, technology and architecture across thousands of years of history and across the continent of Europe. The stories are organised into ten time periods from Antiquity to the Early 21st Century, and into ten themes: stage mechanics and sets; special effects and projection; lighting; sound; architecture; scenography; knowledge transfer; theatre management; health and safety; and the 'unexpected' - curious, surprising or less well-known facets of our history.

The name of the project derives from this second output: a canon is the *'list of works or items considered to be permanently established as being of the highest importance in a specific field'*. It is the list that every knowledgeable person in a field is expected to know and understand. The project recognises, of course, that such a thing is impossible – it would need 200, 500, a thousand stories. Instead, the stories have been selected as entry points, that together map the territory, and invite further exploration of people, places, performances and innovations that reflect a turning point or essential part of our history.

The third and fourth outputs relate to the project's education aspect. The Canon Tools are digital artefacts designed to support the teaching and learning of the history of technical theatre. The tools include models, visualisations, recordings, drawings, designs, templates, and so on. The tools have been developed by the Canon team – most of whom are highly experienced educators – because they are a valuable part of their teaching. In many cases,

the tools are directly linked to the project's fourth output, the Canon Teaching Methodologies, which give guidance on how the tools can be used as part of a course or structured learning. Most of the tools can also be used for independent study, so whether as a student, a teacher, a professional, a researcher or a curious member of the public, the tools may be a helpful – perhaps even inspiring – way to engage with the history of technical theatre.

The Canon Teaching Methodologies form a kind of 'cookbook' for teaching and learning about the history of technical theatre. Each 'recipe' in the cookbook describes a learning activity. Some methodologies are specific to a particular field, such as architecture or lighting, while others can be used to learn about any aspect of technical theatre. Each methodology describes the process, the resources needed and the preparation required, as well as indicating the type of student it is intended for, the kind of learning process it is, and how long it will take. They also offer tips and examples, based on the experience of the members of the project. While the methodologies are primarily designed as a guide and inspiration to teachers, many of them are suitable for 'independent study' by an individual professional, researcher or member of the public. All of them are based on a belief that technical theatre is best understood and learnt about in practical, active ways, and many describe learning through making, performing and game-play.

The final project output is a network of organisations and professionals – teachers, researchers, curators, archivists, holders of private collections – with an interest in the history of technical theatre. The network serves several purposes. One of its goals is to connect educational institutions with cultural organisations and professionals to share knowledge beyond the traditional teaching approaches at universities and higher education institutions, and to give students and teachers a more international perspective. Another goal is to connect professionals and institutions managing historical collections, archives, databases and other related resources, to share their knowledge. The network has been created through in-person meetings and on-site visits to heritage organisations during the project, and also through online and offline events (symposia, conferences) with a wide range of professional audiences.

As well as a core team of over twenty staff from the partner organisations, the project involved over seventy students, studying a diverse range of courses in technical theatre, design and architecture. The project was largely managed through online meetings, but at key points through its three-and-a-half-year duration, in-person meetings took place in Belgium, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Spain, Italy and Germany. Some meetings involved just the staff, for project planning and development, as well as visits to sites of historic theatre interest. Meetings with students similarly included visits, in addition to sessions where students researched specific topics to help develop the content for the outputs. The project was significantly disrupted by COVID, resulting in a six-month project extension beyond the originally planned three years, and a bunching of many of the meetings in the final six months, but the overall aims were achieved.

In addition to the outputs themselves, the project has produced several important findings. Firstly, the challenge regarding the preservation of our technical theatre heritage, in terms of collections of artefacts and archives, is the same across Europe. Many collections are in private hands, and so vulnerable in the longer term. Others are 'hidden' amongst more general cultural or technological collections. All require specialist knowledge to curate and communicate – specialist knowledge that is often not available even in dedicated theatre museums. Equally, what is relatively well-known in one country or subject area is unknown in others.

Secondly, and more optimistically, there is great benefit in leveraging the work that has already been done by others. By building on existing databases and resources, the canonbase does not replicate what is already there, but helps to signpost to it, and enable it to be used in conjunction with additional material to produce new insights into our theatrical past. Shared, open standards for data and Creative Commons licencing are key to this cooperative approach.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, there is a great potential in bringing together an international, multi-disciplinary team. Even for those nominally studying the same field, there is much to be gained from sharing and exchange with those from other regions or disciplinary perspectives. Importantly, this includes the work with students, who engaged with the project as partners and researchers. Treating students as equal co-producers

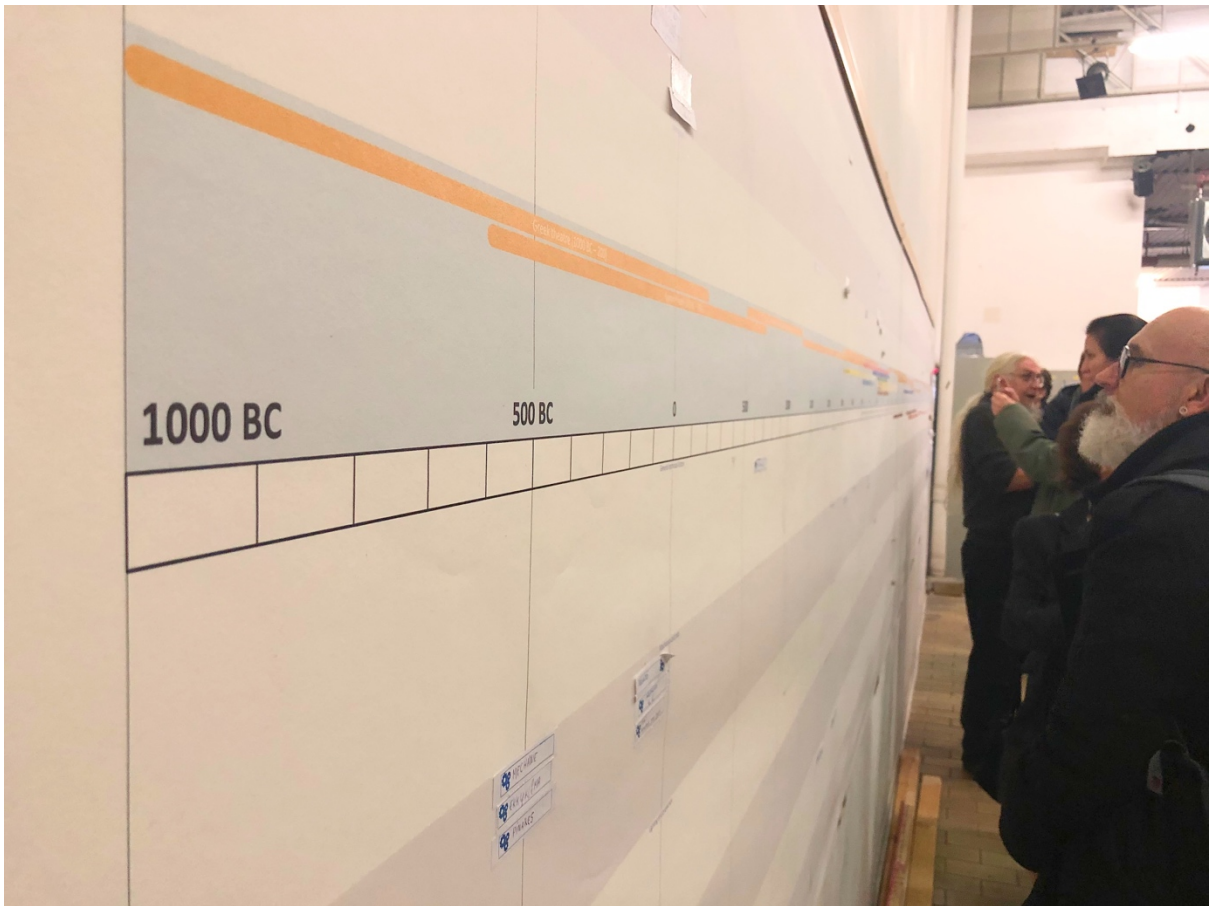
(albeit with less experience and initial knowledge) both maximised their learning, and importantly ensured they made genuinely useful contributions to the project outcomes. Everyone involved took on the roles of teacher, researcher and student at different times. Not only does this collaborative and democratic way of working produce the best results, it is a model for a form of ethical practice that has great value not only in the field of education, but also in the professional context and beyond.

Through its outputs, and by developing innovative working methods, the CANON project is not only providing resources to invigorate teaching and research into the often-marginalised history of technical theatre, but offers a bold vision of a transnational, inter-institutional and cross-disciplinary model of research and learning.

Project website: canon-timeline.eu
Database, and all project outputs: canonbase.eu

Photos:

1. An early, paper version of the timeline (Brussels, 2019).
2. Students creating a map of Europe, showing where they come from with a 'postcard' of a significant fact or story about technical theatre history from their home city or region (Stockholm, 2022).
3. Visit to the *Technisches Kabinett der Oper Leipzig* (technical museum of the Leipzig Opera House, 2022).
4. Low-voltage working model of a salt-water dimmer, made by following one of the Canon teaching methodologies.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