

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rachel Clements

doi:[10.1017/S0266464X21000312](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X21000312)

Willmar Sauter

Aesthetics of Presence: Philosophical and Practical Reconsiderations

Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021. 206 p. £61.99.
ISBN: 978-1-5275-6206-6.

Anglophone scholarship in theatre/performance studies does not warm easily to the concept of 'aesthetics'. To make publication in English possible, Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004) had for its main title to be rebranded as *The Transformative Power of Performance*, a rendering which also loses 'performativity' as an aesthetic phenomenon separate from the materiality of the performance. The German interest in aesthetics tracks back to Enlightenment thinkers who posed the question, 'How do I respond to a work of art?' Fischer-Lichte responded to postmodern performance art and to a multiplicity of other events which collapse the actor-audience relationship in an attempt to define a new quality of artistic experience. Hans-Thies Lehmann's quest for 'postdramatic' theatre was driven by a similar search for a quality of experience that transcends rationalism. Anglophone scholarship tends to be much more squeamish in describing artistic experiences that are not simultaneously beneficial moral experiences, even though, in practice, judgements are constantly made on the aesthetic basis that the performance somehow 'worked', the actors were 'in the moment', they had 'presence' or what Joseph Roach has called 'It'.

Willmar Sauter is best known to anglophone scholars for his work on the 'performance event', and his concern with eventness has led him on to this very personal quest to try to understand what the thing called 'presence' might be. Fischer-Lichte and Lehmann both played by the academic rules in describing a world of practice out there in the world, constructing where necessary a 'one' or a 'we' or 'the audience' as the subject of aesthetic experience. In a necessarily idiosyncratic book, Sauter bites the bullet and interrogates his own experience of 'presence'. From the jumping-off point of a long-retained youthful experience of a stage silence created by actors in London's Old Vic (in *John Gabriel Borkmann*), he weaves together other experiences that for him had the same quality: watching an autobiographical film installation about suicide, mists clearing round a mountain in Lapland, gazing at a beautifully designed coat that

he knows to be 5,000 years old. Sauter also turns his gaze outward to groups where he has been a participant, following an audio play in a multi-ethnic Stockholm suburb, or a festive re-enactment of *Ulysses* on the streets of Dublin.

The argument is grounded in a body of theory from the German Enlightenment addressing sensory cognition, and in an investigation of 'play' sparked by Huizinga. The quest always is for the circular relationship that joins 'A' (the performer) to 'B' (the beholder), and in many ways the book is more a meditation upon this problem than an argument. The book circles as the phenomenon circles. The style is always clear and engaging and brings to the fore the question: what does this thing that we loosely call 'theatre' do to us (and us to it) to make us feel that life is somehow more worth living? As posed in this book, the question does not seem self-indulgent, but rather a valuable exercise in self-interrogation.

DAVID WILES

doi:[10.1017/S0266464X21000324](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X21000324)

Aylwyn Walsh

Prison Cultures: Performance, Resistance, Desire

Bristol: Intellect, 2019. 300 p. £85.00.
ISBN 978-1-7893-8105-4.

The jacket description of *Prison Cultures* describes the text as 'the first systematic examination of women in prison and performances in and of the institution', and Walsh's book doesn't disappoint. The practice and research of prison theatre and performance, done well, present a constant challenge; it is a practice that demands an intellectual rigour and clarity of thought. Prison theatre work focuses the mind of the curious practitioner on the (mis)representations of imprisonment which form a part of popular culture, provoking reflection on their role and function. *Prison Cultures* engages with these arguments and does something more, in that it offers up the idea of performance as a mode of enquiry through which to explore the debates.

Prison Cultures provides an incredibly rich, detailed, and complex performance analysis of women's prisons and imprisonment, and develops an argument for performance as a tool for resistance in carceral settings. The book critically applies performance theory to women's prisons, and considers women's experience of imprisonment through a

performative lens. Informed throughout by feminist criminology, Walsh draws on an extensive interdisciplinary research base and personal experience to identify the structural and ethical weaknesses of the logic models that dominate the existing discourses of women, crime, and imprisonment.

The reader should be aware that this is much more than a book about prison theatre and performance, being equally concerned with prison *as* performance. It achieves this by drawing on an impressively broad range of theory from outside the world of theatre and performance, and Walsh eruditely identifies the critical intersections between feminist criminology and performance studies, and employs them to great effect. While key elements of the book are concerned with theatre practice, focusing on the work of Clean Break, Geese Theatre Company, and Open Clasp, other chapters are concerned with the representation of women in prison in film and television (*Orange is the New Black* features prominently throughout), offering insights into how these representations may impact on the public's understanding of the lives of imprisoned women.

Informed by her own experiences as a practitioner, the applied theatre chapter was of particular appeal to me, as it offered new perspectives on the positioning of the work within carceral settings. Walsh raises important (and often avoided) questions about the claims made by prison theatre practitioners about their work, and suggests a closer interrogation of the frames of reference of the practice would be of value. I was heartened to read something that shifts the prison theatre discourse in new directions, shunning the typical arguments around efficacy and impact in favour of striking new ground. The book is an ideal source for researchers interested in theatre and performance in the criminal justice system, and for those with a keen interest in penology, cultural and feminist criminology. The provocations presented to the applied theatre in the criminal justice sector should also serve to make this a valuable resource to those studying, and practising, prison theatre.

SIMON RUDING

essays, there are three edited discussions with theatre and arts practitioners Vicky Featherstone in the UK, George Sachinis in Greece, and David Schwartz in Romania. The editors begin and end the collection with a short introduction and brief conclusion but they are present throughout offering, in addition to an introduction to each of the five sections of the book, short editors' notes at the end of each chapter with ideas for further reading and investigation.

The essays cover a wide range of artistic practices but, more significantly, a wealth of locations that are often not available to anglophone readers. Historical examples from post-revolutionary Russia sit alongside contemporary practices from Greece, Malta, India, and Germany, for example, as well as the UK. The volume has emerged from a conference organized by an international collaboration between Malta's Department of Theatre Studies and New Tides Platform, based in the UK, and the inevitable diversity of conference proceedings is reflected in the book. This can be a little frustrating because the promise of redefinition of community in relation to theatre remains deferred, not least due to the extremely broad definitions of community. Nevertheless, the editors make the case for the importance of multiple voices in their introduction and argue for redefinition being 'part of an ongoing critical process rather than a renewed attempt to establish rock-solid meanings'.

Contextualizing their efforts within challenges to theatre forms and institutions, redefined audience/performer relationships, and shifting questions of spectatorship, their claim for the facilitation of possible new relationships between theatre and communities is closer to what this book achieves. It will be of value to scholars of contemporary theatre who wish to expand their repertoire of practices and locations in which a diversity of projects are taking place. It opens out a range of readings of community in relation to theatre and performs a valuable contribution to thinking about the complexities of theatre in relation to the communities within which it exists. It also encourages the reader to think about the communities that theatre, and creativity more generally, can build.

ALISON JEFFERS

doi:10.1017/S0266464X21000336

Marco Galea and Szabolcs Musca, eds.

Redefining Theatre Communities: International Perspectives on Community-Conscious Theatre-Making

Intellect: Bristol and Chicago, 2019. 262 p. £76.00.
ISBN: 978-1-7893-8076-7.

Editors Marco Galea and Szabolcs Musca have gathered together an impressively expansive and international body of essays to create this volume. The authors come from both academic and professional arts backgrounds and, in addition to their twelve

doi:10.1017/S0266464X21000348

Nicholas Ridout

Scenes from Bourgeois Life

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020.
224 p. \$70.00
ISBN: 978-0-472-13200-3.

Nicholas Ridout's latest book makes a rich and important contribution to the study of theatre spectatorship. A key premise for the arguments pursued here is that the production of the bourgeois subject as a disinterested and 'reasonable' observer