

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Alison Jeffers

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Tom Stern

Philosophy and Theatre: an Introduction

London: Routledge, 2014. 209 p. £19.99.

ISBN: 978-0-415-60451-2.

Performance Philosophy is emerging as an increasingly popular interdisciplinary field of thought and practice, but Stern's stance implies opposition to this. He states that though such exchanges prompt 'new conceptual tools, new terminology, new distinctions, and indeed new questions of their own', it is worth returning to the philosophical musings of key thinkers (Plato, Aristotle, Schiller, Rousseau) who have shaped our thinking about the social and cultural value of text-based theatre.

Stern's definition of 'theatre' and his choice of case studies are, he admits, narrow: 'an artistic event that takes place in a particular location, with mutually aware performers and spectators engaged in some kind of play'. While Stern briefly acknowledges applied theatre, street theatre, and live art, these are in passing; they 'may be studied under the broad, umbrella term of "Performance Studies"'. Nevertheless, his focus on Greek tragedy (*Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Antigone*), Shakespearean tragedy (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*), Chekhov (*Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya*), and Brecht support intentions to reconsider how *mimesis* and *catharsis* can be theorized.

Part One, 'From the World to the Stage', considers a paradox of theatrical performance (that theatrical representations contain 'truth') through a consideration of Plato's *mimesis*. Having established that 'theatre audiences do not leave with any obvious new skill or ability', Stern turns his attention to the history play. Rehearsing arguments that theatre scholars will be familiar with, *Julius Caesar* is used to offer a reading of the play through the lens of Lukács: 'In drama, historical authenticity means the inner historical truth of the collision.'

If theatrical representations contain no 'truth'—historical or absolute—then perhaps theatre projects something on to audiences. This is the question posed in Part Two, 'From the Stage to the World', which encompasses three complex and productively messy concepts: theatre as site of moral education; as *catharsis*; as political action. Stern's chapter on *catharsis* in *Uncle Vanya* offers the most compelling argument for further cross-disciplinary collaboration between theatre and philosophy. Denial, tragic pleasure, and purging

are raised as critical points of focus that extend beyond the immediate theatrical experience and offer potential ways through which to consider performance affect in historical contexts. The final chapter—on Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children: a Play for Gaza*—introduces the first female playwright referenced, leading into a final consideration of Brecht's political theatre as theoretical space rather than theatrical practice.

Stern offers an overview of key Western philosophical terms and possible intersections with what we might consider a Western theatrical canon: a good starting point for those first encountering philosophical terminology.

CHARLOTTE BELL

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Fiona Wilkie

Performance, Transport, and Mobility: Making Passage

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 211 p.

£55.00.

ISBN: 978-0-230-34315-3.

This thoroughly enjoyable volume sets out to present a case for an interface between theatre and performance studies and the developing, interdisciplinary field of mobility studies. Perhaps not surprisingly, Wilkie's starting point is the now voluminous literature on walking in/as performance—an area to which she dedicates her first main chapter, 'Pedestrian Travel'. Offering a useful overview of recent developments in walking practice, particularly within the UK, Wilkie goes on to gently query the assumption that walking is necessarily a more human or more ecologically minded mode of transportation, just because of its slow pace and small 'footprint'. As she notes, we need to be careful not to romanticize walking; while often a necessity for the global poor, in the West it can also be positioned as a luxury enjoyed by the relatively privileged, who may have transported themselves to their starting points by other means entirely.

Wilkie goes on to offer four further chapters, dealing respectively with rail travel, road travel, boat travel, and air travel. This does not mean she is always concerned with performances that actually travel: many of her examples are plays and performances created for theatre spaces. The rail chapter, for example, looks in detail at Peter Terson's 1966 documentary play *The Knotty*, and at David Greig's *Europe* (1994), set in a dilapi-

dated railway station. The Builders Association's multi-media theatre piece *Jet Lag* (1998–2010) is considered at length in the boat and air travel chapters, since it is concerned with both.

Even in her discussions of work created beyond the theatre space, Wilkie's attention to the specifics of mobility often remains more conceptual than literal: the road chapter, for instance, includes a consideration of Graeme Miller's sound installation *Linked* (2003), an experience that is all about a motorway, but which must necessarily be experienced on foot. In the boat chapter, a detailed examination of Lone Twin's *Boat Project* (2012) considers the dialogic processes by which a new sailing boat was constructed through donations of wood, but the mobile adventures of the completed boat are not explored.

In short, Wilkie's book is concerned more with the ways in which we conceptualize and perform ideas of mobility than with mobility in performance *per se*. It is informed by a wide variety of theoretical sources, and offers an eclectic range of examples, which are discussed with clarity and vigour. Wilkie's writing is never less than engaging. If I have a criticism, it is simply that the examples of works chosen for discussion sometimes seem a little arbitrary, and I found myself asking why other (to my mind obvious) alternatives had not been chosen. There is also a tendency for the examples to be quite recent, often Anglocentric ones – conditioned by Wilkie's own immediate experiences while writing the book. I would therefore have some concern as to how quickly the text will date, and indeed, how far it can travel.

STEPHEN BOTTOMS

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Clark Lunberry

Sites of Performance: Of Time and Memory

London: Anthem Press, 2014. 206 p. £60.00.

ISBN: 978-1-78308-287-2.

Lunberry's book is a meditation on how time as concept and as bodily experience constitutes theatrical space. In the first section, he reflects on decay and deterioration in Beckett and Proust, the role of stagehands in sustaining the tragedy of Deborah Warner's 2003 Broadway production of *Medea*, and the anti-theatricality of *Coriolanus* and Artaud (suggested by their rejection of prompters). According to Lunberry, by stripping away the trappings of theatre Beckett forces us out of the theatre building into alternative spaces, to which Lunberry turns in the second section of his book.

Here he muses on Artaud's writing as a kind of performance, the simultaneous inscription and erasure of language in Ann Hamilton's installation art, the persistent return of language in the

apparently wordless experiments of James Turrell and John Cage, and the interplay of disappearance and memory in two performances (one aborted, one accomplished) of the music of Morton Feldman.

Many of Lunberry's observations about theatrical space, time, and memory have been made more convincingly elsewhere by the likes of Marvin Carlson, Peggy Phelan, Alice Rayner, Nicholas Ridout, and Rebecca Schneider, none of whom appears in Lunberry's alarmingly scant bibliography. Many of his observations about Beckett, Proust, and Cage have been made more convincingly elsewhere by Herbert Blau, Lunberry's late teacher, who does feature prominently in the pages of this book (and to whom Lunberry openly acknowledges a debt).

Lunberry is at his best when analyzing his own experiences of and reactions to performance events, in particular the abandoned 1996 performance of Morton Feldman's six-hour *String Quartet II* (1983). His self-critique is honest, astute, and at times amusing. But his failure to fuse his lyrical meditations with rigorous argumentation and to engage meaningfully with relevant scholarship makes his book of limited interest (or use) to those working in theatre and performance studies. Perhaps surprisingly, the book will likely be of more interest to those in literary studies who have yet to consider the various sites in which performance might take place.

DAVID CALDER

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Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris

**A Good Night Out for the Girls:
Popular Feminisms in Contemporary Theatre
and Performance**

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 228 p.

£18.99.

ISBN: 978-113-751820-0.

This is an entertaining and thought-provoking book that sets out to evaluate a heady mixture of theatre and performance made for, and consumed by, audiences not frequently appreciated perhaps by academic critics. In celebration of the culture of 'all-girl' nights out to the theatre – which of course are not just the privilege of the over-sixties – the book stretches to analyses of burlesque and new comedy by women, as well as the more commercial West End blockbuster on tour.

With its concern for 'popular-feminist representations', Aston and Harris's study moves from *Calendar Girls*, the Chippendales' *Ultimate Girls Night Out* and *Mamma Mia*, to Nic Green's *Trilogy* and Marisa Carnesky's *Ghost Train*, creating a veritable *mélange* of mainstream and non-commercial work for critical analysis. The juxtaposition of