

# 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-