

# NTQ Book Reviews

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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

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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