

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rachel Clements

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Seda Ilter

Mediatized Dramaturgy: The Evolution of Plays in the Media Age

London: Methuen Drama, 2021. 240 p. £85.
ISBN: 978-1-350-03115-9.

During coronavirus lockdowns, theatre-makers have been forced to get to grips with the internet as a platform for performance, prompting new conversations about theatre's relationship with digital media. In this context, Seda Ilter's new book – mostly written before the pandemic – reads as strikingly prescient. *Mediatized Dramaturgy* asks how plays have responded to the expansion of digital media since the 1990s. It's a welcome addition to existing scholarship on theatre and mediatization, which has tended to focus on performance and neglect the play-text. Ilter also makes a valuable move beyond thinking about mediatization in terms of content, arguing that we must pay as much attention to the mode of representation as to the themes represented.

Each of the chapters addresses an individual aspect of mediatized dramaturgy, considering elements such as language, characterization, and plot structure. Ilter examines a range of texts, adopting a refreshingly open definition of what constitutes a play. Practitioners whose work is explored include playwrights like Simon Stephens, Martin Crimp, and Caryl Churchill, as well as such genre-defying theatre-makers as Christopher Brett Bailey and John Jesurun. However, the writers discussed are mostly white, suggesting that there is further work to be done exploring how these mediatized forms intersect with Global Majority perspectives.

Ilter's analysis throughout is driven by a political interest in what plays can do in the contemporary world. She not only traces how playwrights have reflected aspects of our mediatized reality, but also assesses the critical efficacy of these efforts, using Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* and Jacques Rancière's work on dissensus and the distribution of the sensible as key theoretical reference points. Ultimately, Ilter favours 'no-longer-dramatic' texts, arguing that this mode creates openings for critical rethinking.

While the resistance that such plays offer to neoliberal capitalism is perhaps somewhat overstated, *Mediatized Dramaturgy* remains an engaging discussion of a still relatively nascent subset of

contemporary playwriting. The book is at its best in the passages of detailed analysis of specific plays. One of Ilter's most useful critical interventions is her introduction of the term 'mediaturgical plays' to refer to play-texts written through digital media technologies such as Twitter, using the fascinating case study of David Greig's *Yes/No Plays*.

In some ways, this book arrived just before its time. Several more recent plays – such as Jasmine Lee-Jones's *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* and the work of Javaad Alipoor, along with various shows created online during the pandemic – speak to Ilter's analysis, opening up further avenues to pursue in future.

CATHERINE LOVE

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Caoimhe McAvinchey

Applied Theatre: Women and the Criminal Justice System

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2020.
247 p. £75.00.
ISBN: 978-1-4742-6255-2.

Research addressing theatre and the criminal justice system has historically focused primarily on performance practice with male prisoners, as they statistically represent a large proportion of prison populations. This has led to women within the criminal justice system sometimes being overlooked and treated as 'an even more invisible population'. However, this addition to the Methuen Applied Theatre series offers some counterbalance, and is an informative and engaging critical enquiry into applied theatre practice with women affected by the criminal justice system.

The first part of this book is McAvinchey's introduction to the text and the field itself. She contextualizes women and the criminal justice system, and prison theatre, with clarity. McAvinchey highlights that women make up just '6.9 per cent of global prison population', though, as other contributors also note, this population has been growing. This growth appears to relate to stricter public policies for women, rather than a change in criminal behaviour. She acknowledges the context that this field of work is being delivered in, and outlines that gendered experiences need to be considered in the delivery and analysis of this practice. McAvinchey highlights that the varieties of theatre practice included in this book are all examples of sustained

projects, rather than one-off projects, and are examples of work with limited previous documentation in order to 'extend the frames of reference'.

The main body of this book is comprised of twelve chapters, authored by a range of contributors, all experts in their fields of work. The chapters include a range of applied theatre case studies, interviews, and essays, offering an insight into a breadth of practice in the sector. The range of contributors covers an international scope, including the USA, UK, Australia, and South Africa. Their various theatre programmes range from weekly drama-based workshops to film and singing projects, to radio plays and more. And although each is unique in its specific context, process, and product, there is a sense of connection between them. The contributors each demonstrate an awareness of the intricate complexities of practice in this environment and offer in-depth critical analysis of the socio-political framework in which they are working, particularly in relation to gendered experiences.

Extracts of performance texts are interspersed through the chapters, and these are a welcome addition. They come from a range of Clean Break's work, and have all been written by women who have experience of the criminal justice sector. McAvinchey states that she included these as she was 'aware that the voices of the subjects of this book' are 'carefully mediated' by others. Along with various quotes by the participants interspersed within the chapters, the performance texts offer a valuable reminder of their voices, and allow the experiences of both facilitators and prisoners to sit at the heart of the book.

This book, then, will be of interest to applied theatre researchers and practitioners, students interested in theatre in the criminal justice sector, and those with interest in feminist studies, particularly feminist criminology. The reader can anticipate not only an engaging and accessible read but one containing honest and insightful reflections on new understandings which have unfolded through the theatre practice. *Women and the Criminal Justice System* provides a rich and thorough analysis of theatre work which negotiates ethical and pragmatic issues in order to strive to meet the needs of its participants, while encouraging audiences both within and out of the prison walls to consider the challenges of women in the criminal justice system.

RACHEL MCMURRAY

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Philip Auslander

In Concert: Performing Musical Persona

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021.
294p. £36. ISBN: 978-0-472-05471-8.

Ten years ago it was possible to argue that one area of performance – perhaps the most visible, and certainly by far the most financially successful – had

been largely ignored by academics. Popular music performance was and is a major part of the music industry; it provides a secure income stream, at a time when the industry has gone through a profound restructuring; it is responsible for the largest and most visible manifestations of popular music culture (in 2019, the annual Glastonbury festival had a capacity of 210,000, and every ticket was sold). However, and perhaps because the form fell between disciplinary boundaries, the performances themselves did not receive much in the way of academic study. Performance theorists were wary about engaging with music, music scholars' analyses of performance tended to be focused on the interpretation of scores, and sociologists were considerably happier dealing with the social structures surrounding the event than they were with any activity on stage. Over the past few years, however, this has changed. Now we have histories of live performance (Frith *et al.*, 2013–21), volumes on performance venues (Edgar, 2015; Kronenburg, 2019), synoptic studies of live performance (Anderton and Pisfil, 2021), and volumes on the future of the form (Masierska *et al.*, 2020). Philip Auslander's new monograph *In Concert*, therefore, arrives at a time when the field of live popular music studies is far more extensively populated than it used to be.

In Concert stands as the summation of a line of enquiry that has occupied Auslander for the past twenty years (the first chapter, 'Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto', dates from 2004). Auslander is primarily interested in the evolution of performance personae in popular music. As he notes in the introduction, this is a complex business, combining a variety of readings inflected by a variety of different frames: the musician and their history, the reading of gesture in performance, the influence of technology within the event, the codes that form habitual behaviours associated with genre, and the role of the audience in both creating and evaluating the artist's persona. Given this complexity, there is no one way to establish the relation between the performed self, the creation of the music, and the reception of both persona and music. The elements are so intermingled, in fact, that it makes no sense to think of the persona as a vessel for the music the artist creates. Rather, the only way to give a clear sense of the way that persona operates in performance is to treat it as composed of all of the elements of that performance – the physical relation between the artist and the audience, the music played, the instruments on which it is played, the space within which the event takes place, and so on.

Auslander argues, I think convincingly, that this opens up a range of potential personae that are, by their very nature, contingent. Even what seem to be the most prescriptive templates (genre, for example) are in practice infinitely malleable. The artist always has the freedom to co-opt, subvert, or inflect even the narrowest of performance codes