

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rachel Clements

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Dorota Sajewska, trans. Simon Wloch

Necroperformance: Cultural Reconstructions of the War Body

Zurich and Warsaw: Diaphanes and Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, 2019. 461 p. £38.00. ISBN: 978-3-03580-191-0.

In this deftly ambitious book, which had an enormous impact on theatre and performance studies in Poland after it was first published in 2016, Dorota Sajewska introduces a new term to the field, *necro-performance*, to demonstrate the 'active influence of the dead on the living'. This multidirectional term twists back to show how human remains, archival objects, and 'things' reveal what has been written out of or marginalized by historical discourse. Dead bodies perform and their performances constellate in ways that historical biography obfuscates. To demonstrate this, Sajewska (a dramaturg as well as a scholar) opens the book with a glance through Rosa Luxemburg's recently recovered herbarium, thus setting the stage for a myriad of cultural performances enacted by the Polish-German communist's disfigured corpse that continue to reverberate today.

Defying the patriarchal and institutional violence of the archive, Sajewska aims to reveal the absences or invisibility of the First World War in Polish visual and performance cultures. This war, Sajewska argues, has been reduced to a 'romantic uhlan skirmish' and the primary focus has been on Poland's independence in 1918 at its conclusion rather than on the mechanization of state violence that transformed culture and politics forever. Refreshingly, Sajewska undercuts the nation as the ultimate frame of her analysis. We see how any effort to spread Polish cultural memory beyond stable and known categories moves us around the globe. Indeed, those interested in German and political theatre histories will find evocative new readings of Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, Frank Castorf, and the Berlin Volksbühne; and gender studies scholars will be richly rewarded by Sajewska's analysis of the cross-gendered performance of women soldiers and histories of drag in frontline theatres and POW camps.

Foregrounding the First World War, Sajewska produces an original reading of the Polish theatre canon (Kantor, Grotowski, Grzegorzewski), including Stanisław Wyspiański, who – although he died in 1907 – becomes one of her key interlocutors with the twentieth century. Sajewska contends that the

Great War 'engendered new means of recording and memory', and so, while theatre is a key paradigm (as medium and methodology), her examples extend to film and photography as well as plastic and visual arts. The book is in dialogue with Grzegorz Niziołek's *Polski teatr Zagłady (Polish Theatre of the Holocaust)*, also translated into English in 2019, which conceptualized postwar Polish theatre as the site of the return of the repressed in relation to the Holocaust. Sajewska critiques universalizing tendencies in Western memory studies, as well as the dominance of the Second World War in theatre histories and cultural studies. And even while she opens necroperformance up to global norms of recognition, she warns against cultural appropriation that accelerates the forms of amnesia, displacement, or projection that Niziołek identifies.

The epilogue, 'Theory as Remains', can be read as an autonomous text for scholars interested in performance documentation and deserves to be placed on reading lists beside Peggy Phelan, Diana Taylor, and Rebecca Schneider. In this groundbreaking study, Sajewska deploys *necro* to elide many of the eradicable binaries in conceptual frameworks that distinguish the archive from remains and to blur the boundary between 'the one who studies and the thing being studied'.

BRYCE LEASE

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Alison Child

Tell Me I'm Forgiven: The Story of Forgotten Stars Gwen Farrar and Norah Blaney

Wales: Tollington Press, 2019. 335 p. £11.99. ISBN: 978-1-90934-715-1.

Alison Child's study of two of the most prolific performers on the musical comedy, revue, and cabaret scene in 1920s London, is rich in detail. Refreshingly unencumbered by theory, it is a work of dedication, set on uncovering the history of Farrar and Blaney, too often mentioned only in passing in histories of twentieth-century theatre and performance.

Two women from radically different classes, one who had to work and the other who had no real economic need to, Child weaves together both the disconnects and the commonalities of Farrar and Blaney's professional and personal relationship over almost thirty years. Once inseparable onstage and off, Blaney married a number of times, and Farrar spent her latter days ensconced, somewhat disastrously,