

The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays

Edited by Leanne Keyes, Lindsey Mantoan, and Angela Farr Schiller. London: Methuen Drama, 2021; pp. xi + 444. \$100 cloth, \$34.95 paper, \$31.45 e-book.

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The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays presents the aesthetic, philosophical, and practice-based dimensions of being transgender and making theatre in the twenty-first century. It features eight new plays by trans playwrights, each with its own critical introduction by scholars and critics (not all of whom are trans). This anthology is special: a book of trans plays about trans life as it is actually, materially lived in time and space. It does not lump together trans identity and performance under the abstract figure “queer,” where “inclusion” means including one trans character in a compilation of plays by cisgender gay and lesbian playwrights. Instead, this collection treats the minutiae of transgender life and experience (love, sex, trauma, joy, friendship, exile, spirituality, family, boredom, etc.) in all their genres as capacious modes of theatrical capacity—from the ordinary to the fantastic, from the mundane to the revolutionary, and from childhood to old age. To revise the question of “what ‘is’ and ‘isn’t’ a trans play,” the editors remind us, “The right question is: do trans people recognize themselves in the art?” (1). They reject the assumed assertion that cis people can tell trans stories as they wish, all the while romanticizing or parodying trans characters in mainstream theatres. And they critique “trans stories” (2) written by cis writers and performed by cis actors who treat gender as a frivolous theatrical costume or represent trans life as inherently tragic.

There is, of course, nothing new about cis people’s demeaning fascinations with trans people in popular forms of entertainment. The theatre industry—both the performances it propagates in mainstream press and the discipline, curriculum, history, conservatory training, and critical methods we are taught in academia—has featured demeaning abstractions of trans life for centuries. In response to tragic and idealistic portrayals of trans characters onstage, the editors and contributors of this book offer in-depth explorations of the deeply material and historical relationship between trans people and their communities and the art of theatre and performance. This is not only a call for more authentic portrayals of trans people under the superficial guise of “representation,” but an emphasis on the importance of a material redistribution of resources to trans theatre artists. These plays offer shared performance space for understanding and actualizing practices of reading and listening to trans experience. As such, they create new possibilities for trans relationality, theatricality, and beauty across differences of race, religion, culture, and gender.

Plays by MJ Kaufman, Mashuq Mushtaq Deen, and j. chavez in Part 1, “Disembodied Articulations,” use puppetry to physicalize stories and punctuate movement and emotion. These writers underscore how trans understandings of the body can simultaneously encompass human skin and other-than-human landscapes or inanimate interiors. Although the editors label puppet theatre

“disembodied articulations,” for the scholars and artists who introduce these plays there is nothing more embodied than a puppet’s articulations. I agree with them. It is stunning how viscerally puppets adorn trans affective states of mind and encounters with the natural world—the stars, mountains, a forest’s oral histories—that no human body could ever replicate. In Part 2, “Fraught Spaces,” Raphaël Amahl Khouri and Sharifa Yasmin elaborate on connections between trans people and the histories of the geographical locations they inhabit, as well as the borders they must cross for reasons of safety or exile. Khouri introduces us to trans Muslim, Southwest Asian, and North African characters in Sweden, Amman, and New Jersey, while Yasmin situates an Arab trans woman in rural South Carolina. These plays dramatize the weight of setting, stagecraft, and geopolitics on the lives of trans people in what director, actor, and writer Melory Mirashrafi calls “the revolutionary mundane” of trans docudrama (183). The third and final part, “Familiar/Familial,” features a captivating trio: Leanna Keyes, Ty Defoe, and Azure D. Osborne-Lee. Here, Keyes’s prediction about an apocalyptic future where reproductive health care is illegal (a reality that has been eerily actualized in our present) meets the immediacy of Defoe’s two-spirit Ojibwe family on an Indigenous reservation in Anishinaabe territory and Osborne-Lee’s Black trans family drama in a small city amid the American South.

Taken together, this collection offers a stimulating guide to reimagining the history, presence, and future of trans lives when actualized by theatrical means. In fact, all the plays share an interest in temporality. Black time, Indigenous time, musical time, spiritual time, apocalyptic time, lost time, traumatic time, revolutionary time, “crooked” or nonlinear time, and transitional time all feature here. We travel from the past to the present, in any place and any time, to an exact and vivid future, and from all times at once to time immemorial. The book falls in line with recent movements exploring alternative forms of trans perspectives on the theatre across time. It arrives at a timely moment, one in which the living and breathing relations between trans theatre artists and institutions that safeguard the art they love in inaccessible spaces of cisgender naturalism, popular sentimentalism, bourgeois respectability, and white supremacy are under scrutiny. The Trans March on Broadway against the transphobic erasure of trans people in the theatre industry on September 6, 2021, led by Black trans actress Sis, is a case in point. What is made strikingly clear in the critical introductions to the plays is the overwhelming minority, if not direct absence, of trans knowledge and expertise in many of the bibliographies and the field of theatre and performance studies more broadly. We need trans playwrights, designers, actors, and directors, certainly; and we need trans scholars, historians, and philosophers of the theatre too.

At the end of the Introduction, the editors make a plea for a “growing trans ecosystem” in our ever-changing, turbulent present of theatre and performance (6). In keeping with their claim to a physical environment in which trans theatre can flourish, let theatre’s trans ecology be loved and thriving, without police, transphobic discrimination, or mainstream sentimentalism. Let it be ugly, beautiful, scary, warming, and thrilling, just as it always was throughout theatre history—even if only in underground theatres like basements, rehearsal halls, the streets, brothels, nightclubs, and homes—and is now on the mainstage. Trans theatre artists are writing breathtaking plays. With this anthology’s movement from the palms of your

hands to your classrooms and your desks, will you, theatre professor, critic, or artistic director, support their work?

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Broadway Goes to War: American Theater during World War II

By Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2021; pp. x + 290, 11 illustrations. \$35.00 cloth, \$35 e-book.

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Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry's last collaboration took on Hollywood at war, examining some of the ways in which film shaped Americans' understanding of World War II. Their current book responds to that most Hollywood of desires, the want of a sequel, and it does not disappoint. In *Broadway Goes to War: American Theater during World War II*, McLaughlin and Parry focus on the theatre's response to the Second World War by suggesting that Broadway "presented a less tidy but more complex view of the war than any other popular-culture medium" (22). McLaughlin and Parry argue that this complexity exposes the myth of wartime consensus. "This is not to say that patriotic pulling together, personal and economic sacrifice, did not happen," they write, "but that this love of country and support for the war effort were carried on side by side with questions, concerns, criticisms, and fear" (132). Whereas the majority of plays produced during the period focused on America and its allies—"we have found no plays that support fascism," the authors assure readers—New York theatre did not shy away from the domestic difficulties exposed by the war (44). *Broadway Goes to War* reveals just how the war enabled playwrights and practitioners to produce vibrant, timely theatre that offered audiences an unvarnished, nuanced, and at times unpleasant look at the social and cultural challenges facing midcentury America.

Organized by wartime phases rather than by themes, *Broadway Goes to War* takes readers from prewar tensions, through overseas combat operations and troubles on the home front, and finally to the beginning of a postwar world. To prepare their case, McLaughlin and Parry identified and studied nearly two hundred plays with a thematic connection to the war, and they stay true to their topical commitment throughout by examining everything from popular hits like *On the Town* (1944) to the expressionist antiwar musical *Johnny Johnson* (1936). The result is a comprehensive survey of New York productions between 1933 and 1946 that were concerned directly with the Second World War. "Taken together," McLaughlin and Parry argue, these plays "provide a sense of the rich and difficult experience of living in the United States during the war years" (180). *Broadway Goes to War*'s strength lies in this inclusivity, a cross section of performance history robust enough to support the authors' claims of theatre's cultural complexity.