

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Alison Jeffers

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Antonio Scuderi

Dario Fo. Framing, Festival, and the Folkloric Imagination

Lanham, MD; Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011.

156 p. £35.14.

ISBN: 978-0-7391-5111-2.

This is a curious book. It purports to be about Dario Fo, the Italian writer-performer who was controversially awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997, but the author is far more interested in the background material than in how Fo himself works. In his introduction, Scuderi states that since winning the Nobel Prize there has been an abundance of studies of Fo's politics and performance techniques, hence his aim is to explore Fo's theatre 'from an interdisciplinary perspective', which principally involves looking at the history of possible influences.

Indeed, Scuderi virtually dismisses Fo's political commitment, and when at one point he is compelled to mention Fo's journey to China in 1975 and Fo's involvement, like many Italian and French intellectuals at that time, with Maoism, he deals with this by declaring that Fo had simply 'misread' the Chinese situation. Scuderi's book pretty well depoliticizes Fo throughout, and provides no information on the whole Italian anti-establishment culture from which the work of Fo and his wife, Franca Rame, emerged. Instead, he sets about tracing some of the elements that Fo utilized in his work, starting with folk traditions.

He mentions Fo's debt to Gramsci's theories of the significance of folk and popular culture, then moves swiftly on to carnival, pausing to tell us that his intention is 'to momentarily set aside a direct discussion of Fo's theatre' and instead to provide details of the historical and anthropological background. He sets Fo aside again later, when he provides us with an account of the history of the *giullare*, the Italian version of the jongleur, the medieval travelling player, and then gives us an account of the life of St Francis of Assisi, the subject of Fo's 1999 *giullarata*, entitled *The Holy Jester Francis*.

Scuderi is obviously well read and appears to have been writing about Dario Fo for some years now, having interviewed him back in the early 1990s. But this book is unlikely to be of much use for anyone wanting to learn more about the politics of Fo's theatre, about the development of his performance technique, about the different

ways with which he worked with stage interpreters in different cultural contexts, or about the case for awarding him the Nobel Prize. Scuderi advises us in his introduction that he has made 'no attempt to fit [Fo's] works into any theoretical rubric' and has organized the work 'thematically'. The result is an odd book, though easy to read and, in its limited way, entertaining. Its defect is that it contributes nothing to our understanding of the theatre of Dario Fo.

SUSAN BASSNETT

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Kene Igweonu, ed.

Trends in Twenty-First-Century African Theatre and Performance

Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2011. 474 p.

£85.00.

ISBN: 978-9-0420-3386-3.

This volume is a collection of papers from a conference held by the African branch of the International Federation of Theatre Artists in Stellenbosch, South Africa, in 2007. It claims to be a snapshot of the current status and situation of theatre practice across the continent, but unsurprisingly the volume is dominated by contributions from the two countries with by far the lion's share of theatre departments, South Africa and Nigeria. Most notably there are no contributions from non-Anglophone nations.

When reading the Nigerian and South African contributions against each other one is struck by the massive divergence in theatrical concerns. In South Africa there is a continuing tone of anxiety about racial and geographically situated identity. There are papers by Patrick Ebewo and Temple Hauptfleisch about the teaching of theatre in South African universities which make it apparent that there remains a huge emphasis on white, Western theatre, and very little indeed on African theatre outside South Africa. Johann van Heerden contributes an overview of how South African theatre has developed since apartheid. Overall there is a picture of the overwhelming dominance of Western-based theoretical and practical influence in South African theatre which is sadly making the area seem largely irrelevant to non-white citizens.

The tranche of Nigerian papers focus on analysis of specific plays and Theatre for Development projects. Possibly the most intriguing pair of papers here look at *Hard Ground* by Ahmed

Yerima – a play which deals with the tragedy of violence and alienation of young people in oil-rich southern Nigeria. While Osita Ezenwanebe offers a reading which sees the work as a moderate piece focusing on human cost, Adebisi Ademakinwa claims that much of the script is lifted directly from speeches and goes on to claim that the villain is a representation of Ken Saro Wiwa, the Ogoni playwright and activist murdered by the regime of Sani Abacha in 1997. Since I write from Nigeria I have been asking numerous theatre academics about these readings. The latter is universally seen as perverse, and a government-promoted distortion. What is interesting is what these opposing views tell us about how politicized theatre remains in Nigeria.

Elsewhere, articles of particular interest are Ngozi Udengwu's study of the commercial superstar of Nigerian playwrights, Stella Oyedepo; and Ola Johansson's thoughtful and challenging paper on community-based AIDS theatre in Tanzania. I also note a growing focus on dance across the continent with three papers on dance theatre from Nigeria.

JANE PLASTOW

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Shulamith Lev-Aladgem

**Theatre in Co-Communities:
Articulating Power**

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 200 p.
£50.00.

ISBN: 978-0-230-55519-8.

The notion of a 'co-community' is the unifying concept which brings together the range of case studies of theatre practices discussed in Lev-Aladgem's book. The idea is derived from the communication theorist Mark Orbe's (1998) work on 'co-cultures' and is intended to promote a politics in which no single culture is considered to be superior or the norm within a given society (the US in Orbe's case, Israel in Lev-Aladgem's). This political stance has led the author of this book to work with the elderly, young, or sick and to study the work of others with marginalized ethnic groups, principally Mizrahi community groups (Jewish Israelis of Middle-Eastern or North African origin) and young people of Jewish Ethiopian origin.

The nine main chapters in the book each presents an account of theatre practices, sometimes her own and sometimes those of others, involving one particular 'co-community' group, and develop an analysis of their politics and aesthetics. The case studies are drawn from a period within which she traces a development of community-based theatre practice in Israel from the early 1970s into the 2000s. Whilst not setting out to provide a history as such, the book therefore

provides some useful resources for students and scholars attempting to fill in the gaps in Israeli theatre histories, or indeed of histories and geographies of applied/community theatre. Chapter 5 in particular focuses overtly on a history of community-based theatre in Israel, associating its origins predominantly with work by, with, and for the Mizrahi 'co-community'.

The author's mode of analysis shifts with the case studies. This is understandable given the difference in contexts and the different levels of access the author might have had available, although it does sometimes make the overall thread of the argument elusive. However, this does not detract from the interest of the chapters individually. Perhaps inevitably, it is the earlier chapters, which seem to be most closely based on the author's own sustained practice in a geriatric day-care centre, that provide the most vividly drawn descriptions of key moments and therefore produce the most convincing illustrations of the way she regards theatre as a means of 'making do' (in De Certeau's terms).

In Chapter 3 there is a detailed and memorable account of a series of interactions between the author and three elderly men. Lev-Aladgem describes rather poignantly how these interactions shifted subtly between ritual, play, and what might loosely be characterized as drama. It is here, in her account of Sadik, Jacob, and Abudy's mix of jokes, transient role-playing, and mild flirtation, where the book seems to come closest to identifying the dynamics and limitations of the transformational potential of community-based theatre.

SIMON PARRY

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Ian Brown, ed.

The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama.

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

256 p. £61.75.

ISBN: 978-0-7486-4107-9.

Any reader possessing the preconception that Scottish drama is a site of sporadic and uneven activity will be corrected by this comprehensive and welcome collection of essays. Covering the range of Scottish drama in all its forms, including theatrical translation and non-theatrical drama, the collection's reach extends from the nation's earliest dramatic activity to the most recent publications and performances.

Taking a chronological approach, the *Companion* begins with Sarah Carpenter's excellent essay on Scottish drama until 1650, which analyses both 'theatrical and quasi-theatrical performance' in the contexts of religion and Reformation, town and city life, the court, and political conviction. Following this is the editor's survey of both