Theatre Survey

THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR THEATRE RESEARCH

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EDITORIAL POLICY AND PRACTICES

Theatre Survey (ISSN 0040-5574) is chartered by the American Society for Theatre Research as a theatre history journal. Its theatrical and historical orientations are broadly conceived. Performance-centered and historiographic studies from all points across the historical, cultural, and methodological spectra are welcome.

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COVER: Sandra (Oni Monifa Renee Brown, *left*) and Lydia (Katherine Partington, *right*) prepare Artemis (David Greenspan, *center)* to leave Tauris in *Rescue Me*, Ma-Yi Theater Company, Ohio Theatre, New York City, 2010. *Photo*: Brian Barenio.

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FOUNDED IN 1960

confront each other, George triumphs because his empiricist disciplinary training better equips him to face an uncertain cold-war future than does Martha's primarily rationalist understanding of how the world should be.

Bennett concludes by interviewing Coco Fusco. Discussing a range of work, especially her *Two Undiscovered Amerindians . . .* and *Rites of Passage*, Fusco emphasizes the structural, logistical, and psychological demands of unscripted, interactive performance. Bennett attempts to identify a consistent, intentional relationship among words, space, and audience, yet Fusco denies she is cognizant of such abstract relationships during performance; this contrasting perspective is welcome. Fusco's tight focus on specific performances arises from a nuanced consideration of historical audiences and a healthy skepticism of performance documentation—including scripts.

Words, Space, and the Audience provides substantive insight into histories of plays and playwrights, though each chapter would benefit from some extension. At points, Bennett's theoretical frame imposes a dichotomy—that audiences must "side" either with rationalism or empiricism—when it seems likely that most audience members use(d) both, and may not be concerned with logical inconsistencies arising from employing the two together. Deeper consideration of the ephemeral, embodied, and paralinguistic aspects of performance, admittedly more difficult to capture in writing, would enhance the project. Occasionally specific performances are considered, briefly suggesting that tensions between epistemologies can be resolved by artistic choices. However, Bennett's primary goal is to describe tensions within texts, rather than to theorize meaning creation in performance. This book's value lies in its linkage of play and context; it would be most useful for scholars of dramatic literature, or directors and dramaturges interested in the plays discussed. Overall, Bennett dares in *Words, Space, and the Audience* to ask difficult questions about the relationships between the histories of thought and drama, and shows there is still much answering work to be done.

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Authoring Performance: The Director in Contemporary Theatre. By Avra Sidiropoulou. What Is Theatre? New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; pp. x + 217. $95 cloth, $28 paper, $85 e-book.
doi:10.1017/S0040557414000167

Reviewed by Robert L. Neblett, *University of Arkansas at Little Rock*

In the forty-five years since Roland Barthes declared the death of the Author, the disciples of literature and performance have struggled against long-standing traditions of centralized meaning, seeking to wrest control and claim subjective interpretive power from the godlike grasp of an omnipotent, omniscient artist-creator. Yet, in the arena of theatrical performance, the advent of the modern director's role at the end of the nineteenth century and its continued organic development over the past century or so have given rise to a new category of potential arbiter of signification onstage: the auteur. Avra Sidiropoulou's deceptively slim

Authoring Performance explores the analytical and cultural tensions that fractured the role of the Western director in the late twentieth century, leading to what she refers to as the contemporary function of the "'director-author'" (4). She asserts that this tension is often localized within the increasingly fluid nature of postmodern dramatic texts, whose rejection of realism, classical codes of representation, and linear structure facilitate—indeed, necessitate—a secondary voice that can bring physical shape to these works in performance.

The book is divided into an introduction, six theoretical-historical chapters (comprising the bulk of the book) that focus on the rise of the auteur in the twentieth century, and an excellent appendix of six contemporary case studies. In its first chapter, "The Rise of the Modern Auteur," Sidiropoulou's painstaking research into the development of the director's theatrical function deserves praise for its concise packaging and intelligent presentation. Of particular note is her discussion of early design innovators such as Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia. Yet, significant gaps appear in this chronology, such as the short shrift (almost to the point of exclusion) she grants to influential vanguard artists such as Konstantin Stanislavsky and Jerzy Grotowski. While Grotowski's "poor theatre" arguably deserves comparable attention to her later examinations of absurdism and the "theatre of cruelty" (in Chapters 2 and 3), one could reasonably make the case that Stanislavsky's attention to realism disqualifies his inclusion in a discussion of avant-garde theatrics, despite the fact that he devoted the last stage of his career to more experimental modes of performance. Although Sidiropoulou's work on the early auteurs she does engage is very strong, as I read the first chapters I could not help but wonder, again and again, about who and what else had been left out, and why.

I also found myself struggling to understand the book's title in light of its actually quite historical focus. Though this entry in Palgrave Macmillan's What Is Theatre? series purports to consider the function of the "contemporary" director, Sidiropoulou does not specify what temporal parameters comprise the "contemporary" in her volume, nor does she clarify the nomenclature of the "director" proper: a full third of her volume is devoted to the work of dramatist-theorists Antonin Artaud and Samuel Beckett, both of whom often staged their own texts but whose primary identities reside more within the world of dramaturgy than of directing. Thus, without a clear indication of what both "contemporary" and "director" mean for her purposes, their appearance here is at times puzzling. Further, not until Chapters 4 and 5 does Sidiropoulou actively engage in a detailed aesthetic examination of the processes of directors working over the past three to four decades. While her goal is to establish Artaud and Beckett as stylistic predecessors to auteurs such as Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and Anne Bogart, and while this goal is indeed a valuable one, such focused emphasis on early- to mid-twentieth-century drama in the bulk of the volume feels disingenuous given the book's title. Once more, the result is that readers may feel keenly what is missing: for example, a brief description of JoAnne Akalaitis's infamous ART production of Beckett's *Endgame* (which I would think supports the book's thesis about the nature of contemporary auteurism as clearly as any example in recent memory) reads more like a footnote than a key intersection of the (post)modern and contemporary.

At the heart of Sidiropoulou's argument is the tension between text and performance/playwright and director that marks twentieth-century avant-garde performance, and that ultimately leads the auteur director to abandon fidelity to authorial intent, and the avant-garde playwright to abandon Aristotelian cohesion of action, character, and language. Sidiropoulou struggles with this tension on every page, sometimes vigorously but sometimes in a way that seems to privilege the playwright—the figure who, according to the lore of the auteur, is supposed to be increasingly irrelevant in modern theatrical practice—as director, generating a paradox that threatens to undermine her central thesis. This is not to say that Sidiropoulou's theoretical approaches are misdirected or flawed, but merely to signal an imbalance of attention in her analysis: because she has preferred to focus on experimental dramatic texts, often at the expense of other forms of postdramatic performance equally important to a discussion of contemporary auteurism, she offers a view of the "contemporary director" that skews strangely at times toward the playwright.

I have taken issue with the specific historical focus of Sidiropoulou's analysis, given her title and her apparent intentions for the book, but nevertheless there is much extremely good work here. In particular, Sidiropoulou appends to the primary text of *Authoring Performance* a series of six excellent case studies of contemporary auteur directors, including behind-the-scenes glimpses into works by British company Complicite; by the NYC mainstay of the theatrical avant-garde, The Wooster Group; and by director Ivo van Hove. The writing in the appendix is clear and passionate, devoid of the overanalytical jargon of critical theory and directly honing in on the director's practical role in the creation of performance, be it textually derived or collaboratively devised as an original work. I wish these case studies had formed the basis of the main body of the book, but without doubt even in their shortened appendix form they will prove valuable for readers and especially for students.

Despite some shortcomings in maintaining its intended focus, *Authoring Performance: The Director in Contemporary Theatre* is a welcome, extensively researched addition to the bookshelves of scholars of performance studies and theatrical semiotics. Unfortunately, while directors and students of directing may find value in Sidiropoulou's historical surveys and case studies, her dense concentration on dramaturgy and critical theory may vex them and leave them wondering whether they are the volume's fundamental audience.

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Lives in Play: Autobiography and Biography on the Feminist Stage. By Ryan Claycomb. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012; pp. 272. $55.00 cloth, $30 paper, $45 e-book.
doi:10.1017/S0040557414000179

Reviewed by Patricia Elise Nelson, *University of Southern California*

Taking up feminist plays and performance art from the 1970s to the present, Ryan Claycomb's first book, *Lives in Play: Autobiography and Biography on the Feminist Stage*, reconsiders works of feminist theatre that have fallen out of favor

in the wake of shifting critical trends. Claycomb presents a nuanced treatment of the tensions attendant on performing subjectivity onstage, and pays careful attention to the original contexts of the plays that he discusses; ultimately, he attempts to return life narrative to a central position in the project of feminist art. A carefully researched, theory-rich study that is both clearly written and conceptually complex, *Lives in Play* does important recovery work for a wide range of feminist plays and performance art.

The introduction and first chapter of *Lives in Play* lay out Claycomb's complex historical and theoretical argument. Claycomb, who is clearly well versed in critical theory, hinges his argument on the premise that discussion of performance must take into account six interlocking elements: narrative, identity, voice, body, community, and history. Arguing that since the 1980s, women's life narratives often meet criticism under charges of essentialism, Claycomb refocuses the conversation surrounding these works to suggest instead that the performance of "real life" often functions in feminist theatre to "*reveal real life as performative*" (2; his italics). This distinction allows him to skirt the well-worn grooves of the debate between essentialism and social constructionism in feminist theory by allowing for both constructs simultaneously: for Claycomb, all of the elements that make up a performance are both manipulated consciously by performers and, at the same time, always operating outside of authorial intent. Methodologically, Claycomb, who is based in an English department, draws from narrative studies and performance theory to consider both the words spoken onstage and the body who speaks them. His foundational claim is twofold: first, the tension between the artifice of the theatre and the authority of the "real" provides a space where truth claims are uniquely positioned to be called into question by the audience; and second, this dialectical relationship between radical gender performance and a claim to the real is precisely what gives feminist performances political heft. Undoubtedly, this attention to multiple axes of analysis makes *Lives in Play* a dense study, but it is this very complexity that allows Claycomb to bring something new to the field of feminist theatre criticism.

Throughout *Lives in Play*, Claycomb grounds his theoretical approach in the texts themselves, using performance to test and challenge theory and often making a historical point of recognizing these theatrical works as a *source* of theory. The first chapter considers feminist performance artists of the 1990s, including Orlan, Kate Bornstein, Carmelita Tropicana, and Bobby Baker, whose quasi-autobiographical performance pieces clearly engage emerging constructionist or deconstructive theories. But while these texts align with critical trends that have attained dominance since the 1990 publication of Judith Butler's extremely influential *Gender Trouble*, Claycomb turns in his second chapter to autobiographical feminist performances by Carolee Schneemann, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, and Terry Galloway that have met with greater critical backlash for their seemingly more stable notions of female biology and identity. Attempting to complicate the notion that these pieces simply peddle stable identities, Claycomb argues that this second group of performers instead self-consciously uses its works' grounding in the "real" to engage audiences.