



Worlds, Bodies, Matters: Theatre of the Late Twentieth Century by Valentina Valentini

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traditions of biblical hermeneutics, she argues that evangelical spirituality is based on an 'affective piety' (p. 20) which privileges the believer's own felt experience, all the more so when that experience builds on well-known biblical narratives or popular cultural forms. The relevant analytical question, then, is what emotions and affects these performances create in their evangelical audiences, and how they do so. While belief is of course important, Stevenson understands belief as part of each individual's 'embodied schema' (p. 28) that allow them to make cognitive and affective sense of their experiences and the world around them. It is affective resonance, not doctrinal exactitude, which gives these performances their spiritual force.

This method requires Stevenson to attempt to understand these performances from spectators' perspectives with a maximum of empathy and a minimum of judgement. This is not so different to Bert O. States's self-positioning in 'the theatre seat in [his] mind's eye', even if Stevenson's pew is decidedly less cushy than States's chair.¹ It is the customary means by which theatre scholars of a phenomenological bent (or even a semiotic one) approach their material, and by following in a tradition familiar to performance scholars, Stevenson expands the field on which our discipline works.

This emotional generosity and suspension of judgement is a wise and necessary decision. Stevenson's goal is understanding, not critique; her book does not seek to fight battles within the 'current culture wars' (p. 82) even when aspects of her subject matter (such as its antisemitism or homophobia) disturb her. Evangelical Christianity is a foreign subculture to most liberal-leaning theatre and performance scholars, and one they are likely to stereotype negatively, though not without a certain quasi-Orientalist fascination steeped in what Stevenson, following Ann Pellegrini, calls 'affect envy' (p. 237).

However, like many phenomenological approaches, Stevenson's focus on the affect and experience of her performances can make the political and economic structures that have shaped those performances hard to see. For instance, Stevenson frequently describes the ways in which evangelical performances are strengthened by their reference or relationship to mass models of cultural production, such as the use of the sounds and tropes of popular culture in megachurch worship. She also mentions how evangelical performative practices appeal to political controversies (such as between the teaching of evolution and creationism)

in order to strengthen an affect of noble resistance. But these factors could work in the other direction as well. It may be the individualistic pattern of cultural consumption or a particular political agenda that helps determine which affects these performances aim at, or how they do so. If, as she convincingly argues, evangelicism is a major contributor to the embodied schema of American self-understanding, might these performances not just borrow from mass culture but contribute to it as well?

To some extent, Stevenson addresses this concern in her coda, in which she relates her notion of evangelical dramaturgy to the political tactics of the Tea Party. This section is both fascinating and frustratingly brief; it will hopefully provide a spur for further work. Stevenson points out that the seemingly individualistic, personal, and grassroots Tea Party movement is in fact set up and underwritten by the Koch brothers and other wealthy donors with a political agenda. The museums, theme parks, performances, and megachurches she describes also have economic and political links to businesses, publishers, major international ministries such as the Trinity Broadcasting Network, and political pressure groups. I would have liked to read more about how these links shape the workings of evangelical dramaturgy. There are moments of this – such as the technological and organisations sophistication of megachurches and the re-embrace of the antisemitism of passion plays after the success of Gibson's film – but this is not a theme that Stevenson pursues systematically. Evangelicism may privilege individual affect, but that does not mean that scholarly study must do the same.

It may be unfair of me, though, to ask this excellent book to shift its focus. With her thorough and precise analysis, Stevenson has offered us an insight into the affective workings of an important mode of performance that we ought to know more about than we do.

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Worlds, Bodies, Matters: Theatre of the Late Twentieth Century by Valentina Valentini

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In *Worlds, Bodies, Matters: Theatre of the Late Twentieth Century*, Valentina Valentini provides an

1. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 11.

accessible and systematic study of late-twentieth-century Western theatre with an emphasis on its relations with and influences from visual arts and new media. This study offers a comprehensive critical analysis of a complex array of artistic and post-dramatic theatre practices richly illustrated with photographs of historical and contemporary events. Valentini leads the reader on a previously uncharted journey through the fragmented identities and uncertainties of our time, offering a generative summary of many key narratives and philosophical ideas that have shaped European culture of the late-twentieth century.

Although the book is historically contextualized in the avant-garde movements of the nineteenth century, a conventional historical narrative is largely avoided. The intersections and contaminations between artistic languages are in fact surveyed through a poststructuralist approach and, most importantly, her paradigm of historical discontinuity is taken from Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*.¹ The book's structure, organized according to a non-hierarchical narrative, results in a nonlinear system of cultural interconnections, an irregular thread of events stitched together around one cohesive element: the theatrical space. Therefore, although Valentini focuses on the reciprocal influences between theatre, visual arts, and new media, the theatrical space remains the hub around which these artistic relations are organized and investigated. The theatrical space is therefore understood and interpreted as the container within which occurrences such as improvisations, emergences, visual art interventions, and new media technologies come together, blurring their boundaries and modifying one another.

Although theatre has not moved entirely away from the theatrical space and the boundaries between genres have not vanished, modalities of theatre interventions have undergone a substantial cultural shift. Valentini is interested in comprehending the specificity of this shift within the framework of what Josette Féral and Ronald P. Bermingham call a 'stage-related theatricality'.² Valentini analyses the practices that have contributed to the specificities of such theatricalities stemming from contemporary cultural environments, which include, among others, installations, performance art, land art, and new media technologies. For example, she

looks at Allan Kaprow's concept and practice of happenings to elucidate Tadeusz Kantor's concept of theatre as environment, and juxtaposes Richard Long's journeys on foot with Peter Brook's spectacles to clarify Brook's concept of the stage as an expanded field. The conceptualization and design of the contemporary theatrical space is indeed the legacy of this dialogue that has influenced the way text is now treated, interpreted, and employed; how the relationship between actor/performer and audiences is structured; and how creative possibilities have multiplied.

In 'Contemporary Myths and World Theatres', Valentini examines a repertoire of productions by Carmelo Bene, Società Raffaello Sanzio, Sarah Kane, and The Wooster Group to analyse the processes and methods used to rewrite and deconstruct classical texts. She stresses how fragments from texts, comic books, literature, painting, and other visual cultures infectiously disrupt the linearity of classical narratives to produce hybrids, traces of intersected stories, and their phantoms. However, Valentini is also careful to identify what remains intact from this deconstructive process, namely myths and archetypes.

In 'Visual, Performative, Mediatric', companies such as Studio Azzurro, Robert Lepage, Big Art Group, and Giorgio Barberio Corsetti are examined as exemplary in their effort to subvert codified linguistic strategies, disciplinary conventions, and linear narratives through the use of new media. These artists and companies produce composites where TV monitors, 'real' presences and mediated presences interact, coexisting in space in a non-hierarchical order. Pairings such as tradition and innovation, body and mind, original and copy, object and subject, and actor and character are all mixed up in processes through which the distinction between fiction and reality becomes irrelevant, lost in a network of correspondences, influences, and connections.

In the final chapter, 'Actor, Performer, Spectator', Valentini pays attention to the 'performer', this new category substituting the role of the actor as conventionally understood. The performer is trained to engage with the theatrical event as it unfolds on stage, free from the expectations attached to a given character that has an established biographical history and specific cultural identity. Performers of late-twentieth-century theatre, disentangled from this tradition, have been engaging with embodied actions that are happening in the here and now. Valentini identifies the body as the real protagonist of postdramatic theatre. This is not, however, a liberated body that follows its own impulses and tempo, but is rather a body that knows and acts according to the theatrical

1. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

2. Josette Féral and Ronald P. Bermingham, 'Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language', *Substance*, 31.2/3 (2002), 94-108, (p. 99).

apparatuses in place that – constructed each time differently – block, stabilize, emphasize, destabilize, multiply, or reduce creative and relational possibilities. The theatrical space emerges and is revealed as a controlled system devised to influence audiences' experiences, which determine physical proximity or separation, emotional involvement or detachment.

The question of legacy is important in regard to the historical shift triggered by postdramatic theatre. It haunts Valentini's analysis, encouraging further scholarly engagement with the question as to whether the methods and methodologies examined here retain the power to ignite change and innovation today. All the concepts informing this study pose the necessary question as to whether this legacy has become the normative paradigm of contemporaneity and has consequently been formalized into 'compulsive strategies' (p. 4), which might no longer have the same political, social, or ecological relevance.

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***Modernity, Community and Place in Brian Friel's Drama* by Richard Rankin Russell**

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In *Modernity, Community and Place in Brian Friel's Drama*, Richard Rankin Russell engages in an analysis of space and place in five of Friel's best known and most critically acclaimed plays, specifically *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), *The Freedom of the City* (1973), *Faith Healer* (1979), *Translations* (1980), and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). The methodology employed involves a variety of theories and philosophical perspectives, but the prose is always clear and never convoluted in an examination of Friel's plays that is grounded in significant scholarship. The argument is driven by the contention that Enlightenment rationalism in its manifestation as modernity, and later as colonialism, has inflicted damage on Ireland over the centuries. 'Modernity' and 'modernism' are qualified as the philosophical programmes that developed a dogmatic emphasis on rationality since Descartes that have dominated science, philosophy, and politics until the mid-twentieth century by aiming for a 'generalized account of everything' through 'abstract intellectualizing' that

often jettisoned 'local culture' (p. 6). Set against the violence of modernity *qua* colonial invasion are the more beneficent notions of local places, fluidic spaces, and the restorative power of community. Although Russell points out that Edenic myths are something that Friel is quick to dispel in his plays, the central argument in the book does not seem to move beyond the dialectic of modernity versus community. The dominance of the 'modern cosmopolis' is set against communities that feature 'elasticity and adaptability' which can enable us to live more 'practically and wisely' (p. 15). In the Irish context, this dialectic overlooks the fact that corruption and cronyism are as prevalent in the country as they are in the city. Moreover, the anti-Enlightenment argument that Russell propounds, specifically that rationalism leads to modernism and then to colonialism, is something of a non sequitur based on a rather overbearing generalization.

Russell portrays modernity as the root cause of cultural destruction on agrarian communities. However there is no small irony that Friel, following Chekhov, with whom he has often been compared, is among the most modern of playwrights. In *Translations*, for example, Friel takes great care to present a rational portrayal of the consequences of British colonialism and ends the play not with tub-thumping nationalist propaganda or the sentimentalization of a colonized culture but on the horns of a dilemma. The character Hugh outlines the choice either to embrace modernity and shape the course of history by renewing images of the past, or to cease renewing those images and risk fossilization. Russell pays meticulous attention to textual detail and the word 'reading' is used to describe the examination of Friel's plays rather than an analysis of a given production or comparative productions of the plays. Where close reading is a hallmark of literary studies, the matter of drama as a theatre production, which is perhaps the most compelling aspect of Friel's plays, is given only marginal treatment in the book. The word 'drama' is used rather than 'theatre' insofar as the analysis is engaged more with plays as dramatic literature than staged events. There is very little use of theatre reviews in the popular press to engage with production histories, as the argument focuses more on cultural aspects such as the fluid spaces of agrarian life and the flux of natural rhythms in terms of their manifestation in Friel's plays.

The study of Irish drama has been conducted predominantly by scholars who have emerged from and who have spent most if not all of their careers in literature departments. The books and articles thus produced have focused on the historical and cultural dimensions of drama, with national identity usually forming the interpretive superstructure. Various