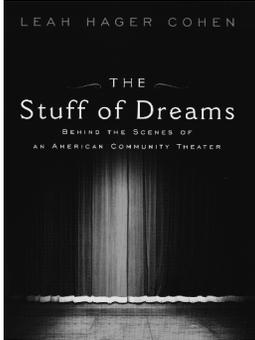
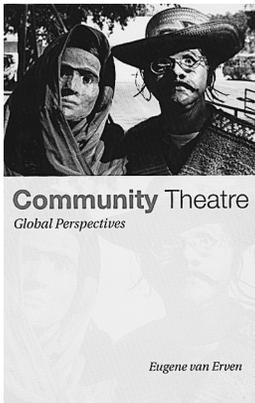

Books



The Stuff of Dreams: Behind the Scenes of an American Community Theater. By Leah Hager Cohen. New York: Viking, 2001; 234 pp.; illustrations. \$24.95 paper.



Community Theatre: Global Perspectives. By Eugene van Erven. New York: Routledge, 2001; 269 pp. \$75.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Coming from what seems to be entirely different perspectives on two entirely different theatre genres, Leah Hager Cohen and Eugene van Erven have produced two studies of “community theatre” that ironically make the same plea: to have their subjects taken seriously. From Cohen’s stay with a small community theatre in suburban Massachusetts to van Erven’s global gallivanting during which he samples community theatre in the Philippines, the Netherlands, the U.S. (Los Angeles), Costa Rica, Kenya, and Australia, these two books produce ample case study material for the performance studies scholar interested in performance based in “community.”

Cohen, who positions herself in the field through a charming narrative of her preadolescent days with Bread and Puppet (her mom even took her out of school for the project), summarizes the “culture” of U.S. community theatre:

Here is a place where people’s most base elements thrive: egos may be exalted, fed, stroked, and patted; jealousies may run rampant; tantrums may be tolerated and considered part of the culture. At the same time, here are all these strangers coming together—for nothing profitable, nothing useful, nothing tangible or lasting, for nothing more than such stuff as dreams are made of—all because of some unnamable, unstanchable desire to imagine themselves into other people’s stories and relate those stories to others. (xix)

It is the mysterious efforts of community theatre practitioners, who receive neither formal compensation nor professional recognition for their work but who are by no means rare—Cohen cites an estimate by the American Association of Community Theatres of ten thousand community theatres throughout the U.S. with a membership of one million—that fascinates Cohen (and me as well). I have often wondered where to position the kind of theatre that I participated in as a child, teenager, and young adult. Cohen describes the quotidian of the genre as I perceive it of the genre: “a white car” pulls into the theatre’s driveway, “a Ford Taurus, that most ubiquitous of American cars, only this one has a license plate that reads ACTOR 1” (2). I’ve *met* that guy—he’s a staple of the kind of community theatre I know. My experiences closely parallel what Cohen describes: a white, middle-class, suburban, “amateur” theatre. In these settings, theatre groups may unabashedly pick and choose from the repertoire of American

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theatre, from *Barefoot in the Park* to *Company*, from *South Pacific* to *The King and I* (with enough pan makeup and liquid eyeliner, the sky's the limit, right?).

Cohen's chosen example, however, is stuck somewhere between the sky and the real world. Based in Arlington, Massachusetts, the Arlington Friends of the Drama (AFD) have been putting on plays for three-quarters of a century. Founded by members of the local Women's Club around the time when nationally the "little theatre" movement was similarly inspiring towns around the country, AFD is a typical community theatre—"one of many thousands like it in America" (xix). Cohen's AFD is faced with the obstacle of overcoming its own homogeneity and exclusivity—at a price. The foundation of the group, consisting of a slight majority of older, more conservative members, longs for the days when play choice was simpler and plays didn't threaten the membership's values. A younger group—the future—appreciates the foundation created 75 years ago but would like to see AFD broaden its horizons. The theatre balances precariously on the common dedication of both sides. Upon the author's visit, AFD holds auditions for its second play of the season, *M. Butterfly*. David Henry Hwang's drama has proved uncomfortable for many AFD members on the levels of content (a "love affair between what the audience eventually learns are two men" [5], and nudity onstage); and context (a play "with Asian themes, culture, politics, and characters, within the particular communities of this theater and this town, which are both predominately white, European-American" [5]). The play's director, Celia Couture, is president of the AFD board and the most outspoken member of the progressive side of the company. She is so determined to overcome the issues presented by *M. Butterfly* that she steadfastly remains focused on what will come *after* the production, a regional community theatre competition in which she will enter her play and hopefully win.

Despite their reservations about the chosen script, longtime members of AFD who fulfill (on a volunteer basis, of course) certain roles during the audition, rehearsal, and performance processes, show up as promised to make coffee and clean the theatre. *They* are the dedicated ones. At auditions we meet Dot and Lorraine, and "if you questioned them as to why they're volunteering to work on a show they don't entirely approve of, they'd look at you as if you had some mild brain damage" (13).

Celia and her cast and crew replicate the dedication of Dot and Lorraine throughout the rehearsal process, juggling full-time jobs and family obligations with nightly rehearsals. Cohen delves into the lives of the main characters of AFD and the *M. Butterfly* production: she follows Molly, the costume designer from store to store in search of the perfect costumes, most likely to be paid for out of her own pocket; she visits Patrick, who plays Sing in the production, at the Monday night scene study gatherings he holds in his apartment; she documents Jimmy as he nearly gets sick over the challenge of playing Gallimard; and she sits with Lorraine as she makes her 19th opening-night cake for AFD.

Cohen's account is more a practical narrative rather than an ethnography. She, like the community actors, just wants to tell a story, relying on whatever inherent value the story of this community theatre holds. She does, however, alternate AFD's story with passages from her life, including her experiences as a theatre student at NYU and subsequently as a theatre artist in Nicaragua, which she uses to place AFD in a larger theatrical context.

Cohen uses two examples to potentially make interventions in the study. First, she describes the conflict arising during *M. Butterfly* rehearsals between Celia, the workaholic director, and cast and crew members. As the community theatre competition held at Brandeis University draws near, a *rift* occurs between those who perceive the show's purpose as an enriching experience and those who prioritize a polished production. "Both ideals, in the end, are about using theatre to make an impact on community, whether it's the community of volunteers

who make up the theater, or the community at large in which the theater exists” (108). Two alternative, implicit political acts are at work, which correspond directly to the kind of “community theatre” discussed further by Eugene van Erven. And the question is raised by both studies: Should this genre be focused on using theatre to impact those who practice it, or to affect those who see it?

Cohen’s second insight into the potential for community theatre to become a viable site for performance scholarship involves theatre’s exclusivity. A former student at Tisch School of the Arts/NYU who opted to finish her undergraduate work elsewhere, Cohen describes how her experience in community theatre was received by the Tisch establishment: “I gathered that my experience in community theatre was ranked insignificant at best, detrimental at worst, to developing the real craft of a serious actor”; conservatory training, she found, relied on the mystery and inaccessibility of theatre’s “laborious process” (141). By breaking these unwritten rules, community theatre becomes a potentially subversive means for penetrating theatre’s “mystery,” allowing “the masses” to control the means of theatrical production and, in the process, produce something meaningful on any number of levels for both the community involved and the community of spectators.

Coming from the presumed perspective of making theatre accessible and useful to all, Eugene van Erven’s project in *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* attempts to map examples of such practice in six locations around the world. Through these examples, van Erven hopes both to emphasize the specificity of community theatre evolving under various circumstances as well as to seek common ground and promote a global forum for discussion. Van Erven’s text is clearly the more scholarly of the two, with the formalities of endnotes and references, and an approach leaning closer to mini-ethnographies of the community theatre companies he visited than the entertaining narrative of Cohen.

Discouraged by the “lack of attention to community theatre in postcolonial and intercultural performance studies,” van Erven set out to document and examine such performance in six locations chosen because: “I personally knew them, they quickly agreed to participate, and all had interesting activities going on in the period I was able to set aside for the project” (3). He repeats the order of his travels in the book chapters, beginning in the Philippines and ending in Australia. One of the project’s key components was a video crew, always composed of members of the local community. From this footage, van Erven has created a video meant to accompany the text, but which at the time of my review was not yet available from Routledge.

In the Philippines, van Erven works with BITAW (Basic Integrated Theatre Arts), an offshoot of PETA (Philippines Educational Theatre Association), to explore the issues surrounding an environmental disaster at Marinduque caused by a copper mine spill. With an extensive structure of community theatre in place, facilitators Eli Obligacion, Ernie Cloma, and Dessa Quesada easily find the majority of their participants in another theatre group. Mostly teenagers, they join a sprinkling of others from the local community organization PRRM (Philippines Rural Reconstruction Movement). For five intensive days, participants create and rehearse a performance based on the issues surrounding the mine spill. Most crucial to the creative process is a site visit on the third day to two *barangays* (“politically sanctioned neighborhood association[s]” [51]) that have suffered the most damage. After an exhausting week, the group ends their performance on an agitprop-ish note: “The entire cast, holding pro-environmental placards and singing the national anthem, exhort the audience to unite and fight” (49).

Not all sites are as outwardly political, but many, like PETA, were founded on “explicitly issue-driven liberation theatre” (6) and have roots in social action. Stut Theatre, van Erven’s example from the Netherlands, was inspired by the “prolific Dutch political theatre-in-education movement” from the 1970s and ’80s (55).

Van Erven visits the company for *Tears in the Rain*, in which facilitators Jos Bours and Marlies Hautvast bring together Dutch, Moroccan, and Turkish residents in highrise-dominated neighborhood of Kanaleneiland. The group creates a theatre piece focused on the issues each cultural group faces, from language to tradition to education, intercultural dating, and prejudice. Van Erven cites the group's difficulties in finding participants who will consistently show up for rehearsal (a problem mentioned at other locations). Stut Theatre combines the efforts of professional artists, who write and direct community pieces based on the experiences of the respective community members. Following this model, *Tears in the Rain* tours for several months, reaching 4,000 at over 50 sites (87).

In Los Angeles van Erven observes Sally Gordon, whom he credits with inspiring his project. Gordon works with the Hathaway Resource Center in Highland Park while creating theatre with her Teatro de la Realidad. The group bravely tackles issues ranging from incest to unemployment, mixing surrealism with naturalism. Gordon's method "gets deep under the participant's skin and consequently requires a great deal of trust, guts, energy, and determination" (128).

Similar to Gordon's approach, the Costa Rican theatre company, Aguamarina, opens their group to participants whom they hope to train as ensemble members. Using their own version of the Latin American theatre method of *creación colectiva*, Aguamarina produces plays about local circumstances; in the case van Erven's observes, Aguamarina creates *El Pescador*. Inspired by the devastating effects that recent political and economic circumstances in Costa Rica had on fishers, Aguamarina embarks on a theatre project based on their stories. Using an "exposure" model reminiscent of PETA's work in the Philippines, Aguamarina brings four new young members to a fishing village to hear community members' stories. In only a few days, actors perform for 70 audience members near the water. During the short performance fishers offer feedback, yelling out "technical advice when Eduardo and Jimmy mime hauling in their lines and try to catch a hammerhead shark" (160). Aguamarina appreciates the critique, noting that every "performance is different [...] and continues to be updated with audience feedback" (161).

Although van Erven's chapter on Kenyan community theatre begins with a slightly disappointing account of the Kamariithi theatre and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's impact on the country's theatre history, it ends with one of the best examples of community theatre I've come across. The Kawuounda Women's Group, established in 1967 ("when they were invited to sing at Jomo Kenyatta's home" [192]), operates under rigid gender norms. In Sigoti the women meet (during van Erven's observation, accompanied by a male interpreter) to make theatre while they work: "One of the women begins to tell a story during a natural break from work, after which they collectively decide to turn it into drama" (193). Without the formalities of auditions, rehearsals, and production meetings, the group can focus solely on making theatre that immediately communicates a message to those present. The chosen director/storyteller offers a narrative to explore: while doing laundry, one woman, Rose, "starts talking about the long absences of her husband. She is interested, she says, to learn from the older women how they used to deal with such situations" (194). Rose's question prompts Clementina, her mother-in-law, to tell the story of her own experience of a husband sent forcibly to fight in World War II. The group improvises the scenes from Clementina's story, playing both male and female roles and including songs and narration.

Given this example of community theatre, which was unique to all others in van Erven's list, it is perhaps not surprising that the discussion leads down an anthropological path, attributing the group's methods to the need for adaptation. No longer able to pass on cultural information the way they did in the past, these Luo (the culture of the surrounding region) women have found a new way to share and pass on traditions. In addition, the forum of the women's group allows

members to cope with and express the stress of the oppressive gender system in which they operate. Their favorite “Tsi-Tsi” song, during which performers swing their arms behind their backs in a fly-swatting motion, was later revealed to van Erven (once he could arrange for a female interpreter) as a symbolic plea to get men off their backs. The example is an interesting one; but its unhesitant anthropological interpretation causes some alarm—i.e., although van Erven states outright that his case study is “informed by a Western anthropological [...] and sociogeographical source,” I wonder why he didn’t do background study for the other locations.

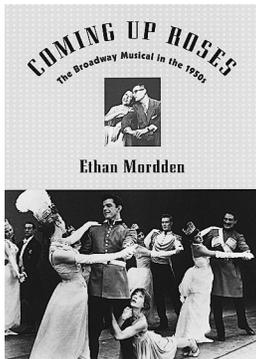
Finally, van Erven documents a semisuccessful theatre project in western Sydney performed on city trains. After encountering various logistical problems, mostly due to City Rail’s resistance to the project, Death Defying Theatre (now called Urban Theatre Projects) uses travelling performances to open up the greater urban population’s eyes to the often underrepresented western part of Sydney.

As a model for the study of community theatre, van Erven’s text includes background information about the sociopolitical and theatre history of each site and company. He gives detailed funding information for each company, a sufficient bibliography, and a detailed index. Van Erven meticulously follows the methods used by each group, conceptualizing their influences (Augusto Boal, Viola Spolin, Enrique Buenaventura, and others) while emphasizing their autonomy of style. Although the personal relationships that van Erven admittedly maintains with each company may prevent a critical discussion, he does offer a potentially useful model for looking at community theatre.

Both books make community theatre more visible in the scholarship of theatre and performance studies. Van Erven’s call is slightly louder: he attributes the absence of community theatre in “serious” scholarship to a number of factors: “Community theatre performances are seldom reviewed by national media and, because they frequently occur outside ‘legitimate’ arts milieus in the major cities, they have consequently tended to escape the attention of cultural theorists and theatre scholars” (248–49). To some extent, he’s right; a field dominated by theoretical preoccupations may not value community theatre. Yet objects of study don’t appear out of thin air, they are brought to the fore *by* some scholarly force, which makes its appearance with these books.

—Sara Brady

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Coming Up Roses: The Broadway Musical of the 1950s. By Ethan Mordden. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 262 pp.; \$15.95 paper.

The Broadway musical was once central to American culture. Before the onslaught of rock 'n' roll and the youth culture of the Baby Boomers, Broadway composers and lyricists provided tunes for the weekly *Hit Parade*, raw material for the improvisations of jazz musicians, and new stars for Hollywood. Broadway was a part of the “modern transmitting metropolis” (Williams 1989:40). A decidedly bourgeois form, the Broadway musical of the '50s was a complex creation. Firmly grounded in the prejudices and aesthetics of mass culture, it also displayed