Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism. 
By Mike Sell. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005; 327 pp. $60.00 cloth.


I, along with most theatre scholars, have grown sick of hearing that the avantgarde is white, European, and long dead. Its practices and its histories are colonialist and sexist sure enough (see for example Schneider 1997), but I am not ready to officiate a funeral just yet. Neither are the editors and authors of the two volumes reviewed here. Instead, they call for particularly situated historiographies of the avantgarde that challenge the temporal, racialized, and geopolitical assumptions that have so persistently haunted the field.

Not the Other Avant-Garde is composed of three pairs of essays focusing on a geopolitical region (Africa, Latin America, Japan) and five other essays. In his chapter “From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges,” Harding examines the intercultural and transnational exchanges so crucial to the formation of various avantgardes. Using the concept of a “rough edge” to reimagine border theory as a way to recognize the inherent negotiations, resistances, and compliances that occur at the borders and edges of cultural exchange, Harding interrogates the often “universalized notions of history implicit in the linear undercurrents of terms like ‘cutting edge’” and its tacit center-periphery politics (24). It also opens up the possibility of rethinking border theory after the advent of transnational discourse and diasporic imaginations. The other authors do not always follow Harding’s paradigm, but they do wrestle with the assumptions he interrogates using historiographically minded methodologies from literary criticism, theatre history, and performance studies.

In his essay, Harry Elam takes on TDR’s first Black Theatre issue, arguing that guest editor Ed Bullin’s 1968 volume defied white spectator’s racialized notions of avantgarde performance by publishing plays that referred to social reality but nonetheless enacted revolutionary dramaturgy that demanded methexis rather than a mimesis. Elam draws on the implications of his earlier work on the importance of ritual in social protest theatre, while simultaneously making a case for thinking productively and performatively about Bullin’s claim that the “The King is Dead” (Elam 1997; Bullins 1968:23–25). John Conteh-Morgan concentrates in his essay on the intersection of radical politics and aesthetics in contemporary francophone Africa, revealing a distinctly postcolonial critique of French-language textual theatre as a colonial imposition—a critique enacted by engaging African indigenous oral forms, many of which perform essentialisms of their own.

In their essays on Latin American theatre, Adam Versényi and Jean Graham-Jones complicate the possibilities of transnational foundations there. Versényi points out that staging plays by
certain European and US playwrights, such as Eugene O’Neill and Jean Cocteau, was seen as a distinctly nationalist move by Mexico’s early avantgarde theatre artists, while Graham-Jones points out how the highly developed theatre scene in Buenos Aires, rather than promoting standard European definitions, determined performances’ legibility as vanguardista. For example, one could say that in the 1930s there were two vanguardias—the “politically committed ‘Boedo’ social realists and the apolitical ‘Florida’ Europeanists” (169); by the 1960s, key Buenos Aires practitioners used the term to describe diverse performance forms, revealing its historically contingent nature.

The contributions on Japanese theatre and performance analyze the relationship between politics, formal innovation, and political efficacy. Peter Eckersdall’s exploration of Japanese theatre in the 1920s and ’30s argues that artists were committed to the performing body as a site of sensation and knowledge until the dire political situation led these artists away from liminality and toward ideology to combat the regime. David Goodman, meanwhile, takes on the nostalgia for traditional forms, such as Kabuki, among underground theatre practitioners in the 1960s. The other essays include Hannah Higgins’s exploration of the transnational travels of Fluxus, Marvin Carlson’s work on Syrian and Egyptian theatre, Joachim Fiebach’s analysis of Sub-Saharan performance, and Sudipto Chatterjee’s study of progressive Bengali theatre.

This volume is an important one because it realigns the relationships between political vanguards and avantgarde performance, reveals complex intercultural exchanges as something other than evidence of influence, and troubles the very roots of the terminology used to describe these performances—including the term “non-Western”—a label used a bit indiscriminately in the volume’s introduction. Another potential site for dialogue: Given that many of the anthology’s essays deal with the uncomfortable allegiance between cultural nationalism, revolutionary politics, and artistic practices, it makes Rouse and Harding’s statement that “performance has been more difficult to limit to a specific nationalist agenda” ring a bit false (8). I ended up reading Conteh-Morgan’s essay against Elam’s and Eckersdall’s against Versényi’s exactly because their insights made me realize how undertheorized the relationship between conceptions of the avantgarde, nationalism, and cultural nationalism is in contemporary scholarship. Attention to these concerns could have provided an alternate organization for the volume as a whole. Nonetheless, this anthology reminds us that if we are to truly take on the task of including the performance techniques of subaltern, colonized, and minoritarian-identified cultures as potentially “avantgarde” we will inevitably have to deal seriously with some of their (other) tactics: discourses of development, cultural nationalism(s), and “revolutionary” materialist rhetoric—all of which are usually swept aside in the search for ruthlessly formal radical artistic practice.

Mike Sell’s Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism looks back on the practices of the Living Theatre, Fluxus, and the Black Theatre Movement to analyze the role of the critic, the scholar, and the institutions to which they belong in the cultural struggles of radical artists and activists—ultimately taking on “how performance identifies the very limits of critical consideration” (inside cover). This project, as the description indicates, is a Foucauldian one, which nonetheless also performs as a scrupulously researched materialist historiography of avantgarde performance. Inductively theorized, Sell refuses to shoehorn the complex negotiations between cold war capitalism and avantgarde artmaking into a simple resistance/co-option dyad, making his volume a must-read for scholars interested in understanding the economic practices of US post-war avantgardes as well as for those interested in the role of the scholar in said enterprises.

The first case study on the Living Theatre explores the relationship between the drug war and The Connection (1959), arguing that the play’s temporal practices enact heroin experience as dramaturgy rather than using them as a prop; he also argues for the equally important role of jazz music in the Living Theatre’s development as an ensemble (130).

In his study of Fluxus, Sell takes on assumptions about capitalist production by revealing how Michael Kirby’s conception of “de-matrixing”—a form of alienation which removes objects from
their “matrix of common social, economic and aesthetic associations”—was equally important as an explanatory tool for Fluxus art and capitalist commodity culture (194). More radically, the author posits Fluxus as a mode of production, arguing for the movement as a form of temporal antagonism, which has admittedly disappeared into the trackless reticules of capitalist performativity but might ultimately find a way out; a brave and utopic assay, to say the least. I welcome Sell’s willingness to rethink capital, and I can only hope that we can rethink the contemporary avantgarde in relation to neoliberal practice in an equally rigorous way.

The last case study on the Black Arts Movement ultimately brings us back to Ed Bullins, particularly his editorial performance in Black Theatre, the We Righteous Bombers scandal, and the aforementioned issue of TDR. Bullins’s paradoxical relationship to many of the publications he wrote was emblematic of the ambivalent relationship between the critical establishment and the Black Arts Movement as a whole. Ultimately, Sell claims that the Black Arts Movement’s “ongoing mode of cultural transformation reclamation and demarcation” often took it outside academia’s walls and outside its critical consideration (289). Nonetheless, the Movement’s struggle with art/life and text/performance dialectics tacitly argues for its role as an emblematic avantgarde, making its exclusion from said history all the more ironic.

Reading the two works together was invigorating. After finishing Sell’s book, I was left imagining a dialogue between Sell and Elam about TDR’s 1972 Black Theatre issue, which under editor Michael Kirby concentrated on critics and criticism rather than on plays—something Richard Schechner might have preferred for the 1968 issue, which was edited by Bullins independently but during Schechner’s first tenure as TDR editor. It might also be a place to test out Harding’s revision of border theory in the broadest sense, given Kirby’s editorial comment in the second Black Theatre issue, with requisite irony, that “This is not a ‘segregated’ issue” (1972:3). Maybe I will read that dialogue in TDR sooner rather than later.

—Patricia Ybarra

References

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Kirby, Michael

Schneider, Rebecca

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1. Kingley B. Bass’s We Righteous Bombers, produced by the New Lafayette Theatre in 1969, was actually Ed Bullins’s plagiarized version of Stuart Gilbert’s 1958 translation of Albert Camus’s Les Justes. Once this hoax was discovered, it provoked intense reactions within the Black Arts Movement community. As Sell himself argues, however, one could see this as an editorial performance on Bullins’s part, as he manipulated Camus’s text as a mode of critique.
Upstaged: Making Theatre in the Media Age. By Anne Nicholson Weber. New York: Routledge, 2006; 192 pp. $95.00 cloth; $22.95 paper.

The dominance of screenic media has notably influenced the production of theatre as well as altered theatre’s current cultural status. In Upstaged: Making Theatre in the Media Age Anne Nicholson Weber draws from conversations with 24 theatre practitioners to discuss the tensions between theatre and various screenic media, seeking ways that theatre can “play to its essential strengths—language, metaphor, immediacy, and community” (x). Weber thus discusses, in a thematic way (from geographic locale to gender roles, from the rehearsal process to the rhythm of movement and voice on both stage and screen) the issues surrounding liveness in an era of exponential reproduction in the arts.

“The Media Age,” as defined early on in the book, is the age of film and television. Nicholas Hytner, the artistic director of Britain’s National Theatre, begins the book by writing, “I’m not convinced that anything has happened recently that hasn’t been happening since The Jazz Singer was released—or at least since people got televisions in their homes” (1). Though this comment may seem disconnected from the remarkable cultural changes that have taken place since the advent of the internet, Hytner later expands upon this comment by discussing the democratization of the arts in online environments (2). Though the interviews seldom discuss new media affects on theatre and the performing arts, the primary scope of the book is to discuss why, as Frank Rich, the associate editor for the New York Times, notes, “There will always be a hunger for live entertainment [...] Why do people go to rock concerts when you could just buy the record? This is one reason the theater is not extinct and never will be” (32).

Like several of the strong and concise interviews (each ranging from 2 to 13 pages in length), Weber’s interview with Julie Taymor brings out the complexities between various media forms. Taymor says:

Interestingly, theatre audiences can fill in more blanks because they have seen so much TV and film. They don’t need to see a savannah fully represented on the stage because they know what a savannah looks like already [...] It is a pleasure of the contemporary theatre that you can use a kind of shorthand because the audience is becoming more visually experienced, more visually literate. (43)

Several interviews offer varied viewpoints on this emerging visual literacy and the tension between the image and the word. David Leveaux, associate director at the Donmar Warehouse in London and founder of the Theatre Project Tokyo, says, “Theatre functions by image first and foremost. It’s simply not true to say that it’s primarily a linguistic, primarily a text medium” (64). Anna Deavere Smith tempers this notion by arguing, “The use of language in America is just at an all-time low [...] Voices have gotten smaller and flatter [...] When I studied Shakespeare, we studied speech as action. It’s the same thing.” She goes on to say:

When I go to speak at a college [...] I’ve realized that I should not be there unless I am prepared to expect of myself that the words I say are going to make a difference. No word can just drop out of my mouth when I’m onstage; each one has to be potent. (126)

Modes of artistic production are an equally compelling topic in the book. The technology of the film medium in contrast to the presence of the human body on the live stage sets up a significant dichotomy in many of the interviews. As Simon Callow, British actor and director, argues (echoing Peggy Phelan [1993]),

There’s this strange phenomenon that this performance will never be repeated; it can’t be. Unfortunately, the bigger musicals that are completely controlled technologically do tend
to be 100 percent the same; and the moment the theatre becomes totally repeatable night after night, then it ceases to be theatre. (21)

In contrast, Peter Hall argues that contemporary theatrical conventions, which “don’t need to be naturalistic on the stage anymore,” are in fact conceived from a kinship with filmic technologies. He argues that “cinema has freed us in the theatre” to the fluidity and grammar of jump cuts and metaphorical gestures (83).

Upstaged offers readers informal and accessible dialogues on issues of utmost consequence to performance studies. Although including questions around the impact of digital and networked media would have bolstered this study, the intentionally reduced focus of the book serves to allow stimulating discussions on media in which most of the practitioners have direct artistic experience. Weber’s impressive collection of interviews offers a valuable look into theatre’s current trajectories as artists seek ways to have the theatre be, as Julie Taymor says, “the sensation of life being breathed into an object by the addition of human imagination” (44).

—Jason Farman

Phelan, Peggy

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Ghosts: Death’s Double and the Phenomena of Theatre. By Alice Rayner. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006; 205 pp. $67.50 cloth; $22.50 paper.


The figure of the ghost has haunted theatre and performance theory almost as much as it has moonlit graveyards and abandoned houses. As figures that shimmer in our peripheral vision, between the alive and the dead, the past and the present, the real and the imagined, ghosts trouble some of the most pervasive cultural boundaries. In Ghosts: Death’s Double and the Phenomena of Theatre, Alice Rayner defines the theatrical, in a broad sense, as anything that takes place whenever such dualistic thought or oppositions are invoked and broken down (xii). This allows her to include largely 20th-century play texts and performances, as well as public memorials, installation art, and film in her meditation on theatre as a ghostly practice.

Rayner locates herself in a long line of ghost studies, from those by Margery Garber (1987) and Jacques Derrida (1994) to Joseph Roach (1996) and Marvin Carlson (2001). Similar to Carlson in The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine, Rayner structures her chapters around the undertheorized material aspects of the theatre. Whereas Carlson’s macro-historical project deals with the operations of repetition and memory in the text, the actors’ bodies, production elements, and the performance space itself, Rayner provides more intimate and
experiential analyses of the 8:00 PM show time, stage props, chairs, and the curtain. Rayner hesitates to explain away the ghosts in theatre and instead opts for an approach that seeks to preserve the mystery of the possible, yet rarely recognized, ghostly experience that theatre promises.

In a densely articulated opening chapter, Rayner situates this promise of the theatrical encounter in the space between audience and actor. By showing up for the 8:00 PM curtain, the audience agrees to participate in a dream of sorts that is not altogether separate from their own daily lives. Rayner draws upon the work of Freud, Lacan, Garber, and Ricoeur. Although Derrida is not explicitly cited, his notion of the multiple temporalities of the specter seems influential. Theatre, as a space of repetitions (with a difference) invites the doubling and blurring of a single given present. The piercing bell in Beckett’s *Happy Days* (1961), Rayner suggests, functions like the mutual appointment of the theatrical encounter in this double sense, to waken both Winnie and the audience:

An attentive audience that is attuned by grief to the losses in/of time may wake up from within the dream/representation to the sound of a different bell that is the same; it may wake up along with Winnie to its own repetitious habits that get us through a conventional day while, bit by bit, grain upon grain, we are buried by the present. (20)

Rayner’s work gains momentum in her central chapters dedicated to theatrical objects, including props and, specifically, chairs: “[S]tage props clearly participate in the signifying, narrative, and stylistic fictions of the drama as well as the culture, and they also supply the material, aesthetic, and tangible reality of things in themselves” (74). She succinctly describes the prop table as “a tangible archive with a variable narrative” (84). Here, the relationship between historiography and theatre (one of her primary concerns) begins to emerge more clearly in a lucid interpretation of how the use of objects in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play* (1995) succeeds, as only theatre can, in recontextualizing, usurping, playing with, referring to, and disrupting history. Unlike historical writing, which can only lay claim to a version of the real, replete with absences, omissions, and blind spots, theatre has the capacity to overcome and exceed this: “Historical writing tends to tame its ghosts. History as a collection of written documents banishes ghosts from three-dimensional space and regulates them to the norms of narrative and facts, exercising the uncanniness of an absent past that is present” (58). Theatre, for Rayner, is bound together with recognizing loss and the dynamics of mourning.

Both Rayner and Mark Pizzato, drawing on Lacan as a central theoretical interlocutor, suggest parallels between the space of the self and the space of theatre. In *Ghosts of Theatre and Cinema in the Brain*, Pizzato insists that theatre and film as we know it are manifestations of our internal “cranial theatres” (4). Pizzato’s interdisciplinary and ambitious work invites readers to be flies on the wall for what feels like an imagined transhistorical conversation between Darwin, Shakespeare, several contemporary neurologists such as Antonio Damasio and V. S. Ramachandran, and Lacan. Pizzato is the moderator, constantly balancing and recasting the connection he sees between Lacan’s orders of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic with the neurological dimensions and evolutionary layers of the human brain.

Akin to Rayner, Pizzato emphasizes the role of ghosts—of our internal selves, loved ones, and others—in how we come to know ourselves. He argues that:
theatre and cinema, along with other mass-media technologies, as extensions of the brain’s internal performance and narrative spaces, are continuing experiments of cultural evolution. They express specific ghosts embodied in our brain parts, as we work together or in conflict to resolve the competition for space and Self/Other control, in neuronal and communal group selection, inside and between our skulls. (201)

The Oresteia, for Pizzato, stages the struggle between “limbic revenge” and “neocortical justice” (64).

In addition to Greek tragedy, Pizzato goes all the way back to Neanderthal burial sites in Egypt, compares the multiple incarnations of Hamlet’s ghost in a variety of film adaptations, and ends with a Japanese Noh play and the 2001 film The Others. Each piece demonstrates its particular era’s collective ego; Shakespeare’s Hamlet, for example, “exemplifies the insecurities of the modern ego in its Renaissance beginnings” (116). Pizzato’s wide-ranging study of theatre and media practices invites more focused and in-depth studies constellating the provocative connections he makes between the fields of psychoanalysis and neuroscience. The promise of therapeutic catharsis is one such link, making Pizzato’s emphasis on an evolving human consciousness as it functions within and as theatre especially relevant to debates on the social and aesthetic function of tragedy.

Theatre, with the ghost as protagonist, is a redemptive space for Pizzato: “Such ghosts and their material basis in the brain might be cathartically purified and physically altered, in incremental ways, by watching theatre and film” (184). Theatre, in a more or less teleological fashion, can work toward exorcising destructive human tendencies and instead foster compassion as a “higher order of consciousness” (240). Although Pizzato notes the problems of such determinist logic, the dream embedded in his project is for the human imagination, through theatre, to evolve and transcend humanity’s violent and destructive tendencies.

What haunts both of these texts is the nature of the divine and the sacred. Rayner eloquently states: “The sacred is not a matter of any religion or belief, nor is it in an object; it, rather, appears as a giving of attention toward the mysteries of the real and material world” (107). Her own study of ghostly theatrical moments could then be seen as one way of giving that kind of attention. Pizzato more directly poses his project as a partial response to an impossible question: “Why are human beings created in the image of God or gods (and vice versa) to act with divine creativity and tremendous destructiveness, in virtual and real worlds, far beyond any other animal in the evolutionary experiment of life on this planet?” (13). Both Rayner and Pizzato seem motivated by such deep ontological inquiries.

Ghosts continue to haunt theatre studies precisely because they remain elusive enough to stand as generative figures right at the limits of our knowledge, on the shaky boundaries of what we think we know. And although ghosts are mobilized by Rayner and Pizzato in distinct ways, they both occupy and present their demands in the same place: the theatre. In times of drastically reduced funding for the arts and the contested status of theatre in a media-saturated world, both works express a deep commitment, desire, and hope for the future of theatrical practice and scholarship to acknowledge the difficult questions that ghosts will continue to ask of us.

—Jennifer Cayer

References

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Derrida, Jacques
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In these three powerful new books on modern Indian and Pakistani theatre, authors Afzal-Khan, Dalmia, and Dharwadker focus on theatre that reflects, embodies, challenges, and constructs narratives of the nation and national culture. Afzal-Khan analyzes secular alternative theatre in Pakistan and its role (both actual and potential) in the current social and political landscape; Dalmia traces the genealogy of modern Hindi theatre in the context of an emerging idea of a “national” “Indian” culture; and Dharwadker documents the formation of a modern dramatic canon in post-Independence India. All three books argue persuasively that these modern theatres have shaped and been shaped by contemporaneous national political movements.

Afzal-Khan grounds her book—the first on this subject—in the historical and political contexts that gave rise to the work of the three companies she focuses on: Ajoka, Punjab Lok Rehas, and Tehrik-I-Niswan. Ajoka (“Dawn of a New Day,” founded in 1983) led the street theatre movement in Pakistan with protests against the cultural repression of General Zia-ul-Haque and has since performed plays such as Barri (Acquittal; 1987) about four women imprisoned during Zia’s regime; Aik Thee Nani (There Was Once a Grandmother; 1993), a “secular critique of the official Islamist doctrine that forces all women to accept its repressive regime (62); and Dhee Rani (Daughter/Queen of the House; 1990), a play about the need for female education. Punjab Lok Rehas was founded in 1987 by former members of Ajoka who wanted to perform exclusively in Punjabi as a way of reaching specific communities of villagers and slum dwellers. Their work has dealt with the plight of rape victims, causes and consequences of the Gulf War, and child labor. Tehrik-I-Niswan (which literally means “Women’s Movement”) functions as the cultural wing of the
women’s movement in Pakistan and is at the same time “the premiere alternative theatre group of Karachi” (137). Afzal-Khan details their performance of *Aurat Ki Kabani* (A Woman’s Story; 1997), which “highlighted the theme of injustice, maltreatment, and discrimination against women in every area and at every stage of life” (98) not by focusing on women as victims but on women overcoming obstacles.

By foregrounding these three groups, Afzal-Khan successfully demonstrates that there is a “people’s national theatre movement” in Pakistan that is used for “education, enlightenment, and action” (72), and which is organized and run by small theatre groups to serve as a forum for debate on national issues.

Afzal-Khan focuses on actual performances rather than hypothetical performances or texts, which allows her to analyze a complex set of audience reactions rather than positing a utopic outcome for every performance—her stance is interrogatory rather than celebratory. She also writes from the standpoint of a practitioner-scholar; she acted in several of the productions she describes, which allows her to measure the distance between the intent of a production and the complexities of its receptions.

However, the book is a compilation of individual lectures and conference papers, which results in quite a bit of repetition between chapters and a regrettable lack of depth and detail. The reader is left wanting more detailed descriptions and analyses of the companies, the productions themselves, and the audience responses. In addition, because it is clear that the work of these companies cannot be fully understood outside the social and political contexts in which they operate, it would have been helpful to provide much more historical material. Nonetheless, as the first book to make visible a secular alternative theatre in Pakistan, it is an extremely important beginning and will no doubt pave the way for further scholarship on the subject.

*Poetics, Plays, and Performances* focuses on the politics of modern Indian theatre as revealed in a study of Hindi theatre. The book is divided into three sections. The first section, “In Search of A National Theatre” charts the major developments in modern Hindi theatre, beginning with Bharatendu Harishchandra’s 1883 essay “Natak” (Drama), which attempted to establish a “high” dramatic tradition in literary Hindi for an emerging urban intelligentsia by distancing it from popular rural performance. The study moves on to the work of Jayshankar Prasad who coined “a new language of subjectivity” (14), and through to Mohan Rakesh who developed a theatrical language of realism. What Dalmia charts here is a 19th-century move toward redefining theatre as dramatic literature, a construction that shaped the aesthetics of the emerging modern theatre as a text-based phenomenon. This move created the perception of a cultural divide between what was seen as high/urban/European-influenced/modern theatre and low/rural/Indian/traditional performance. This conceptual framework continues to influence the way modern theatre is defined, practiced, discussed, and understood.

The second section, “The Nation and Its Folk,” traces the independence movement’s call for a theatre that would communicate important political issues to mass audiences as well as the renewed interest in the nation’s “folk” theatre for nationalist purposes. The Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) set out to revitalize “the stage and the traditional arts […] making them at once the expression and organizer of our people’s struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice” (Pradhan 1979:129). Government organizations such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi later used “folk theatre” to redefine “Indian theatre,” and by extension Indian culture and India itself, both at home and abroad.

In the third section, “What Is Indian?” Dalmia interrogates theatrical constructions of Indian identity at the end of the 20th century—particularly those that equate “Indian” or “Indianness”
with traditional performance and “folk art,” and those that, directly or indirectly, promote Hindutva, a term used by Hindu nationalists to define India in terms of an “Indian essence.” She focuses on productions that offer potent challenges to the homogenizing constructions of nation and national culture, most of which, she argues, have been produced by women directors based in and around Delhi, particularly Tripurari Sharma, Maya Rao, Amal Allana, and Anuradha Kapur. Their work exhibits several characteristic features, most notably the ability to slit “open the certainties of gender roles, of the stereotype of wife, mother, and courtesan, and [to dissolve] the boundaries between public and private, between inner and outer selves. The old definitions of character no longer hold” (317). These productions offer a method for challenging traditional constructions of identity and of the nation.

Dalmia’s scrupulously well-researched and extremely well-written book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the ways in which theatrical developments have paralleled national movements and nationalist ideology by participating in, reflecting, and challenging constructions of the nation.

Most histories of Indian theatre focus on a particular regional or regional-language theatre. Because of India’s diversity, the conventional wisdom has been that it is impossible to write a history of the nation’s theatre. Dharwadker’s most important contribution to the study of Indian theatre is to focus on post-Independence theatre nationwide and thereby to reveal trends, issues, and themes not otherwise visible. While previous regional studies link modern theatre to 19th-century theatre and often to Sanskrit drama, stressing their commonality, Dharwadker defines the moment of independence (1947) as a watershed moment, and rightly highlights both the originality and modernity of post-Independence theatre as a historically demarcated and, in terms of both language and genre, diverse “field of postcolonial practice” (2). Dharwadker analyzes the formation of the post-Independence canon in three contexts, using three historical moments to frame her argument: the increasingly powerful identification of theatre with the nation from the 1870s to the 1940s, as exemplified by the inception of IPTA in 1943; the formation of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA), its view of the role of theatre in post-Independence theatre, its political and artistic mandate, and its influence on theatre and theatrical culture as exemplified in its first drama seminar of 1956; and the explosion of theatrical activity between 1950 and 1980, as demonstrated in the SNA’s 1989 Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroh (national drama festival).

Structurally, Dharwadker’s book is divided into two parts. The first deals with the major changes in post-Independence theatre that gave rise to the modern canon (including translations of plays into multiple languages and the rise of the freelance director). Part two deals with the major themes of post-Independence theatre (mythology, history, and notions of “home” and “homeland”). Dharwadker devotes one chapter (“Alternative Stages: Antirealism, Gender, and Contemporary ‘Folk’ Theatre”) to a brief mention of the plays, playwrights, genres, and styles subjected to ideological erasure by a focus on traditional performance as that which could be used to define “Indian culture” in the decades after independence. I would have liked to see her devote another chapter to an analysis of other work that lies outside the canon; it would be interesting to know whether street plays, Dalit plays, plays by and about women, and children’s plays have resisted canonization or been excluded from it. This quibble notwithstanding, Dharwadker’s book is the most thorough and comprehensive analysis of modern Indian theatre to date.

All three books are indispensable to scholars of South Asian studies and performance for shedding new light on this vibrant theatrical work by placing it in political context.

—Erin B. Mee

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