

Books

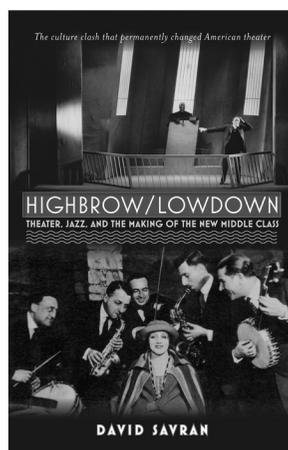
Highbrow/Lowdown: Theatre, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class. By David Savran. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009; 326 pp.; illustrations. \$24.95 paper.

The cover image of *Highbrow/Lowdown*, David Savran's study of the political economy of performing arts in the 1920s, enacts the reversals and defamiliarizations that the book accomplishes throughout its pages. Divided in half, the top portion is a photo of a production of Elmer Rice's drama *The Adding Machine* (1923), the bottom, an image from J. Hartley Manners's lesser-known *The National Anthem* (1922). The upper scene is spare and expressionistic, with an angular courtroom and masked judge weighing the verdict on Rice's Mr. Zero. The lower scene features a young Laurette Taylor surrounded by a five-piece jazz band in a basement dive. A quick glance might take these images as iconographic of the high and low that the title evokes: serious literary drama on top and jazzy melodrama on bottom. By the end

of the book, however, these two scenes reveal themselves not to be irreparably split by the divisions of cultural distinction but rather as two sides of the same coin. Savran reframes these plays by showing how they both sought to distance themselves from the popularity of jazz. Neither high nor low, *The Adding Machine* and *The National Anthem* together represent a middlebrow theatre, one that excited the improvisations of both jazz and popular amusements and that spoke to the social experiences of an emergent US middle class.

Highbrow/Lowdown investigates the social and economic forces that underwrote the uneasy and anxious differentiation of "legitimate" American theatre from a range of amusements deemed lower class, unscripted, popular, commercial, and "illegitimate." The book poses the following question: "Why was the Jazz Age the era in which American drama was invented?" (39). In other words, what is the relationship between the mood and structure of feeling that trafficked under the name of "jazz" in the 1920s and the emergence of a serious art theatre in the United States that aspired to highbrow cultural status? To answer this question *Highbrow/Lowdown* models a method that Savran has elsewhere described as a sociology of theatre: a structural analysis of cultural hierarchy that, following French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, investigates the conscious and unconscious functioning of social class across a variety of fields. And while the book is full of statistics and empirical data about audience demographics, ticket sales, and patterns of American production and consumption, it also offers original and detailed close readings of specific plays (*The Adding Machine*, Eugene O'Neill's *Diff'rent*, Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.*), musical comedies (*Shuffle Along*; *Tip-Toes*; *Lady, Be Good!*), and symphonic music (Gershwin's *Concerto in F*, Carpenter's *Skyscrapers*, and Antheil's *Ballet mécanique*). Savran's synthesis of these two approaches demonstrates the formal and thematic relationship of performance to its sociological and historical transformations and offers a multilayered interpretation of the stage in the 1920s. That he makes such a difficult approach appear so effortless and tells a complex story with such clarity are but two of this book's impressive accomplishments.

Highbrow/Lowdown develops and extends a vision of theatre studies that Savran has laid out over the past decade in works such as "Choices Made and Unmade" (2000), a controversial



exchange published in *Theatre*, and his collection of essays, *A Queer Sort of Materialism* (2003). The former issued a disciplinary autocritique that questioned poststructuralism's influence in theatre studies scholarship, the ascendance of performance studies in the academy, and what Savran viewed as undertheorized and unrigorous claims for performance's subversive potential—all symptomatic, he concluded, of a crisis of the public intellectual. Savran pursued these themes in *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, a volume that sought to address both specialized and general readers who shared an interest in the material and ideological conditions of American drama. We can locate the kernel of *Highbrow/Lowdown* in that collection's first essay, "Middlebrow Anxiety," in which Savran examined mainstream US theatre's ambivalence about its relationship to artistic merit (measured as cultural or symbolic capital) on the one hand and commerce (economic capital) on the other. "Middlebrow Anxiety" focuses on the cultural status of musical theatre following World War II and into the turn of the millennium. In *Highbrow/Lowdown*, Savran returns to the beginning of this story and the struggle over the new theatrical audiences that emerged in the era of cinema and the rise of mass culture.

Playwrights, critics, and composers in this decade expended enormous energy differentiating their serious compositions and scripts from the "illegitimate" acts and improvisations of burlesque, vaudeville, musical comedy, and cabaret in what amounted to a hard-fought struggle over cultural legitimacy. For Savran, jazz is the concept that both points to and expresses this era's anxiety around class, art, and commerce. Chapter 1 excavates the complex and disruptive role that "jazz" played in the 1920s in unsettling and resettling cultural hierarchies in the performing arts. As he thoroughly documents, "jazz" was an elastic term deployed in multiple and contradictory ways in the early part of the 20th century. It was not limited to musical compositions but could appear as sound, movement, style, or stance (bodily or otherwise). Functioning as a sign of "the low" and bearing the trace of blackness, jazz provoked a crisis of class distinction for a society undergoing rapid socioeconomic transformation. As musical comedy and vaudeville performers incorporated elements of jazz into their staging, a more serious and legitimate theatre sought to define itself against the intrusion of a jazz sensibility—and all that it connoted—onto their stages. Jazz became a kind of pivot point around which the various performing arts were compelled to locate themselves, "a fulcrum that divided a heroic, universalizing, modernism from its popular, mongrelized other" (21).

This argument depends upon an expansive definition of jazz as not only a musical tradition but also as a structure of feeling. Echoing Gershwin's 1925 claim that "Jazz is not Negro but American. It is the spontaneous expression of the nervous energy of modern American life" (2004:90), Savran approaches jazz wary of definitions shaped by racial essentialism, cultural purity, or a "love and theft" dynamic that would view white-performed or white-authored jazz as appropriations of black musical styles or updated versions of blackface minstrelsy. Rather, he focuses on the hybrid and multicultural roots of jazz in order to define jazz as primarily an expression of social class, where jazz "represented a *social relation*, a result of and analogue to new forms of labor, both mass production and reaction against mass production. A cultural practice around and through which a new structure of feeling and new class relations crystallized, it provided a touchstone for both old and new forms of theatre" (6). In this formulation, blackness is subordinated to a more general, national structure of feeling that is primarily class-based and concerns the pleasures and terrors of mass production.

While Gershwin sets a precedent for this expansive approach to "jazz," Duke Ellington offers perhaps a better paradigm for understanding the relationship of jazz to America to blackness in the early 20th century. To the sentiments issued by Gershwin, Ellington responded:

The music of my race is something more than the "American idiom." It is the result of our transplantation to American soil, and was our reaction in the plantation days to the tyranny we endured. What we could not say openly we expressed in music, and what we know as "jazz" is something more than just dance music. When we dance it is not a mere diversion or social accomplishment. (1993:49)

What is at stake between the two composers is, among other things, the acknowledgement of blackness as constitutive of the “American idiom” that Gershwin describes.

Ellington, like Savran, writes against the essentialism that saw syncopation and jazz rhythm as intrinsic to black performers. But while Savran disarticulates the link between blackness and jazz, Ellington rearticulates it in a formation that insists on the historical conditions and historicity of black music. Any disarticulation of the relationship between jazz and blackness, Ellington suggests, raises new questions about how these two concepts function (or don't) in relation to each other. For the most part, blackness as such falls outside the trajectory of Savran's argument about jazz, class, and theatre. What, we might ask, was the use of blackness in the accumulation of various kinds of capital (cultural, symbolic, economic, etc.) in 1920s performance culture (a question he briefly returns to in chapter 6)? How did black musicians, playwrights, and critics of the 1920s, many of whom were engaged in the same conversations as (and often with) the white and Jewish critics Savran discusses, negotiate jazz and class distinction (something *Highbrow/Lowdown* largely leaves unexamined)? How did blackness and its disavowal shape the formation of the new middle class Savran describes? While these questions don't always emerge explicitly, *Highbrow/Lowdown* nonetheless enables us to pose them.

The second and third chapters build on this understanding of jazz as a structure of feeling to trace the refinement and policing of cultural hierarchies by critics. Specifically, Savran finds in Gilbert Seldes's *The 7 Lively Arts* (1924) an important classification of performance culture. Seldes distinguishes between the great arts (those of high seriousness of purpose), the lively or minor arts (jazz, vaudeville, and other popular entertainments), and the bogus arts (those that are genteel, pretentious, easy to appreciate, aspire to high art but fall far short: the middlebrow). In situating Seldes's classifications within the larger transformations of US culture, Savran makes an important contribution to the historicization of liveness. It is the quality of liveness—improvisation, participation, contingency—that defines the popular arts and that the legitimate theatre would seek to discipline or exorcize. Within such a framework, musical comedy (the subject of chapter 3) poses the biggest problem and appears, unlikely as it may seem, as the most insurrectionary theatrical form of the 1920s since it refused to stay within its formal boundaries or location in the cultural hierarchy. Savran's analyses of Noble Sissle's and Eubie Blake's *Shuffle Along* (1921) and George and Ira Gershwin's *Tip-Toes* (1925) and *Lady, Be Good!* (1924) point toward a new and reinvigorated approach to musical theatre research that takes the form's ambivalent cultural status—“not quite legitimate, not yet variety” (94)—as a starting point for further investigation. Chapter 4 continues to limn emerging distinctions between high/middle/low, though here Savran describes the emergence of “legitimate” theatre not from the perspective of critics and other arbiters of cultural taste, but of consumers themselves as new audience demographics settled throughout the decade in relation to various arts and entertainments.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to theatrical and musical expressionism, further tracing the consolidation of high/middle/low classifications around the fulcrum of jazz. If in his first chapter Savran disarticulates jazz from blackness and defines it in terms of class distinction, he provides occasion to rethink the relationship between them in his discussion of composers John Alden Carpenter and George Antheil in his sixth. In incisive readings of Carpenter's jazz ballet *Skyscrapers* (1926) and Antheil's *A Jazz Symphony* (1925) and *Ballet mécanique* (1926)—art music compositions by white composers that incorporated elements of black vernacular music and expressionistic styles in elite cultural venues—Savran makes two key arguments. The first is that, as the varying responses to Carpenter's and Antheil's pieces illustrate, it could “never be known in advance if the appropriation of jazz would lead to the accumulation or forfeiture of high cultural capital” (184). While Carpenter's fairly conventional and European-influenced musical idiom borrowed from vaudeville and musical comedy, it solidified its status as high-brow art that spoke to universal experiences of the Machine Age. Antheil's Dada-inflected compositions, on the other hand, fell short of elite avant-garde status and garnered confusion and

disdain from critics for their variety show aesthetic. The second argument Savran makes is that each of these performances—and this sort of “jazz cosmopolitanism” more generally—“represents a sublimation of minstrelsy, a radical rechanneling and elevation of blackface performance” (175). By looking at the scenography and staging choices of these performances, Savran nimbly demonstrates the absent presence of African Americans within white-authored art music pieces. His analysis of Antheil’s scenic backdrops and Carpenter’s minstrel invocations vividly foregrounds the uneasy and intricate relationship between blackness and class distinction.

The book concludes with a revisionist reading of Eugene O’Neill’s status within the American theatrical canon. O’Neill, in collusion with critics, producers, and publishers, purified theatre of the stain of jazz—of blackness, of the disorders of desire, of social flux, of the reorganization of social relations. This was achieved not at the level of O’Neill’s content (blackness and the disorders of desire are repeatedly thematized for his audiences in his plays from the 1920s) but through the practices of cultural distinction that marked O’Neill’s theatre as “serious” and separated it from the popular. Savran takes great delight in humorously profaning O’Neill and demystifying his canonical position in American theatre history, exposing it as the collusion of a number of agents sharing class interests in hierarchizing American performance with “legitimate theatre at the top, vaudeville, burlesque, and cabaret at the bottom, and musical comedy somewhere in the middle” (225). Through what Savran characterizes as an “antijazz” discourse (240), O’Neill and critics such as George Jean Nathan disavowed the popular, even as it appeared in sublimated form on the stage (see especially Savran’s rereading of Travis Bogard’s *The Eugene O’Neill Songbook* [1993], in which he shows how repressed popular and racialized elements resurface in O’Neill’s work through music). Throughout this chapter, Savran offers a much-needed alternative to psychoanalytic readings that view O’Neill’s disdain of the popular stage through an Oedipal relationship with his father. Returning O’Neill and his boosters to their historical conjuncture, Savran helps us see O’Neill’s fear of liveness and improvisation in his productions (evidenced by his novelistic stage directions and his avowed disdain for actors) as part of a larger process of elevating a legitimate theatre above popular entertainments. In doing so, Savran describes something like an “O’Neill-effect” that continues to reinforce cultural hierarchies in the performing arts by stabilizing high/middle/low distinctions.

Impressive in depth as well as breadth, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* rewrites 20th-century theatre history. It shows how “serious” drama claimed its authority by distinguishing itself from popular amusements and cinema in order to appeal to the artistic and intellectual aspirations of a new middle class. In addition to casting the cultural struggles of the 1920s in a new light, Savran’s thesis also has implications for the disciplinary history and future of theatre studies. While critics such as Nathan come under intense scrutiny for their role in legitimizing theatre and hoarding cultural and symbolic capital, the academy is conspicuously absent from Savran’s indictment. Surely theatre and English departments have been as complicit, if not more so, in the marginalization of popular performance and the canonization of “legitimate” playwrights from O’Neill to Tony Kushner. In exposing how the legitimate theatre defines itself in part as the (perpetually futile) elimination of improvisation and liveness from the stage, Savran reminds us that drama cannot be studied in isolation from the larger spectrum of performing arts against which it defines itself.

—Shane Vogel

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On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man. By Rachel Bowditch. New York: Seagull Books, 2010; 364 pp.; illustrations. \$35.00 cloth.

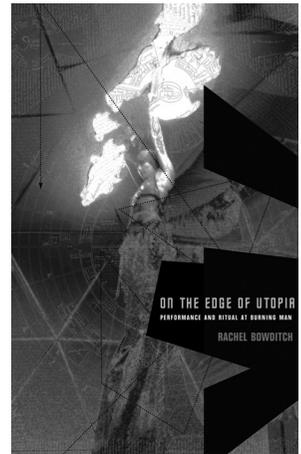
There are surprisingly few academic books written about Burning Man, considering the cultural significance and scope of the event—a fact that Rachel Bowditch acknowledges in her preface. Bowditch adds considerably to this conversation by offering a detailed study that draws equally from field notes, interviews, history, political theory, aesthetics, and performance theory, arguably affording the most holistic and detailed portrait of Burning Man in print. While other books have particular disciplinary bents or are penned by devotees, this book offers a comprehensive analysis of Burning Man’s social, historical, and political roles in our culture and society.

On the Edge of Utopia is divided into three main sections: an introductory overview of the event and its historical development followed by sections on the roles of performance and ritual within the event and its surrounding cultural diaspora. Illustrations include photographs of specific performances that are analyzed within the text as well as diagrams and layouts constructed by the author, which help to clarify specific points.

In the years since its first incarnation in San Francisco in 1986, Burning Man has emerged as the hub of a dynamic countercultural community. For a single week at the end of every summer, tens of thousands of people descend on an isolated and inhospitable desert in Nevada to form Black Rock City, a temporary community based on interactive art and self-expression. The paradoxical and controversial event is framed in the context of a culture war, since Burning Man’s value system is juxtaposed with the commodified, capitalistic nature of the “default reality” outside of the event. However, its actual impact within that frame remains a contentious topic for those who see a contradiction inherent in the Burning Man Organization’s for-profit status.

Bowditch evaluates the tensions and ambiguities that saturate Burning Man without attempting reconciliation. She traces the history of the event from its humble origins with just a few dozen participants through 2008, when nearly 50,000 attended. The formation of the for-profit Black Rock City Limited Liability Company (LLC) in 1997 was arguably a necessary transformation for an increasingly complex event, but it also highlights the contradictions inherent in a movement that is simultaneously anti-commodification and relentlessly capitalistic.

At the level of the event itself, Black Rock City is designed to accommodate creative chaos and unbridled freedom, but it is also governed by strict laws imposed by the Burning Man Organization and local authorities. While rings of orgiastic creative expression radiate across the playa, Burning Man’s beehive structure “allows for the regulation and choreography of bodies and practices into precise, geographical locations that can be monitored through networks of surveillance” (94).



Despite Burning Man's complicity with capitalist society—it requires entry fees, supplies and equipment, costumes and props, staffing and police—Bowditch argues for its efficacy as a platform for experimenting with values that run counter to those of “default reality,” providing a deconstructive venue within the capitalist system for developing alternatives. As such, Bowditch argues, Burning Man and similar countercultural events performs an important symbolic function in relation to the rest of Western civilization.

Situating Burning Man in the history of both attempted and theoretical utopias, Bowditch resists the notion that the inability of a utopian community to sustain itself signals its failure. In opposition to narrow definitions of communication and consciousness, Burning Man “raises the possibility of creating a different kind of culture within a society, a culture with a completely different vision of the world” (324). Rather than promoting a nihilistic destruction of Western culture, Burning Man *deconstructs* that culture in order to demonstrate the fundamentally performative nature of reality. Initiated into the process of system formation itself—by experiencing the effects of their actions within a participation-based culture—“Burners” are able to experiment with the symbolic constructs of our collective reality beyond the scope of any particular manifestation or coherent doctrine. In other words, Burning Man is an experiment in shaping culture without prescribing any absolute or transcendental meaning to that culture. Burning Man's significance is as a “cultural performance” that “produces and reproduces culture, moulding and shaping tradition as well as inventing it” (7). Although recurring symbols like the Man and the Lamplighters don't “mean” anything definitively, they function as symbolic vessels for communal intention, offering ritual spaces for significance to develop rhizomatically rather than from the top down. Accordingly, the performative significance of ritual is maintained as a foundational component of developing collectivities, honoring the structural role of ritual within society without delimiting concrete rules and practices.

Even though Burning Man means different things to different people, Bowditch emphasizes, there is generative potential in this structural ambiguity. By blurring the distinction between life and art, spectator and spectacle, Burning Man reveals that indeterminacy is not synonymous with a fallen sense of incompleteness. In its metamorphosing, performative, and playful nature, Burning Man challenges any system predicated on totalization and universality—which in today's world is a profoundly political gesture.

—Neşe Lisa Şenol

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Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage. Edited by Carol Martin. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; 309 pp.; illustrations. £55.00 cloth, e-book available.

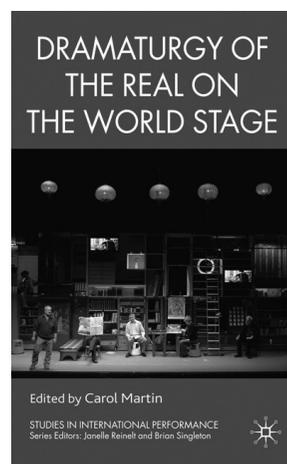
Archive. Documentary. Paradocumentary. Witness. Testimony. Expert. Verbatim theatre, theatre of fact, documentary theatre, documentary performance, reality theatre, nonfiction plays. These terms color the genre that Carol Martin's new collection of essays addresses. As those of us who have been following the story know, verbatim theatre isn't just for trials anymore, nor is it for boring theatre, nor is it, increasingly, even called verbatim. Theatre and performance makers have been both pointing to the past—where “documentary performance,” as I like to call it, has come from—as well as looking critically toward the future, with an eye on how to both

better express the “real” and more astutely think through “documentary” in order to conceive of something less like a genre and more like a paradigm. As Polish playwright Paweł Demirski explains in an interview included in the book: “Documentary theatre is not only a technique; it’s a way of thinking and above all an instrument for acquiring knowledge about the world” (195). Martin has gathered a rich set of examples that vary along geographical, cultural, and political lines. Her choices allow for a conversation among world artists who deal with the “dramaturgy of the real” in very different ways as well as an acknowledgment of how artists can and do look beyond past and future to *each other* for inspiration. Thought of as a paradigm, “dramaturgy of the real” can become helpful as an inclusive yet critical way of looking at the line between art and life, fiction and reality, facts and lies and truth.

Some of the material in *Dramaturgy of the Real* comes from the *TDR* special issue guest edited by Martin in 2006. Although that collection also included both critical essays and performance texts, what is nice about the book (and what distinguishes it from other recent work in the area, such as the Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson 2009 collection, *Get Real*) is the nearly two-to-one emphasis on performance texts. Part 1: Essays includes a few of the best selections from the *TDR* special issue, including Martin’s own “Bodies of Evidence,” Janelle Reinelt’s essay on the Steven Lawrence case, and Wendy Hesford’s juxtaposition of the photographic exhibit *Inconvenient Evidence* and the verbatim play *Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*. Hesford’s use of two examples from different artistic genres, which are both representations of the so-called war on terror, suggests the benefits of thinking beyond “theatre” when thinking about “documentary.”

The other essays in Part 1 are new and consider innovative contributions to documentary performance: Yvette Hutchison’s piece on South Africa deals with the specificity of “documentary” in the South African context, in which “a story is no less true for being fictional or constructed” and the emphasis in performance remains on a “recognizable, lived truth” (62). In “Reality from the Bottom Up,” Agnieszka Sowińska traces a history of Polish documentary from the “fact-montage” theatre of Leon Schiller through “paradocumentary” theatre in contemporary Poland. In the paradocumentary method, “interviews, facts, and newspaper reports”—what Martin describes as “evidence”—become “points of departure” which “inform and inspire the creation of the text” (72). Finally, Florian Malzacher’s essay on Rimini Protokoll is straightforward in its analysis of the German-Swiss collective’s “theatre of the instant,” which “brings characters together from our time and for a time, arranging them sometimes by fields of knowledge, sometimes by occupation, by age, by destiny—and then disperses them again” (86). Rimini Protokoll’s attention to detail, refusal to separate reality from fiction, and use of “experts”—that is, regular people whose expertise in their own lives finds voice in Rimini’s performances—all work to enable a particular type of “moment” in the theatre.

Ending Part 1 with Rimini Protokoll works well because their brand of theatre addresses so many of the issues the book raises around the “dramaturgy of the real.” The performance texts that follow in Part 2 almost all return to the kind of “moment” that Malzacher finds in Rimini Protokoll’s work: a moment of imperfection, of authenticity, of the line between reality and dream that we all walk in life whether on or off the stage. All seven scripts (more if you consider that several of Vivi Tellas’s “archives,” as she calls them, are excerpted) are about this moment in very different ways and for many different reasons. Philip Miller’s opera *Rewind: A Cantata* is a musical expression of testimony in post-Apartheid South Africa. “Miller’s acoustic,” writes Jessica Dubrow in her introduction, “is about the condition of testimony: the underside of what can be said and heard, the ordeal of agreeing and of trying to speak” (92). In *Is.Man*, truth and experience are juxtaposed—for a Western audience—through the personal narrative of a Turkish immigrant to Holland who is serving a sentence for an honor killing. Rabih Mroué’s



compelling *Three Posters* also challenges the very ability to define (indeed, reconcile) the concepts of documentary and theatre through its repetition and revision of actor-martyr videotape testimony. *The Files* is a playful re-membering of the Theatre of the Eighth Day's released files from the Polish Secret Security Service, which intertwines personal memory—letters, diaries, notes—with official, albeit “secret,” surveillance documentation collected by Polish authorities on the theatre company from 1975 to 1983. The other Polish play included in the collection, *Don't Be Surprised When They Come to Burn Your House Down*, is an almost dreamlike, fierce exposition of the death of a worker at a refrigerator factory and his widow's subsequent attempt to investigate what happened, in a form that engages with narrative, witnessing, and metaphor in equally effective doses. The short introduction to Argentine playwright Vivi Tellas's work offers what I can only describe as a delightful sampling of plays that find the extraordinary in the ordinary. “My premise,” she explains, “is that every person has, and is, an archive: a reserve of experiences, knowledge, texts, and images” (247). Similar to Rimini Protokoll's search for the extraordinary in the ordinary, Tellas offers the world of her own family, a few philosophers, driving instructors, and others to show what she calls a “Minimal Threshold of Fiction”: “There's something deactivated in those experiences that become extinct,” she explains, “and what is deactivated always becomes poetic” (252). In a related vein, the book ends with Ain Gordon's *Art, Life & Show-Biz*, another appealing and personal piece that attempts to demystify documentary: “Contrary to most documentary theatre,” Robert Vorlicky explains, “characters' memories” in Gordon's play “are not driven by an obsession for authenticity, accuracy, or conventional archival legitimacy. Recollections are shared, confirmed, disputed, and dissolved among the characters” (261). For Gordon, “show-biz” is the “space in which the lines between reality and fiction are necessarily unclear” (262).

At first I thought what was most important about this book was its move toward opening up the space of “documentary theatre” to be inclusive and diverse. In the end, however, what I find most useful in this collection is the reverberating attention paid to the “blurred space” between reality and fiction (262). Documentary theatre begins with a need and an attempt for evidence and truth; it ends, at least in this book, with a useful approach to the “blurred space”: Gordon's “show-biz,” Rimini Protokoll's “reality theatre,” Vivi Tellas's “minimal threshold of fiction.” For a writer dealing with personal narrative and experience, such as Ain Gordon, “show-biz” is “actually the stuff of existence—as we (all) move between realms of identification and displacement, the material and fantastical in the moment to moment of being” (262). For personal narratives that can also operate on a wider political level, such as the testimony in *REwind: A Cantata*, the space between has to do with the *nature* of truth: Yvette Hutchison credits the “fictional status of the theatrical space” in South Africa with allowing “audiences to engage with the narratives differently than if they were hearing them in a judicial or community hall setting” (64). In any case, the paradigm of “documentary”—of the “dramaturgy of the real”—breaks down truth/reality and fiction/theatre binaries in order to produce meaning for different purposes, and this is where the book succeeds and offers an effective learning tool.

—Sara Brady

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The DbD Experience: Chance Knows What It's Doing! By Rachel Rosenthal, edited and with a foreword by Kate Noonan. London: Routledge, 2010; 130 pp., illustrations. \$110.00 cloth, \$36.95 paper.

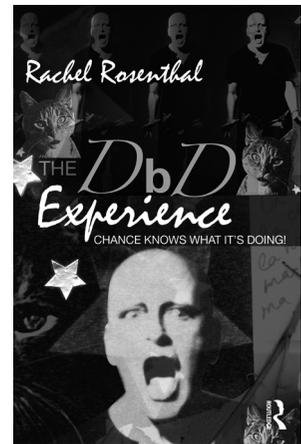
I don't consider myself a "practitioner." Critical discourse is my primary mode of access to art making. Which makes me an odd, or at least a self-conscious, fit for reviewing Rachel Rosenthal's pedagogical treatise, *The DbD Experience: Chance Knows What It's Doing!*

Or perhaps it doesn't. As Rosenthal notes in the Preface, *The DbD Experience* is less a practicum on how to restage these workshops than an invitation to "glimpse into the space and time needed to train a person in free improvisation, Rosenthal style" (xvi). And for those who do, unself-consciously, consider themselves practitioners, Rosenthal's generous and highly accessible description of how she has developed the DbD, or Doing by Doing, workshops will be invaluable in its eloquent and thoughtful approach to bringing together the physical and metaphysical facets of performance practice.

Housed between the depiction of her idyllic childhood and the revelation of another meaning of "DbD" (spoiler alert: it concerns her cat, Dibidi), Rosenthal's precise, extensive description of her intensive 34-hour workshops is very much a bringing together of her own art and life—the approach that grounds the workshop's methodology. Through a three-day regimen of body and voice work, individual and group exercises, and improvisations, theatre becomes a way of shifting the concentrated focus participants give these practices toward their "unconscious daily experiences" (29).

Rosenthal started the DbD workshops in 1979 in Los Angeles, coming out of Instant Theatre—a "totally spontaneous and collective theatrical form" Rosenthal developed in the late 1950s and continued, with some starts and stops, until 1977. ("The name ['Instant Theatre'] was a mix of the newly invented 'instant' coffee—a nod toward Pop art—and Zen!" [14].) In their current incarnation, DbD workshops take place from a Friday to Sunday, during which time students "hear three talks by [Rosenthal], do group movement meditations, exercises that address different theatrical issues, [...and] do voice work; receive training in lighting, music, set making, costuming and use of props" (22–23). The process, like Instant Theatre, is primarily improvisatory, with structures cumulatively built upon each other toward a final group improvisation called a Rambler. Distinctly rooted in theatre practice and implicitly critiquing the clichés of performance art (Rosenthal instructs her students to avoid the "been there, done that" strategies of that form, advising that "[s]hocking an audience is not half as interesting or important as touching an audience" [24]), Rosenthal situates the DbD experience within the realm of daily life: "A DbD experience consists of a confluence of events whose sum and interaction shape the space. [...] Each present moment is a constellation of things conscious and unconscious" (26).

Rosenthal follows the Introduction with an initial description of "What is Doing by Doing?" in which she addresses the broad structure of DbD. This is followed by three detailed sections based on each day of the workshop: "Friday: 'Origins'"; "Saturday: 'Connections'"; and "Sunday: 'Power.'" Each section includes a "Circle Talk" in which Rosenthal outlines a poetical philosophy of her approach to the overarching goals of the workshops. Friday's Circle Talk begins with an exploration of the role memory and imagination play in art making and expands into an abridged history of human development; Saturday's is a discussion of the relationship between subatomic physics and our connection to the people and world around us, particularly as a way to reconcile humans' "adversary and hostile" relationship to "Nature" (67); and Sunday's considers the hazards and responsibilities that come with the power one assumes as an artist. These Circle Talks, too, are improvisatory gestures that "contain material and thoughts that are prominent in [Rosenthal's] life at the time of the particular DbD" (40).



The sections are further divided into specific exercises and techniques—mostly descriptions of concrete strategies, though occasionally more abstract elaborations of the environment of the workshops. My favorite of the latter is “Dogs,” a subsection describing the role of the three dogs who share Rosenthal’s studio—a furry metaphor for the participants “actively pursuing conscious and unconscious connections to the Planet’s Nature in all its forms” (70). As well, the sections are complemented by exquisite photographs (several including the “Company Dogs”) that are as aesthetically engaging as they are instructive.

For nonpractitioners, though, it may be another element of *The DbD Experience* that is most compelling. Critical analyses of the performing arts too often overshadow personal accounts that shape both the practice and theory of any particular discipline or genre. Rosenthal’s Introduction, however, privileges the personal. In recounting friendships with such giants as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, and Bob Rauschenberg, she offers an intimate perspective on this foundational period in the development of contemporary theatre and art practice.

This approach is not entirely unproblematic. Rosenthal cleanses nearly any political context from her reverie. It is jarring to read about her privileged childhood juxtaposed with her family’s flight through Europe, South America, and, finally, New York—the threat of Nazism appearing, though distinctly, only briefly: “All this opulence didn’t prevent my growing up with anxiety and fear, as manifested in awful facial tics and nightmares. The Nazis were building their power at that time” (4). And, really, where are the women artists in this personal history? Certainly Rosenthal was not the only woman making theatre during this period, but she mentions very few others. While the charm and honesty of Rosenthal’s sharing of her personal history bespeaks the sincerity she shares within her practice, it also risks depoliticizing her practice through her memoirsque prose. Part of Rosenthal’s pedagogical methodology seems to be alleviating the weight of such burdens from the body, but I remain unconvinced that any body may, or should, be so relieved of the politics that surround it.

Participants, including the musicians, dancers, theatre practitioners, and nonpractitioners whose letters comprise the book’s addenda, describe the experience of the workshops as “soul-scraping and soul-cleansing” (122), as serving as a “major catalyst” that “precipitat[ed] a major change” (127), and as transformative. It is, as Kate Noonan writes in the Foreword (where she describes her own initial wariness during the first workshop she participated in), a “touchy-feely” process—but it is also one that engages “the eternal dance between the ‘I’ and the ‘Other,’ the negotiations of power, [...] and, as Rachel puts it, the ‘givens’ of existence” (xiii).

Acknowledging the paradox of writing about an exercise that is experiential rather than linguistic, Rosenthal describes her process as more choreographic than textual: “[M]y fingers began to dance on the keyboard [...] and I let them, trusting that the fingers knew something I didn’t know” (30). The workshops, and *The DbD Experience*, reflect and offer a means to try for oneself Rosenthal’s lifelong process of using performance to recognize the basic and profound possibilities of an “articulate” body (xiv).

—T. Nikki Cesare

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Stanislavsky in America: An Actor's Workbook. By Mel Gordon. London: Routledge, 2009; 194 pp. \$88.00 cloth, \$27.95 paper.

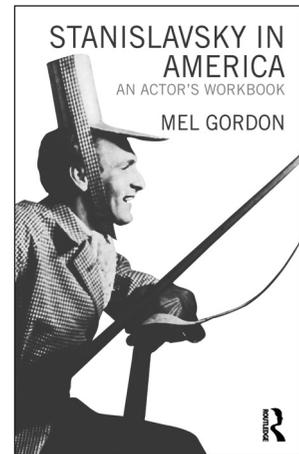
When Konstantin Stanislavsky toured the United States with his celebrated Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in the early 1920s, he opened the door for his now-famous System to become the foundation of American actor training. How his technique was interpreted, disseminated, challenged, and transformed in this country by Russian émigré teachers and their American students is the subject of Mel Gordon's concise and practical *Stanislavsky in America: An Actor's Workbook*. In the preface, Gordon concedes that numerous scholars have explored the ways in which the System "fermented into a Russian-American brew" (xiv) once it landed in the United States. He argues, however, that most of those studies incorrectly ascribe the System's popularity in the US to the ways in which Russian and American theatre are alike, along with "weak acting traditions or the death of [America's] stock companies" (xiv). Indeed, throughout the rest of the book Gordon is successful in proving his assertion that "[t]he historical truth is quite otherwise and exceedingly more complicated" (xiv).

The book consists of nine chapters, each focusing on a particular theatre company, teacher, or actor-training program that has contributed to American perceptions and *misperceptions* of Stanislavsky's work. Gordon makes a particular contribution by concluding every chapter (except for the first) with a series of exercises used by the featured instructors, many of which are drawn from unpublished material and interviews.

His style of writing, as always, is entertaining and engaging and will appeal to both the casual theatre enthusiast and the serious student of acting. What a shame, however, that his enjoyable prose is marred by a significant number of typographical errors—so many that I eventually found them distracting.

The opening chapter provides a succinct overview of how Stanislavsky developed the System in his native land and includes a discussion of how the Bolshevik Revolution and changing political climate affected the ensemble of the MAT in divisive ways. While it sets up the rest of the book adequately, it would be stronger if Gordon had drawn from more current research that has emerged since the fall of the Soviet Union. The selected bibliography for chapter 1 lists his own book, *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia* (1988), as the most recent source while the other four comprise Christine Edwards's *The Stanislavsky Heritage* (1965), John Gassner's *Producing the Play* (1941), Erika Munk's *Stanislavski and America* (1966), and a 1977 issue of *Yale Theater* (Cadden 1977). Certainly, all of these sources are valid; however, Gordon's discussion of the experiments in rehearsal techniques that Stanislavsky conducted in the final years of his life (1936–1938) could benefit from the latest scholarship in the area of Active Analysis by Sharon Carnicke (2008, 2010a, 2010b) and Bella Merlin (2001, 2003).

Particularly strong, on the other hand, are chapters 2 and 3, which profile the American Laboratory Theatre and the famed Group Theatre respectively. In this stretch of the book, Gordon offers a compelling exploration of how Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya of the American Laboratory Theatre first introduced American actors (namely Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Robert Lewis, and Sanford Meisner) to the theory and practice of the System. Gordon then traces in detail how those students "borrowed many of the American Laboratory Theatre's most hallowed principles" (40) and, along with fellow members of the Group Theatre, placed them into rehearsal practices, thereby creating "a comprehensive program in Stanislavsky Technique" (40). Thus, Gordon delineates clearly how the American version of the System began and how, early on, Strasberg and the other members of the Group dubbed their own work in Affective Memory the "'Method' in order to separate it from its Lab origins" (44).



Chapter 4 is divided into a series of individual sketches of émigré Stanislavsky-based teachers ranging from the legendary to the obscure. Again, Gordon makes a significant contribution with this chapter by bringing to light the work of several little-known or forgotten instructors that contributed greatly to the propagation of the American version of the System yet never wrote books to secure their legacy. Similarly, with chapter 5 Gordon plants a seed that might generate further scholarship devoted to Hollywood's Actors Laboratory, which, in Gordon's own words, "is chiefly remembered today as the first institutional victim of the Hollywood Blacklisting and political suppression of left-wing organizations during the McCarthy era" (114).

Chapters 6 through 9 are devoted to legendary acting gurus Strasberg, Adler, Lewis, and Meisner, respectively. Of particular note, in the chapter on Strasberg, Gordon presents a persuasive case in which he makes six distinct arguments to untangle the ever-controversial Method from its creator, demonstrating it as "a teachable system of acting with definable precepts and exercises. It is a technique and independent of any single teacher" (146). Of the last four chapters, I found the chapter on Meisner to be unsatisfying and the least substantive. Nevertheless, it is enough to pique one's interest in further study of the Meisner technique. Gordon follows up his study with an informative appendix listing the faculty and coursework of the American Lab Theatre, Maria Ouspenskaya's School of Dramatic Art, the Group Theatre Studio, the Michael Chekhov Studio, and the Actors Laboratory Workshop.

In sum, Mel Gordon has written a streamlined text that provides both historical context and exercises for anyone seeking an introduction to how Stanislavsky's System has been interpreted and transformed into the techniques taught by the most celebrated acting teachers in America from 1923 to 1994. His book is a welcome addition to the myriad texts appropriate for introductory courses in acting. Although the text lacks both substance and sufficient scholarship, Gordon manages to condense and explain a great deal of complex material, laying a foundation for further study of heftier works such as William Esper and Damon Dimarco's *The Actor's Art and Craft: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Approach* (2008) or Sharon Marie Carnicke's second edition of *Stanislavsky in Focus: An Acting Master for the Twenty-First Century* (2008).

—R. Andrew White

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More Books

Racine: From Ancient Myth to Tragic Modernity. By Mitchell Greenberg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010; 296 pp. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper, e-book available.

Mitchell Greenberg's in-depth study of the major 17th-century tragedies of Jean Racine confirms him as one of the most prominent and influential authors in France during this period. Greenberg points to Racine's use of the Oedipus myth to mobilize particular ideas about sexuality and order that speak to the establishment of the French absolutist state. He also focuses on the role of the body in Racine's work and the capacity for his productions to move audiences to tears as part of a particular set of affective theatrical techniques. Each of the seven chapters in the book is devoted to one or more tragedies as well as the ideas they inaugurate and explore: *La Thébaid*, *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, *Bérénice*, *Bajazet*, *Mithridate*, *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre et Hippolyte*, *Esther* and *Athalie*. This book is an invaluable addition to Racine scholarship as well as to the relationship of 17th-century French theatre to the politics of the period.

Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body. By Harvey Young. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010; 272 pp.; illustrations. \$80.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Harvey Young analyzes various forms of racialized performance in the United States over the past two centuries—from photographs of black captives in the 1850s to contemporary African American theatre—that exemplify what he conceptualizes as phenomenal blackness: a way to understand the black body as both a materiality and an abstraction. Rather than organized chronologically, each chapter deals with the problem of the black body around a particular medium. The first chapter is an extended discussion of phenomenal blackness and the questions it opens up around issues of experience, language, and memory. Chapter 2 focuses on early photographic representations of captive slaves taken by Joseph T. Zealy as well as the work of Richard Roberts and Walker Evans. Chapter 3 focuses on sports, in particular the public performance of boxing figures such as Tom Molineaux, Muhammad Ali, Jack Johnson, and Joe Louis. The fourth chapter looks at three plays by contemporary women performers and playwrights: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*, and Dael Orlandersmith's *Yellowman*. The final chapter discusses the history of lynching in the United States as a form of public spectacle and the way this history is exhibited in institutions such as America's Black Holocaust Museum, founded by James Cameron, America's last living survivor of a lynching.

Stepping Stones. By Ingemar Lindh. Ed. Frank Camilleri. Trans. Benno Plassmann and Marlene Schranz with the assistance of Magdalena Pietruska. Holstebro-Malta-Wroclaw: Icarus Publishing Enterprise, 2010; 232 pp.; illustrations. €14.00 paper.

First published in Italian, *Stepping Stones* provides a rich history of the work of Swedish acting teacher and director Ingemar Lindh, who passed away in 1997. Directly influenced by Étienne Decroux, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba, Lindh led a 10-day workshop in Porsgrunn, Norway in 1981. The book came out of transcriptions from that workshop. In the first two chapters, “In Search of Research” and “Catching the Moment of Eternity,” Lindh presents his thoughts on acting and lays out the basic building blocks of his approach as part of a workshop on collective improvisation. The third chapter includes two letters written by Lindh, giving an account of his artistic biography as well as his learning process throughout his pedagogical and artistic work. Chapter 4 is a 1986 interview with Lindh by Paolo Martini, founder and director of Studium Actoris in Norway. Finally, chapter 5 provides a detailed historical chronology of Lindh’s Institutet för Scenkonst (1971–1996) by Magdalena Pietruska. *Stepping Stones* is a vital record of Ingemar Lindh’s work as one of Europe’s the most influential acting teachers in the latter half of the 20th century.

Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance. By Chris Salter. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010; 480 pp.; illustrations. \$40.00 cloth.

Chris Salter has written an expansive historical and theoretical analysis of the influence of new technologies on 20th- and 21st-century artistic performance practices. Beginning with a foreword by Peter Sellars, each chapter of the book is occupied with a particular medium, ranging from theatre to robotic art. Salter’s aim is to illustrate the way changing technologies have affected the perception and production of artistic performance and how specific artists have deployed such technologies in their own artistic work. The first two chapters, “Space 1: Scene/Machine” and “Space 2: Media Scenographies,” focus on the role of technology and theatre scenography from the periods 1876 to 1933 and 1950 to the present by looking at stage environments as spatiomechanical and electrotechnical apparatuses. Chapter 3, “Performative Architectures” focuses on the transformative, ephemeral, and kinetic aspects of architecture technologies while the following chapter, “The Projected Image: Video, Film, and the Performative Screen,” deals with the role of television and the video screen in theatre and performance work as well as other large-scale uses of projection in architecture, media festivals, clubs, and expositions. Chapter 5, “Sound,” centers on sound and music technologies, beginning in the 1920s with the development of the Teleharmonium and the theremin, and concluding with contemporary integrations of gesture-based musical performance through digital tools. “Bodies,” the sixth chapter, considers the technical discourse around dance and body-based performance, including practices such as chronophotography, biomechanics, and eurythmics, along with the modern use of sensors, cameras, and computer imaging techniques. Chapter 7, “Machines/Mechanicals,” deals with the relation of human actors to mechanical performances and robotic art, ranging from the *Schrottkunst* industrial art scene to cybernetic sculptures. The final chapter in the book, “Interaction,” extends the notion of *responsive environment* by looking at artistic installations that blur the boundary between performers and spectators, from 1960s immersive *participant-activated* spaces to contemporary cases of urban gaming and performance through digital technologies.

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