
Is it possible to write a history of ephemeral live artworks that vanished decades ago? If it is, what are the theoretical implications of doing so? How does one approach such a task? What are the resources — institutional and otherwise — that have to be in place to enable this task? If not, why is it impossible to access a cultural legacy that was originally created in the public interest? How can one elucidate, contest, and overcome the obstacles that keep this work from the public for which it was created?

Some of these questions and more may have motivated Peggy Phelan, the editor of this volume, and its four contributing authors (Michael Ned Holte, Amelia Jones, Suzanne Lacy, and Jennifer Flores Sternad) to collaborate on this inviting anthology. Since I am reviewing the book for *TDR*, the answer to the first question is, Yes — it is possible to write a history of vanished live artworks. Phelan’s title for the volume, if abbreviated as *LA in LA*, evokes a Steinian French wordplay to imply a promise, reversing Gertrude Stein’s famous dismissal of Oakland (“there is no there there”), while conjuring up the southern California city’s facetious urban nickname. As if saying, “There is thereness there, in La-La Land,” *Live Art in LA* extends a seductive invitation for readers to follow the authors’ narrative footprints in re/tracing a past in LA that was enriched by many all-but-forgotten performance events. The edited volume was first produced in response to a research program at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), which shared its valuable archives, commissioned performance remakes and historiographic publications, and organized art roundtables and exhibitions in response to the Getty Foundation’s massive regional exhibition and performance initiative, *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980* (October 2011–April 2012). Thus, there were indeed institutional resources for the art historical retrieval of the performance pieces assessed in *Live Art in LA* — even though Phelan’s periodic framing (1970–83) is both shorter (by a quarter century) and slightly beyond (by three years) the time period of the Getty project. This subtle discord, along with the Getty-subsidized and LACE-facilitated research ambition “to tell the story of the rise of the Los Angeles art scene” (Getty Trust 2011), points to a subtext hidden within Phelan’s analysis of “the ways in which institutional violence of various kinds informs the perception of art” (3): institutional *patronage* often stands behind institutional *violence*, which might just manifest itself as the (necessary, if also cruel) arbitrariness of period framing.

As the author of *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (2002) — a book that Phelan graciously acknowledges as “among the few serious critical reflections” (3) on the history of live art in LA — I was invited by LACE to contribute to Phelan’s volume. I delightfully accepted the commission but later had to withdraw because of a schedule conflict. As I read through this insightful book, I could not but regret that I had missed out on the action. At the same time, I wondered if some readers would interpret my absence from a critical anthol-
ogy about LA performance art as a form of institutional exclusion (of a Taiwanese-American immigrant writer). My personal, behind-the-scenes relationship to the project gives me another perspective on the politics of redress that underscores the book, and particularly Phelan’s and Jones’s chapters. Phelan suggests that the dominance of the Hollywood film industry and the “[r]outine misogyny and racism” (4) that was provoked by the radical feminist performance that emerged in the region in the 1970s are both responsible for the relative dearth of scholarly efforts to historicize West Coast performance art. Jones confronts the “racism” (161) that she believes has erased certain politically progressive, ethnic-minority activist art collectives from “mainstream [art and cultural] histories” (115) by studiously documenting the performance achievements of Asco, an LA collective composed of Chicano/a artists Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Patssi Valdez, and Willie Herrón; and participants in the LA-based Black Arts Movement, including African American cross-media artists Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, David Hammons, Ulysses Jenkins, and many others.

I celebrate the arrival of these exceptional LA artists to the art historical narrative of US performance art. Yet, the past is an opaque country. I suspect that, aside from institutional and interpersonal violence, more convoluted circumstances, made even more complex by chance, choice, or politicized deviance, might have produced the preexisting art historical discourse in which diverse artists have enjoyed or suffered from uneven cultural exposure of their artworks. Phelan’s and Jones’s largely just indictments highlight the predicament that finite public resources tend to privilege certain types of creative agents over others. Nevertheless, by claiming that social prejudice is the singular root cause of the historical obscurity endured by some non-white, non-male, and non-heteronormative artists, Phelan and Jones might have ironically left these same artists less room for self-determination. Since the politics of redress is implicitly linked with a desire for inclusiveness, I wonder as well how many other performance artists are still left out, excluded from consideration by the volume’s scope of research, by the artists’ own lack of archival records, or even by certain performers’ ideological resistance to turning their transient actions into textually canonized icons. Might not the live seek to evade the supposed “permanent”—the text that transfixes some elusive memories onto inert pages—like a printed plague?

Despite my multicentric misgivings, I find Live Art in LA most compelling in its use of what I would call “embedded historiography,” as the authors self-reflexively perform/embed their critical subject positions and histories in the subjects of their “LA+LA” research. Phelan relates how her decade-plus professional and personal connections with California have modified her past “New York School” (34) scholarly identity, swaying her to partially cede her influential argument for performance’s ontological irreproducibility to the historical exigencies of performance documentation. Holte recalls the anxiety he felt as an art critic and curator over participating in Steve Roden’s reinvention of Allan Kaprow’s 18 Happenings in 6 Parts (1959), a “reperformance” that took place at LACE in conjunction with Allan Kaprow—Art as Life (2008), the Museum of Contemporary Art’s retrospective exhibition of this key southern California performance artist-theorist-teacher. Holte discovered that reenacting a major live artwork via reconstructed archives is “a curious act of scholarship” (41), which serves not to confirm authorial certainties but rather to accrue performative multiplicities. Confessing to a somewhat nostalgic melancholia, Jones traces her previous intellectual and emotional investments in this sprawling city’s various “communities [of] interest” (124) during her 16-year sojourn here, and launches onto a double course to both analyze numerous coalition performances and interrogate “how live events get written into history” (115). Through their embedded historiographies, the three theorists eloquently link the formative LA live art scene with current concerns in performance studies, including reenactment, archival fever, violence and creativity, ephemerality, and documentation.

The chapter collaboratively written by Lacy and Sternad presents a different, if no less compelling, approach to embedded historiography. Seemingly camouflaging their subjective
presence within the subjects of their quest, the coauthors simply introduce themselves as the team commissioned by LACE to conduct 50 interviews with the artists most actively involved in shaping what they claim to be “the most fecund period in the history of live art”: “1967–1983” (61)—a claim (attached to slightly variable time periods in the four chapters) that recurs throughout this volume, even though I remain only half-convinced. The text then revisits—through oral histories, extracted archives, and analytical annotations—more than 50 live art practitioners, cruising through multiple genres from conceptual art, feminist art, body art, activist art, and political art, to media and interactive art; from dance, theatre, sculpture, ritual, poetry, masquerade, and shamanism, to punk, rock, and sound art. Well-known artists speak next to the lesser-known; their voices, remembered actions, ideological attitudes, and epistemic perspectives are interwoven in a mobile prose that emulates LA’s multicentric urban built environment, producing what feels like a thematic domino effect, knocking from one center to another and another.

As an inimitable contributor to LA’s performance trajectories, Suzanne Lacy appears several times in the chapter, not as the coauthorial “I” but as one among the many third-person-identified creative agents archived there. It struck me that this ostensibly self-effacing stance is precisely how Lacy has exercised her subject position in her impressive four-decade-plus performance art/new genre public art career. Through her coalition politics, Lacy occupies the position of an initiator gradually building up a massive temporary social network of voluntary human subjects, who cooperate with one another by sharing leadership roles and responsibilities. Even her partnership with Sternad for writing the chapter recalls Lacy’s signature cross-generational collaborations. To me, this ultimate, and deeply moving, performative gesture demonstrates Phelan’s “modest proposal” that the museum’s cultural obligation should be reoriented away from preserving art and toward exploring and staging “its capacity to be remade” (11–12). In this light, Live Art in LA chronicles not just a reclaimed “fecund” history of recomposed performances but also signals the fecundity of the present moment.

—Meiling Cheng

References


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“It is time to revive Plato—not the discredited Plato of ide-alism, but a different one, the Plato of dramatic Platonism” (198). Motivated by this belief, Martin Puchner presents in The Drama of Ideas a “theatrical history of modern philosophy—a history of philosophy from the point of view of drama and theater” (8). The book features an eclectic cast including George Kaiser, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, Tom Stoppard, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Kenneth Burke, Gilles Deleuze, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, Alain Badiou, Socrates, and, of course, Plato. Its key term, “dramatic Platonism,” carries the assertion that Platonic idealism (i.e., the theory of the world of forms) loses all potency and legitimacy when not developed in tandem with an analysis of the bodies that express those forms in the material world. According to Puchner, Plato’s philosophy is practical and dramatic, and we find it at work in his dialogues. When approached as dramatic texts, the dialogues reveal Plato as a reformist playwright (chapter 1). A book of enormous scope, fueled by extensive research and a lifelong enthusiasm for pursuing the connections between philosophy and theatre, The Drama of Ideas presents a model for a new generation of performance philosophers to scrutinize and build upon.

Dramatic Platonism is thus a “balancing act” (34) between idealism and materialism, and Puchner introduces his readers to the dramaturgy of such an act in the first chapter, where he develops a poetics of the Socrates play, a genre that mixes tragic and comic elements and to which Plato’s dialogues belong. “Plato’s conception of theater was at once a break with Athenian theatricality [...] and a hesitant attempt to envision a mode of performance that would coexist with writing. Plato’s dialogues are reformist texts that seem to change the very practice of theatrical performance, pointing the way to the theater of the future” (30). Through analyses of the Phaedo, the Symposium, and other dialogues, Puchner develops an image of Plato as a protomodernist playwright. He lays out the basic principles of a Platonic poetics, which he sets off against Aristotles’s views on theatre and dramatic poetry by focusing on the features of character, action, and drama’s relation to the audience. He then locates this poetics in the dramatic works of numerous playwrights as well as in the texts of many philosophers.

Several of the book’s case studies present fascinating insights into modern theatre and philosophy by locating in plays and treatises antiheros modeled on the character of Socrates, philosophical arguments embedded in circuitous and sometimes ludicrous plots, and techniques that transform audience members and readers into keen participant observers capable of engaging in and enacting philosophical thought. Puchner’s reading of Stoppard’s Jumpers and Shaw’s Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy are particularly enjoyable and intriguing. In the former, Puchner finds a critique of philosophical relativism demonstrated through “theater’s supposedly relativizing effects” (118). In the case of Shaw’s play, and despite its poor critical reception at the time of its emergence, Puchner sees a British theatre of ideas following in the footsteps of Wilde that “mixes idea and character, argument and action by forging a drama from their collision” (98).

By yoking such a diverse collection of plays and playwrights together, Puchner runs the risk of finding precisely what he is looking for. If this is indeed his argument—that dramatic Platonism already exists and that, in order to fight off cultural and philosophical relativism, we must learn to recognize it—is Puchner not simply applying his creative Platonic reading to
dramatists whose works reveal a general philosophical tendency? Such a claim would not be unwarranted, but it is not something that Puchner avoids. “Platonic drama,” he writes, “does not describe a single tradition within modern drama, but rather a cluster of playwrights who find different solutions and forms to the same question or problem: how to use ideas in theater” (119). With such a statement, Puchner encourages readers to test his theory and to dive into the history of the Socrates play—a task that would be aided by the book’s 37-page history of such plays and an appendix listing 118 titles of Socrates plays written between the time of Lucian (167 CE) and the contemporary work of Steve Hatzai (2008 CE).

In chapter 4, Puchner turns his attention from philosophical playwrights to dramatic philosophers and offers, again, some compelling analyses that reveal Plato’s dramatic legacy in the works of 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century philosophers. Of particular note are the pages dedicated to Kierkegaard’s major works such as Either/Or and his use of characters such as A and B in that text. As was the case with the preceding chapter devoted to playwrights, Puchner, despite the unique signatures of the philosophers he treats, locates elements in both the form and content of their writings that link them to Plato’s theatrical reformation and devotion to Truth. Puchner’s Kierkegaard, for example, is not a disciple of Plato plain and simple but a reformer who manages to remake Platonic dramatism for a new generation (125–38).

This book’s subtitle—Platonic provocations—points to both the strength and weakness of The Drama of Ideas. Its strength is its many glimpses of dramatic Platonism at work, which provide numerous lines of sight onto the reciprocal relation between Ideas and everyday life. The weakness of these provocations is their sprezzatura; certain sections of the book forward bold claims through quick analyses and beg for more thorough treatment. But idiosyncrasies of style and content do not ultimately detract from the merit of this book, which presents Plato as a philosopher-dramatist engaged in the critique of sophistry and steps into the Platonic lineage by offering a contemporary critique of the philosophies of difference propounded by poststructuralism. The recent formation of the professional association Performance Philosophy proves that scholars of theatre and performance are attuned to the theatrical turn philosophy has taken in the 20th century. Puchner’s book provides a model research methodology for scholars of this new field, and his enthusiasm for the drama of philosophy speaks through its pages.

—Will Daddario

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Body of State: The Moro Affair, A Nation Divided.

Trilogy of Resistance. Antonio Negri. Translated by Timothy S. Murphy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011; xxxvii + 126 pp. $75.00 cloth, $24.95 paper.

On 12 December 1969, a bank explosion in Milan’s Piazza Fontana killed 17 people and wounded 90. Thus began an era of political violence in Italy that became known as the “Years of Lead.” It lasted for nearly two decades. During this period, neo-fascist and communist extremists murdered and maimed hundreds of victims, making Italy the most terror-ridden country in the industrialized world. The problem thereafter subsided, but then resurfaced sporadically on the radical left from the late 1990s to the present. Italy’s dire economic woes and social crises today have the country’s authorities worried over the prospect of a return to the Years of Lead or to something like it.

Working in the politically engaged theatrical tradition of Italy’s Nobel Prize-winning playwright Dario Fo, Marco Baliani presents in Body of State testimony about his own involvement in the “Movement,” the radical left-wing culture from whose most extreme elements such terrorist groups as the Red Brigades emerged. As a young man in his 20s and just starting out in the theatre, he took an empathic view of the Red Brigades, admiring their revolutionary aims, if not all their methods. Even when in 1978 they kidnapped Aldo Moro, Italy’s leading political figure, and killed his five-man security guard, Baliani felt a thrill of revolutionary solidarity with the terrorists. Moro’s murder nearly two months later, however, brought about a crisis of conscience in Baliani, as it did in many other erstwhile sympathizers of the Red Brigades. Filmed for television in 1998, Body of State serves as a vehicle for his personal impressions of the Moro tragedy and the Years of Lead generally.

The play certainly deserves to be recognized as an invaluable historical document for the light it sheds on the Movement’s ideological complicity with the Red Brigades. Baliani says of the Red Brigades that they spoke his language. It was the language of revolution, which the by then thoroughly reformist Communist Party no longer spoke. The Red Brigades had emerged in 1970 as the Movement’s most ideologically consistent element. Baliani concedes that he, along with everyone else actively engaged in the Movement, had played the same game. At political meetings, “everyone there believed more or less the same thing, that the revolution was nigh and the world was about to change, from one day to the next” (35).

About the still-controversial conspiracy theories in the Moro murder case, and chiefly the claims that the government did not want to find Moro, Baliani limits himself to saying, “we feel and know that not everything has been said, that the truth is still far off, and that what is hidden is more troubling than what is visible” (27). The relevant footnote in the text cites the work of Sergio Flamigni, a leading proponent of conspiracy theories surrounding the case.
Unmentioned are the rebuttals to Flamigni, chiefly in Italy by Agostino Giovagnoli, *Il caso Moro: Una tragedia italiana* (2005), and Vladimiro Satta, *Odisea nel caso Moro: Viaggio controcorrente attraverso la documentazione della Commissione Stragi* (2003) and *Il caso Moro e i suoi falsi misteri* (2006). Though explicitly wanting to stay clear of the debate over conspiracy theories, Baliani expresses himself on this contentious point in a way that reveals where he stands. No less indicative of his predilection for conspiracy theories about the Moro case is the unchallenged Flamigni reference in the footnotes.

In the fascinating diary that follows the text of the one-man play, Baliani recounts key episodes in his career as an actor and director. For students of theatre especially, Baliani's diary will make for fascinating reading. Describing his method as both an actor and a playwright, Baliani observes that in *Body of State* he subjected himself to an interior excavation by “performing myself of twenty years before” (62). He also comments on some of the literary sources that inspired him, above all *Between Hell and Reason: Essays from the Resistance Newspaper Combat, 1944–1947* by Albert Camus (1991). On the eve of the 1998 television production in the Roman Forum, he grows apprehensive about the technology involved. On the set, the equipment and swarming technicians unnerve him as he worries about the interaction between his monologue and the images to be flashed on a screen: “maybe that is why my theater has gradually become so Franciscan, just words and bodies, one or two objects and nothing more” (65).

In a 19 April 2009 interview that is also included in the book, Baliani elaborates on his affinities with Pablo Picasso and Bertolt Brecht in thinking about the responsibility of the artist “to pull an element, a subject, a small fragment, out of a confused tangle of history, and put it into relief artistically, with a particular language” (71). Although Baliani’s “biographical theater” has many precursors, he claims a unique distinction for *Body of State*, with the narrator performing himself and divested of the actor’s mask. Such a dispossession he thinks unreal and even unnatural: “I wouldn’t set it as a model” (71). Yet for this particular play about the Moro tragedy, he claims, no other form could work. No traditional character could have performed the narrator’s role, which, for its effectiveness, depended absolutely on the “authority of someone who had lived the experience and could relate credibly to the audience as a historical witness” (71).

In 2009, Baliani brought *Body of State* to the United States. He toured several university campuses on the East Coast and in the Midwest. The challenge in these places for him concerned the different level of historical awareness that he likely would encounter with American audiences. Whereas every Italian theatregoer would know the Moro story to the last detail, American audiences could not be counted on to have any familiarity with it at all. An appendix contains some American reviews of *Body of State* and student responses to it, testifying to the power of Baliani’s performance wherever he took the play.

Antonio Negri’s *Trilogy of Resistance* also belongs to the literature of remembrance for Italy’s Years of Lead. A charismatic political science professor at the University of Padua during the period, Negri thrilled a generation of students with his Marxist lecture-dramas. He did not rest content with lecturing, however. An activist in the city’s radical left-wing politics, he soon acquired national and international fame as the country’s leading theorist of revolution. The Negri message, as elucidated in such notorious tracts as *Il dominio e il sabotaggio: sul metodo marxista della trasformazione sociale* (1978), sanctioned a violent response against the vampire capitalist status quo, grown monstrous on the flesh and blood of the underlying classes.

Then came Negri’s arrest on 7 April 1979 for subversive activity, including, it was charged, involvement in the kidnapping of Moro. About his guilt or innocence a fierce debate erupted that has never died out: on the one side, was he the *cattivo maestro* (evil master thinker) behind the terrorists or, worse, one of the terrorist kingpins himself; on the other, was he innocent of such charges and a victim of the establishment vendetta against all seriously critical thinkers in consumer capitalist society? His election to Parliament as a Radical Party candidate freed him from prison, and he soon fled to France where he taught and wrote for the next 14 years. This Paris period became a time of philosophical recalibration for him. In close association with
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Negri abandoned his Marxist-Leninist ideas and vocabulary in favor of a postmodernist approach to revolution. Returning to Italy in the hope of becoming politically active in a renascent anticapitalist movement and in promoting the cause of amnesty for his fellow political exiles, he served several more years of his prison sentence, which had been reduced through a plea-bargain.

While still in prison, Negri cowrote Empire (2000) with Michael Hardt, a Duke University literature professor. A neo-Marxist critique, in the postmodernist manner, of global capitalism, the book became an international bestseller. Two more books rounded out their trilogy of protest against capitalist globalization: Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (2004) and Commonwealth (2009). In the helpful translator’s introduction to The Trilogy of Resistance, Timothy Murphy draws the reader’s attention to the connections between Negri the philosopher and Negri the dramatist: “if Empire and Multitude produce political philosophy poetically, the plays do so dramatically” (xv). Negri himself leaves us in no doubt regarding the political purpose of the plays: “Above all, I wanted to take up the communist tradition of the epic theater again and try to restore its image for the postmodern era” (3). He further describes them as “three rough drafts of a program for a resisting and desiring life.” Bertolt Brecht would appear to be Negri’s politically engaged exemplar as a playwright, and behind him certainly stands the towering figure of the young Marx of the “Theses on Feuerbach,” specifically the 11th thesis: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” ([1845] 1976:8).

Trilogy of Resistance consists of plays that premiered in France from 2004 to 2007. All three are meditations on the evils of capitalist power and the duty to resist it. The first of them, Swarm: Didactics of the Militant, unfolds as a dialogue between a Man and a Chorus, moving from a poignant lamentation about the indignities, suffering, and slaughter of capitalism’s victims to an aggressive demand for revenge against the morally and politically bankrupt status quo. The dominion of money must end, for man to be liberated from the wage slavery that under globalization has become increasingly precarious and more exploitative than ever.

The Bent Man: Didactics of the Rebel takes place in Fascist Italy. Yet at the outset of the play Negri has the Chorus address the timeliness of his theme: “war, fascism, and the vulgar violence of the bosses are always there” (38). Just before carrying out a suicide bombing, the central character reflects, “the true resistance is singular resistance, it’s bending in order not to break, it’s the rustling of the leaf in the forest, it’s permanent sabotage, it’s a school of intelligent desertion, an exercise in exodus [...] We must rebel in this world by constructing another, a new one, within it” (70). In the Elegy at the end of the play, the Chorus returns to sum up the meaning of his sacrifice: “we will no longer need to bend in order not to be broken, and we will all learn to be free” (74).

Cithaeron: Didactics of Exodus, inspired by Euripides’s Bacchae and the final play in the trilogy, also illustrates Negri’s ideas about the eternal duty of man to resist oppression, an obligation that only can be carried out through revolutionary violence. Even in ancient Thebes the bosses opposed freedom and justice. Their counterparts in every age, called to cruelty and exploitation by nature, batten on human misery. All attempts to reform them simply prolong their domination. Throughout human history, there really have been only two types of human beings: those who yearn to be free and those who crave only power. Between them the war never stops.

Negri presents all of his revolutionary characters in the Trilogy of Resistance as heroic figures standing against the forces of greed and imperialism. For him the Cause is real and eternal. Baliani, by comparison, expresses in Body of State far greater tentativeness and uncertainty about the revolutionary actions that he supported during the Years of Lead. He sees it as a confused period of history and still has not sorted through all of the contradictions that it produced. His confessional play gains from the dramatic tension of the conflict between the noble ideals of the Movement and its terrible outcomes in violence and defeat.
Negri instead has shown no concern at all, much less remorse, over the reign of terror in Padua during the 1970s, to which his Autonomia Operaia group contributed. As a consequence, his message plays, which ring with the passion of a true believer, do not gather any kind of dramatic momentum. They lack the artistic energy that in political theatre can only be produced from a conflict between evenly opposed forces, if only on the level of acting and eloquence. He gives his villains absolutely nothing. They never say a memorable thing nor, in their actions, rise above the communist clichés of capitalist villainy. Philosopher and political thinker Negri rests content in his plays to advance the revolution by means devoid of aesthetic power.

— Richard Drake

Reference


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Discussing the noh theatre, the kabuki theatre, contemporary drag queens, and the figure of the geisha, among others, this book is an ambitious work on femininity in Japan. Reading it immediately raised for me a critical question: Who speaks for whom and about whom? A question like this must have been more than expected by the author, who describes this volume as a “short book [which] is an appreciation, sincere and blundering, resolutely ignorant, riddled with the prejudices and insights of an alien, a theatergoer, a man gazing at femininity” (2).

Still, the question should be dully and duly raised, since the power of the act of “defining” is germane here. Postmodern investigations of performativity have effectively suggested to us that most constative statements—for example, “Japanese femininity is X”—are most likely disguised performatives: in the present example, “I pronounce that Japanese femininity is X.” And “defining that you are Y” and “ordering that you must be Y” are logically just a step apart.

Given this, I am curious why Kissing the Mask takes the noh theatre as the primary subject for its discussion of Japanese femininity. A medieval Buddhist theatre form consisting of dance and chant, noh is arguably the most respected traditional theatre genre in Japan, and yet the
extent to which its highly abstract and meticulously stylized performance of women’s characters represents the concept of femininity in the broader culture is subject to dispute. For one thing, noh actors playing women—shite (main characters) actors in the noh lexicon—do not specialize in women’s roles alone, because shite actors are, by definition, expected to perform all five categories of noh’s main character types: deities, male warriors, women, the crazed, and demons. This is the defining characteristic that differentiates noh actors who perform as women from actors dedicated to the performance of female roles in other traditional theatre forms, such as onnagata—actors who specialize in performing women’s roles in the kabuki theatre (a brief interview with a contemporary onnagata, Ichikawa Shun’en,1 is included in the book [231–36]).

The book draws from a voluminous amount of material, ranging from many published works, to Vollmann’s own “cross-gender”2 makeover in Japan (222–28), to insights he heard and observed from practitioners, including noh actor Umewaka Rokurô and geisha Suzuka-san. While Vollmann’s personal experiences and observations surely enrich the book, the way in which he uses his sources makes it difficult to categorize this book. The numerous published texts cited range from renowned noh treatises by Zeami to contemporary academic texts on noh, and beyond. In this sense, the book might appear too specialized for a trade book, but the way it references sources, directly and indirectly, is not meticulous enough for what is usually considered a scholarly book.

Throughout the volume, Vollmann juxtaposes countless performances of women’s characters in diverse contexts, including the shite in noh theatre, the onnagata in kabuki, contemporary drag queens, and the geisha, an ever-popular cultural icon of good-old Japan, the popularity of which was rejuvenated by Arthur Golden’s Memoirs of a Geisha (1997) and its 2005 film adaptation, directed by Rob Marshall. This array of characters and genres delineates the range of concepts and images of “femininity” in Japan.

The wide variety of styles in this grouping reminds me of a comment made by an onnagata I worked with on several occasions in 2003, when I assisted him on his US performances. Responding to a question from the audience during a performance in Michigan, Onoe Umenosuke III categorically stated that onnagata were totally distinguished from other “cross-gender” performers because what onnagata do is an art. A tacit claim here is that other “cross-gender” performances are not art (except, arguably, for noh, which is located at the top of the artistic hierarchy of traditional Japanese theatre). Such conjunction (whether metaphorically or metonymically), or the denial thereof, is debatable. Simplifying this debate to the extreme, if the onnagata decisively denies the possible connection, Kissing the Mask seems to presume the relationship among these types of performers. No doubt, neither position should be taken for granted; analysis of the onnagata’s refusal of the “cross-gender” categorization must wait for an occasion other than this book review. But if what the onnagata calls “artistry” differentiates various genres of “cross-gender” performance, in Kissing the Mask Vollmann unites them under the umbrella of “Japanese culture.”

As for addressing Kissing the Mask’s assumed correlation among performances of femininity in various genres (noh, drag, geisha, etc.), one potential starting point could have been the remark, “many [noh] plays (like many geisha songs) are about waiting” (49). I would have liked to read what the author thinks about this connection in greater detail, as it would have been an intriguing platform for epistemological dialogue. For example, is this “waiting” especially gender specific? Or, rather, is “waiting” in the noh theatre applicable not only to female but also male characters? At the end of the day, almost any shite in the noh theatre is waiting for his or her story to be retold in front of his or her, and our, eyes. Furthermore, according to the

1. Japanese names are given in the Japanese order: surname first, followed by the given name.
2. Quotation marks reflect my skepticism about this term, which I have explained elsewhere (see Isaka 2009:22–23).
Buddhist cosmology in which noh operates, are we animate beings not all waiting for karma to materialize itself? Ultimately, is waiting not the only thing we can ever do? Alternatively, if “waiting” is a feminized action (arguably a commonsense belief that is taken for granted in many cultures) does the performance of female characters in the noh theatre—and by extension “cross-gender” performance in Japan—suggest that all animate beings under Buddhism are feminized to one extent or another? Is this question not capable of producing further questions? How about, for instance, “Are the Japanese feminine?”

Finally, I would like to add another two cents on the mechanics of the book, because my reading experience was greatly affected by these elements. Throughout this book, readers are asked to deal with three clusters of texts simultaneously: main text, footnotes, and endnotes. While reading the main text, readers are instructed, as convention requires, to look up footnotes. There exists no such indication at all for endnotes. Should you wish to get a full grasp of this book, you must actively keep searching for the unmarked place in the main text that an endnote refers to, by reading the main text and endnotes simultaneously. In this way, Kissing the Mask systemically creates a certain distancing effect for the reader. While this arrangement might not suit a more pedestrian page-turner, the effect might be helpful for some readers tackling the complicated reading experience this book provides.

—Maki Isaka

References


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Readings in Performance and Ecology assembles a broad range of essays that take as their respective foci ecological debates, animals in performance, ecoactivism, landscapes and bodies, ecocriticism in dramatic literature, and the practicalities of theatremaking. This expansive scope evidences the editors’ assertion that performance theorists and practitioners should adopt eco-centric approaches to their work. Arons and May also contend that “theorizing ecological theater and performance will demand a reconceptualization of the nature and purpose of mimesis,

3. I am borrowing this phrase from Ueno Chizuko (1997:293), who asks this question in relation to the concept of reverse Orientalism.
and require finding ways to represent the more-than-human world on stage that do not ineradicably ‘other’ nature” (2). The ethical and logistical challenges of this claim surface in many of the 17 pieces that comprise the anthology’s five sections. Some of the essays, however, do not fully tease out the contours and stakes of ecology within their sites or methodologies.

The anthology aims to inspire artists and scholars to develop “an increasingly diverse and complex discourse” (2) through textual analyses of plays, investigations of performance events, and descriptions of theatre production case studies. This dual focus on scholarly inquiries and the nuts-and-bolts of the theatre praxis helps to distinguish this book from related projects that focus on ecocritical analyses (Marranca [1996] 2005; Fuchs and Chaudhuri 2002; Chaudhuri 1995), studies of site-specific performances (Pearson and Shanks 2001; Kershaw 2007; Szerszynski, Heim, and Waterton 2003), and descriptions of environmentally conscious theatre production (Cless 2010; Fried and May 1994). Useful elements of this anthology include 29 images and an extensive bibliography as well as Wallace Heim’s provocative epilogue of insightful observations and questions prompted by the essays.

One trio of especially compelling materialist investigations includes work from the sections “Theorizing Ecoperformance” and “Ecoactivism and Performance.” Kathleen M. Gough’s “Natural Disaster, Cultural Memory: Montserrat Adrift in the Black and Green Atlantic” examines the environmental and cultural fallout from the devastating 1997 volcanic eruption on the Caribbean island of Montserrat. Gough gathers call-and-response rhythms of Montserrat Carnival, recurring radio announcements, the effects of hurricanes and floods, Stewart Parker’s Kingdom Come: An Irish-Caribbean Musical (1978), and a St. Patrick’s Day Festival as evidence of a complex “archive in repertoire” (109) that reassembles a cultural identity and reanimates a collective memory during and in the aftermath of a crisis.

Arden Thomas critically excavates performance ecology in “Stillness in Nature: Eco Stubblefield’s Still Dance with Anna Halprin.” Thomas chronicles “a fierce but gentle rolling dance” (113) in the intimate choreographies of Halprin who generates slow, improvised movements by responding to the physical conditions (climate, objects, topography) of a location selected by Stubblefield. Stubblefield’s photographs evidence the “evocative duet” (117) of the pair’s collaboration. Thomas uses the work of André Lepecki, Teresa Brennan, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to think through the environmental gestures of this partnership via dance criticism, critiques of modern capitalism, and phenomenology.

Meg O’Shea’s essay, “Bikes, Choices, Action! Embodied Performances of Sustainability by a Traveling Theater Group,” takes the reader into the interpersonal dynamics of the Ottawa-based Otesha Project. Their participants devise theatre with environmental and ecological themes and then bring their work to audiences at campsites and community centers via bicycles. O’Shea concerns herself with the “actors’ sustainability-related perceptions and behaviors” (139). Addressing the group’s tensions and realizations stemming from food purchases, cycle routes, and empathy in performance, O’Shea argues for an “embodied performative element in dialogic processes for public engagement with sustainability” (145). Each of these three essays weaves together evocative performance details and critical references to elucidate the stakes of these collaborations between humans and the world they inhabit.

Some essays lack the nuanced self-reflexive methodological framing articulated in the above studies. Nelson Gray’s investigation of the ecopolitics of place in Canadian drama compares two settler plays from 1930 and two contemporary First Nation plays from the 2000s. Gray does not, however, explicate the significant sociopolitical and environmental shifts that occurred
in Canada in the intervening years that might identify these plays as appropriate for his investigation, nor does he acknowledge the stakes of comparing Euro-Canadian and indigenous dramatic works today. Derek Lee Barton’s essay on the cultural reverberations of a giraffe’s presence in 19th-century Vienna identifies an endlessly fascinating subject worthy of critical attention. Barton astutely observes the need to “distinguish between the giraffe as living, breathing, sentient being, and the ideology-laden performances that were deployed around and overlaid upon his body and the simulacra of his body” (78). The essay does not provide a balanced account of these two sides of the giraffe, however. By describing only briefly the material conditions of the animal’s life and death, the essay’s focus on the giraffe as commodified, circulated image ends up obscuring the singularity of the animal itself.

Whereas ecocriticism has emerged from the discipline of literary criticism as a rich subfield, terms such as “ecodramaturgy” and “ecodirecting” have not yet carved out a place in the vernacular of theatre and performance studies. This anthology seeks to do this, but the repeated application of the prefix “eco” runs the risk of evacuating the political by appearing to join the “green” bandwagon, as it were, in popular culture or of codifying diverse theatrical and scholarly acts regarding the representation and staging of the more-than-human world. Remaining attentive to and critical of the varied (and at times problematic) deployments of “eco,” “ecological,” and “environmental” will help those interested in contributing to this burgeoning area of exciting and important research to generate and refine the critical, self-reflexive discourse that these editors rightly seek.

—Joanne Zerdy

References


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Acting Together marks one node in a network of interdisciplinary relationships and projects designed to explore the intersections of conflict transformation and performance. The two volumes (the second of which was just recently published) focus respectively on direct violence and systemic oppressions and are linked to a documentary, website, and several symposia. The broader project additionally has associations with academic institutions (Brandeis’s Center for Peacebuilding and the Arts) and artistic groups (Theatre Without Borders). Contributors include theatremakers, ritual facilitators, and peacebuilding experts writing about their own and others’ work from a range of sites including Palestine, Israel, the former Yugoslavia, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Argentina, the United States, Australia, and Cambodia. The editors masterfully frame and curate the chapters to provide a sense of cohesion across a range of practices with a focus on storytelling, context setting, and ways that performance (with theatrical emphasis) relates to theories of conflict transformation. In a work of great care and enormous value to those of us working at the intersections of performance and peacebuilding, there are numerous accomplishments to mark—particularly of aporias made visible—as well as a few puzzling hiccups.

While the work celebrates collaboration and pays due homage to the fields of applied theatre, Playback, Theatre for Development, and Theatre of the Oppressed, there is still a tendency in the publication world to mark out the project’s “uniqueness” as “the first ever documentation” (xvii) of global performance practices viewed through the lens of peacebuilding. This kind of statement problematically downplays a number of key studies in the field, such as James Thompson’s prolific work, as well as previous anthologies on theatrical facilitation and on performance, violence, and conflict transformation. The language of “first” also belies this anthology’s care to emphasize hybrid artistic forms that both acknowledge and critique traditional practices alongside “new” aesthetics. Additionally, while John Lederach’s vital work on the moral imagination undergirds much of the book, his foreword indicates an odd misapprehension of the foundational theories of Theatre of the Oppressed. Describing an interactive production in Nepal attended by mainly middle- and upper-class teenagers, Lederach celebrates their proposed solutions to the problems of the protagonist, an abused servant. Yet, TO specifically works against the notion that a middle- and upper-class audience could provide solutions to someone experiencing oppression or that the servant’s experience can be “universalized.”

Lederach’s sensitive understanding of conflict transformation in other contexts, however, provides a useful framework that threads together disparate chapters. The editors additionally work to ensure that the chapters are reflexive, grounded in the historical material conditions that structure violence, and hold multiple perspectives on conflict and its potential transformation.

Volume I offers several prefatory framings from Lederach, Theatre Without Borders cofounder Roberta Levitow, and an introductory essay by the editors. The editors also introduce each of two sections focused on direct violence and its aftermath. A Sri Lankan peacebuilding specialist’s afterword reflects on the nine case studies presented before the editors conclude by previewing Volume II. Black-and-white photo illustrations of starkly lit indoor and blended-into-the-world outdoor performances signal the volume’s attention to the differential aesthetics of artist-driven and community-based theatrical practices as well as to structured rituals. Each chapter is thoroughly sourced and efficiently endnoted.
The editors and authors also take great care to mark not only intragroup conflicts, but also the challenges of building alliances within arenas of asymmetrical power. The most compelling studies illuminate the challenges that complicate conflict’s “resolution,” rendering visible related tensions of narrative control. Closing the book’s first section, “Weaving Dialogues and Confronting Harsh Realities,” composed by Palestinian citizen of Israel Aida Nasrallah and Jewish Israeli Lee Perlman, exemplifies these dynamics.

The chapter follows upon sensitive studies by Serbian artist Dijana Milošević and Ugandan playwright Charles Mulekwa, as well as Sri Lankan conflict resolution practitioner Madhawa Palihapitiya and Palestinian social policy scholar Abeer Musleh. Milošević details the work of her company, Dah Theater, to resist silence and forgetting and construct spaces “where memory can live” (37). Mulekwa, Palihapitiya, and Musleh variously grapple with the impact of colonialism and the generation of what Palihapitaya refers to as “created space” for civic discourse (78). Musleh draws on the concept of sumud—“firm nonviolence”—as a practice of creative resistance (98). These studies of resilience powerfully contrast with the tensions around narrative control and peacebuilding illuminated by Nasrallah and Perlman, whose chapter consists of intersecting scenarios (composed by playwright Nasrallah) and Perlman’s more conventional yet complex discussion of Arab-Jewish theatrical collaborations. Nasrallah’s scenarios mark a shift from her distrust, explained over coffee on Perlman’s turf (Tel Aviv University), to deeper engagement, revealed in her home village of Um El Fahm. The tone of the chapter shifts from Nasrallah’s blunt questioning of “another project where the Arabs and Jews smile together” (123), told through a scholarly language she professes less comfort with, towards her transparent desire to “inflict [her] marginalized language on audiences” (135). The structure and development of the chapter models how two distinct narrative voices can connect with each other without having to blend into one dominant voice.

Section two investigates performance in the aftermath of mass violence, with attention to the paradoxes of expressing the unspeakable and negotiating accountability with reconciliation. The editors and authors frame such ethical dilemmas as the possibility of retraumatization through performance to moving towards creative spaces of acknowledgment and interdependence. Coeditor Gutiérrez Varea explores the intersections of truth and justice in Argentina through storytellers who “embod[y] cultural memory” (154) in the face of state-sponsored violent erasures. Playwright Ruth Magraff offers a theoretically sophisticated engagement of Slavoj Žižek’s theories of alterity and “splits” in social identity to think through Hidden Fires, in which Hindu actors respond to violence in Gujarat by sustaining multiple positionalities as artists, extremists, and Muslim victims. Collaborative artist Catherine Filloux details several projects exploring the work of embodying repressed history in Cambodia. Coeditor Polly Walker concludes the case studies with a focus on ritual as a mode of conflict transformation between indigenous and settler peoples in the US and Australia. She explores how rituals animate relationships of mutuality while unearthing the multiple histories of place. Walker fittingly acknowledges that this work is best suited to post-conflict scenarios.

Across this first volume, the best of the case studies speak towards multiple truths and the need to expand our capacity to sustain these multiple truths rather than to move towards a dominant vision that reduces the power of dissent and agonism. “Theater can answer people’s need to understand the moment they live in,” asserts Dijana Milošević (42). This “understanding” emerges in this rigorous and finely detailed anthology as a capacity to hold contradictory truths while expanding one’s moral imagination to allow for “firm nonviolence” to develop out of situations of conflict.

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John Lutterbie’s Toward a General Theory of Acting: Cognitive Science and Performance is one of the most recent additions to the Palgrave MacMillan series, and a most welcome one. Since I was first introduced to contemporary cognitive science in the 1990s through seminal publications such as The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience by Francisco J. Varela, Evan T. Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991), I have been waiting for someone to author a book like Lutterbie’s, which would provide both a comprehensive as well as accessible account of how insights and perspectives from cognitive science might help contemporary actors to better understand, reframe, and reflect upon their work.

Lutterbie’s book is comprehensive on two levels. First, when compared to the earlier accounts by Rhonda Blair (2008) and Donna Soto-Morettini (2010) that focus primarily on Stanislavskian-based character acting, Lutterbie’s book is comprehensive with regard to both acting processes (training, rehearsal, improvisation, devising, as well as performance), and the range of (Western) approaches to acting discussed: his book addresses realist character acting, nonrealist acting, as well as devised/postdramatic performance. In chapter one Lutterbie’s key argument is that “when speaking of cognitive processes involved in acting, the type of theatre does not matter. To talk about acting [...] is to talk across all three categories of theatre” (27). It also means to speak across all the specific “dominant approaches to the training of acting” (13) he briefly surveys in this chapter—Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, Chekhov, LeCoq, and some of the major American Stanislavskian-derived approaches. What is most important is not Lutterbie’s brief recapitulation of the work of each practitioner/theorist, but the concluding few pages on “common ground” among them where he articulates some of the shared concepts, terms, and metaphors used by these practitioners to mark the actor’s work (71–73). Lutterbie’s purpose is not to choose or reify any single approach or “theory” of acting, but rather to interrogate, clarify, and “tease out the significance” of these common concepts and terms “by using cognitive sciences, not in order to ground them in empirical studies but in order to provide definitions that are useful to the actor and the teacher of acting” (73).
The second way in which Lutterbie’s book is comprehensive is in its attempt to construct a “global theory of acting” in which he examines the processes, structures, and phenomena that constitute the actor’s embodied/experiential work as actor and as human being in a “global” manner. He provides a general GLOBAL theory of acting that cannot be reduced to any specific approach to acting or specific acting theory discussed in chapter one.

The basis for Lutterbie’s “global theory” is the third of three approaches to the study of the mind from cognitive science as defined by Evan Thompson: (1) cognitivism, where the mind is metaphorically conceived “as digital computer”; (2) connectionism, where the mind is thought of as “a neural network”; and (3) embodied dynamicism, where the mind is “an embodied dynamic system” (2007:4–13). Given the processual, experiential nature of acting when considered as a human phenomenon, Lutterbie chooses to elaborate his “general theory of acting” from embodied dynamicism or Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) because it offers “an explanatory power commensurate with the complexity and creativity of the acting process” (9). As Lutterbie explains, DST “states that a ‘system’ is generally defined as elements that function together to create a complex whole; and a ‘dynamic system’ is one that exists in a constant state of disequilibrium, responding to perturbations (disturbances) that further destabilize the whole” (25). The actor’s work in rehearsals is to develop a score that exists as a dynamic within the dynamic system of the performance as a whole.

Lutterbie’s project is similar to my earlier attempt at articulating a “meta-theoretical understanding of acting as a phenomenon” (2009:42; see especially my chapter 3, “An Enactive Approach to Acting and Embodiment”). We both make use of Thompson’s “embodied dynamic system” approach within cognitive science. Our common concern is with the actor as actor and as a human being, i.e., “living beings are autonomous agents that actively generate and maintain themselves, and thereby also enact or bring forth [...their] own coherent and meaningful patterns of activity” (Thompson 2007:13; see also Varela et al. 1991). What differentiates our two often complimentary accounts is that Lutterbie’s is much more comprehensive with regard to the insights to be gained from cognitive science and DST per se, while my account depends more on phenomenology and the notion of the actor as “enactor,” which is drawn from anthropological ecology.

Three constants make Lutterbie’s book a delight: his fascination with the art, craft, skill, and sense of “marvel at the work of good actors”; his admission early in the book that he is “not a scientist,” has spent most of his life “with a resistance to science bordering on antipathy” (7) and therefore does not expect cognitive science to solve all the problems of acting; and his sense of humor when he admits that his antipathy to science is “typical of people who do not understand the thing they dislike: if you can’t do it, hate it” (7).

Thankfully, Lutterbie trained and worked as a theatre director, is fascinated by acting, has immersed himself sufficiently in acting processes to understand the problems of acting from the inside, and has taken the time to thoroughly understand the complicated science that informs his use of DST and other insights from cognitive science in discussions of acting. Throughout his book, Lutterbie manages to keep a delicate balance between explaining how the model and insights from cognitive science illuminate acting and its processes without being reductive, and articulating how and why that model or a particular insight is relevant to a new understanding of acting and its processes. This is an actor/reader friendly book that should be required reading for all actors and teachers of acting.

References


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More Books


In the preface, Poulton contends that the relationship between Japanese modernization and the “New Theater” of the early 20th century has not been adequately examined, and this book undertakes this study. He argues that during the Taishö era, most major Japanese writers at least dabbled in the theatre and produced excellent works, even while public estimation of theatre as an art form fell. Poulton locates this contradiction in the tension between drama, theatre, and performance. What he considers the victory of monologic expression over dialogue led to a strong antitheatrical bent in Japan. To support his argument, he structures the remainder of his book as a combination of analytical and historical essays, and English translations of one-act plays. In chapter one, “Meiji Drama Theory before Ibsen,” Poulton traces the evolutions in Japanese theatre during the Meiji era, including the transition of theatre as an oral tradition to a more literary art form; the elevation of the playwright; and a new emphasis on Aristotelian unities, character, and action. Chapter two, “The Rise of Modern Drama, 1909–1924,” examines Ibsen’s influence on Japanese drama and literature. In “After the Quake,” the third chapter, Poulton looks at commercial theatre in Japan after the 1923 earthquake. The one-act plays he includes reflect a variety of styles and subject matter, but all bear markers of this bumpy journey toward modernity.


Kolcio examines the six major dance organizations in the US: The American Dance Guild, Congress on Research in Dance, American Dance Therapy Association, American College Dance Festival Association, Dance Critics Association, and Society of Dance History Scholars. These entities lobbied for federal recognition and created new communities of scholars and dancers, which enabled them to communicate and work together. The book contains excerpts from interviews with 19 people involved in these organizations as founders, members, or supporters. Kolcio argues that the founding of these grassroots organizations reflected a confluence
of material conditions, intellectual ideas, and values in the US during this short span of time. By institutionalizing the body as a site of knowing, or what Kolcio calls intelligent bodily practice, these organizations challenged the Cartesian mind/body split that undergirds most disciplines and institutions in this country. In so doing, the groups elevated the field intellectually and artistically. Each section of the book focuses on a different dance organization and contains interview excerpts, historical context, and an analysis of the organization’s impact on the field of dance.


Scott sets out to write a history of French actresses that does not rely on stereotypes, focusing primarily on actresses who lived and worked in Paris between 1540 and 1750. She begins the book by detailing the difficulties in undertaking this work with evidence consisting primarily of anecdotes. Finding the value in anecdotes requires contextualizing them historically, evaluating the people involved and their individual motivations, and determining patterns that ultimately can constitute evidence. In chapter two, she chronicles a history of social attitudes toward actresses, particularly attitudes associating them with prostitution, beginning with ancient Greece and Rome, through Christian antitheatricality, early French law, and Protestantism. Chapter three delves into the lives of actresses before the founding of Paris theatres in 1629 and 1631. In chapters four and five she examines the relationships between actresses and playwrights, and obscurity and celebrity. She concludes in chapters six and seven with a critique of evolving acting styles and approaches to theatre.

—Lindsey Mantoan lmantoan@stanford.edu


What sets apart Büchner from other major playwrights of European modernism is, among other things, that the limited scope of his work stands in reverse proportion to the impact it had on modern drama. His entire oeuvre consists of four plays, a pamphlet, a thesis in neurology, and a few letters. It is all here, in an excellent translation by Henry J. Schmidt: a theatrical storm in a teacup. It is not a new idea to publish all (or most) of Büchner’s works in a single volume. What is new and important about this edition is that it is accompanied by critical essays that address each of his works. Superbly edited by Matthew Smith, it contains, among others, articles by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Bernhardt, Christa Wolf, and Heiner Müller. The volume also includes documents authored by Büchner’s contemporaries that mention the young playwright and revolutionary, biographical essays, and accounts of Büchner productions by Orson Welles, Robert Wilson, and Max Reinhardt. This comes very close to a definite edition of a single-book version of Büchner’s work.

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