

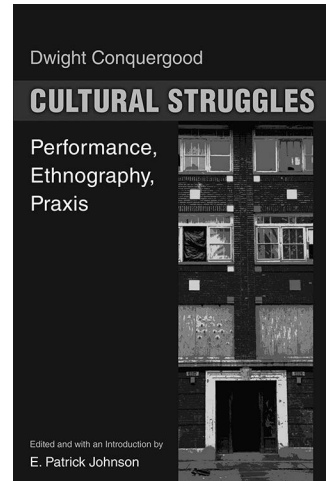
Books

Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis. By Dwight Conquergood, edited by E. Patrick Johnson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013; 344 pp.; illustrations. \$90.00 cloth, \$37.50 paper.

Performance theorist, ethnographer, and social justice activist Dwight Conquergood's research and praxis helped redefine the field of performance-centered, critically engaged, embodied research from its earlier iteration as speech and interpretation to performance studies in the 1980s. I am among several generations of scholars who first engaged with Conquergood's theories and methods in a performance studies classroom through a course-packet of his foundational essays pulled from journals—including *TDR*. These methodologically interdisciplinary essays were deeply invested in the fields of communication, theatre, and cultural studies. Because Conquergood left no central monograph, I went on to teach his impressive body of work through a constellation of PDF copies that multiplied as his contributions continued to grow.

Posthumously published under the careful editorial leadership of his colleague and friend E. Patrick Johnson, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis* is the first collection to present the 20-year breadth of Conquergood's work in one stunning monograph. "The subtitle," Johnson explains in his adroit introduction, "stems from Conquergood's interests in generating theories about performance studies and its relationship to ethnography; critiquing and developing methodologies to enact these theories; and, actually deploying theory and method in field research" (6). Johnson continues: "*Cultural Struggles* is the first collection of its kind to bring together theory, method, and *complete* case studies" (13). This alone represents a significant scholarly contribution, but that is only part of the collection's brilliance. Another of the collection's strengths is its deft pairing of text with context. In addition to the three sections implicated in the subtitle, *Cultural Struggles* presents the body of Conquergood's discipline-defining work within the context of his intellectual genealogy, pedagogy, and commitment to engaging with voices and epistemologies often marginalized within the academy.

Johnson frames Conquergood's work with his own introduction, but also through critical responses from distinguished former students and colleagues, including Micaela di Leonardo, Judith Hamera, Shannon Jackson, D. Soyini Madison, Lisa Merrill, Della Pollock, and Joseph Roach. The introduction and critical responses are written with the kind of intimacy, rigor, clarity, and investment that characterized Conquergood's own commitments. Thus, *Cultural Struggles* allows readers to witness how one of the most important qualitative researchers and cultural theorists of our time developed what have become key tenets of performance studies and performance-centered critical ethnographic research over the arc of his career. Moreover, it attends to what this dedicated scholar-artist-activist (no hyphens/no dashes) came to mean and how he came to matter in particular ways to scholars who represent a sample of the diverse disciplines that Conquergood's research has impacted.



Cultural Struggles organizes Conquergood's work chronologically within the conceptual framework laid out in the subtitle—performance, ethnography, and praxis. The first section focuses on “performance” as a theoretical orientation toward studies of culture that challenges the theory/practice binary, privileges the body as a site of knowledge, and helps audiences track subtle workings of and resistances to local and global networks of power. Taken together, the essays in this section shift our interpretation from culture as a set of “texts” to read toward culture as a set of dynamic “performances.” In “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” an essay that forms a cornerstone of the anti-/trans-/inter-discipline, Conquergood uses his signature alliterative style to distill performance studies into his oft-cited trinity of *art-istry* (performance as culture), *analysis* (performance as cultural critique), and *activism* (performance as a mechanism for cultural change). Within this matrix, performance emerges as equipped to engage culture as social, discursive, and political.

In the second section, Conquergood sets his theories of performance in motion as a method of ethnographic research animated by dialogic performance, coperformative witnessing, and what Micaela di Leonardo refers to in her critical response as “performative political economy” (303). In the first essay of the section, Conquergood maps “dialogic performance” as an ethical orientation toward ethnographic field research that resists the selfishness of what he calls “The Custodian’s Rip-Off,” the superficiality of “The Enthusiast’s Infatuation,” the cynicism of “The Skeptic’s Cop-Out,” and the sensationalism of “The Curator’s Exhibitionism” (71). Instead, dialogical performance “bring[s] the self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another. [...] More than a definite position, the dialogical stance is situated in the space *between* competing ideologies. It brings self and other together even while it holds them apart” (75). The dialogical stance demands an engaged, responsive presence in the field as well as on the page and stage. As Judith Hamera asserts in her critical response, “What comes through very powerfully in these pieces is the idea that vulnerability—irreducible corporeal vulnerability—is [an] ethical and methodological prerequisite to performance ethnography” (307). Far from any weakness or lack, vulnerability as an aspect of dialogical performance denotes a commitment to response-ability, adapt-ability, and presence, which allow one the space to know *differently*. Likewise, “coperformative witness” as a linguistic and embodied refiguring of “participant-observation” unhinges the researcher from a static binarism that contains culture at a bracketed distance, one that allows a barely visible researcher to tip toe in and out with pen and notebook in hand. Rather, “coperformative witnesses” intervene in the linguistic and embodied construction of the relationship between the researcher and the community within which s/he works to acknowledge each as actively performing for and bearing witness to the other. It also reckons with the realities of fieldwork as fluid, dynamic, and collaborative.

Constructed like building blocks, which may be considered individually but reveal the expanse of their potential when stacked together, the essays of the third section allow the reader to engage with Conquergood's theories and methods of performance through meticulously researched and eloquently written case studies drawn from his ethnographic fieldwork. These studies address subjects as varied as theatre and health communication within a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand (127), the politics and “premises” of dwelling in a tenement house largely populated by new immigrants and refugees in Chicago (170), “the intracommunal communication” of a street gang in Chicago (224), and “rituals of state killing” in the modern US justice system (265). Each study is a model of how to *do* performance-centered ethnographic research with ethical responsibility, critical engagement, and a careful tracking of the micro- and macro-sociopolitical stakes that underpin cultures and bind them within uneven systems of power.

In addition to re-presenting the charts, graphs, photographs, and bibliographies that made each of the individually published essays superb, the collection includes a concise index to ease the reader's process of surveying major themes, theories, and theorists.

Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis is an iteration of performance studies that, in no small part, is The House that Dwight Built—collaboratively, contentiously, and with

great care over his career. The book is a powerful bequest to inheritors interested in using performance theory and/or critical ethnographic praxis as a mode of labor, as a means of sharpening one's critical attention, and as a method of enacting social justice.

—Renée Alexander Craft

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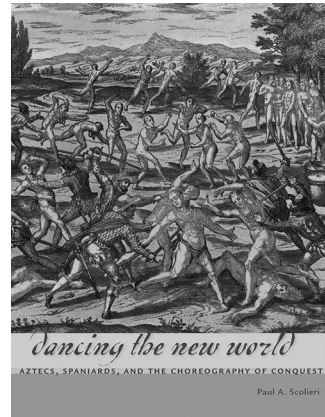
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Dancing the New World: Aztecs, Spaniards, and the Choreography of Conquest. By Paul A. Scolieri. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013; 227 pp.; illustrations. \$55.00 cloth.

Dancing in the New World: Aztecs, Spaniards, and the Choreography of Conquest examines, in illustrious detail, dozens of manuscripts, letters, codices, and other archival materials to demonstrate the central significance of dance in the 15th and 16th centuries. Author Paul A. Scolieri shows how the often-divergent accounts of dance in indigenous societies in the Americas reveal the complex biases and filters with which Spanish colonizers interpreted these performances. Perhaps more importantly, Scolieri also argues for the centrality of dance performance in the historiography of the Americas, where dance actively served as a system of organization, knowledge transference, and training; as a political forum; and as a way of expressing a cosmology and belief system.

As Scolieri attests, the book is more accurately about the archive itself, an unstable and contested collection of overlapping and often radically opposing accounts of mainly Aztec civilization recorded by chroniclers, missionaries, scribes, and artists over the 100 years following the European invasion. Ultimately, these accounts reveal more about the chroniclers and their own distorted lenses than they do about the actual performances they describe.

This is not to discount the events. For example, a reader would be hard-pressed to find a more thorough and accessible English-language account of the 1520 massacre at the Festival of Toxcatl, in which conquistador Pedro Alvarado ordered the brutal assassination of Mexica people engaged in a ceremonious dance. For some historians, this massacre represents the barbarity of conquest betrayal, epitomizing the violence of Spanish-Christian soldiers. For others, it is a pitiful story of La Noche Triste (the Sad Night), when the Spaniards, in retreat, were consequently driven out of Toxcatl, narrowly escaping their certain doom. Scolieri carefully unfolds each turn of events, comparing often-conflicting portrayals and analyzing them next to contemporary research. What we are left with, Scolieri argues, is a record that unequivocally confirms the significance of dance performance. Precisely at the crux of what appears to be a contradiction is the question of dance and its meaning, interpretation, and potential. Thus,



(mis)understandings of dance altered the course of events and the narrations that followed this enormously significant moment in the history of the Americas.

Each of the five chapters exposes the particular interests and biases of major chroniclers of the period (two of the chapters are dedicated to Friar Toribio de Benavente “Motolinia” and Friar Bernardino de Sahagún respectively). A notable example is the superb chapter, “On the areíto,” in which Scolieri assembles the written and pictorial descriptions of indigenous performances known as *areítos*. Areíto is an Arawak word that refers to a form of dance-drama, which included music, recited lyrics, role-playing, and in some cases acrobatics, that was performed in many parts of the Caribbean. The areítos were typically led by guides, or leaders, known as *tequina*, and incorporated instruments such as drums, gourds, and shells. Avid listeners of salsa, cumbia, bachata, and so on may find especially valuable the in-depth study of the areíto made familiar in, for example, the “Areíto of Anacoana.” First recorded in the 19th century, this song-poem tells the story of the legendary Taína chief of Hispaniola that defied the Spanish in 1503, and was later made famous by classic *sakeros* like Cheo Feliciano.

Yet, as the book argues, the areíto—and indigenous performance more broadly—exists in these records as principally an “invention” of Spanish chroniclers. In particular, Scolieri emphasizes what chroniclers attempted to dismiss or justify in indigenous belief systems: the multiple temporalities of death, sacrifice, and ancestral presence; and the ways translation led to both imperialist- and humanitarian- motivated distortions. In other respects, Scolieri adeptly points out what has been ignored by historians of this early record, as skewed as it may be. For instance, chroniclers noted how the areítos were a way of telling history “in the place of books” (35), served as “a mnemonic device of codified ‘laws’” (31), and were connected to thriving economies where dancers were paid in chocolate (cacao) beans and other gifted favors (36). Thus, while “inventions” may indeed recall a distorted Spanish worldview, Scolieri’s disquisition on the record gives us good reason to exhume the disfigured remains of this archive.

The result is that this book points to the need for further research to expand the frame of dance and the study of dancing bodies to a transdisciplinary discussion of performance studies, including its overlapping fields of anthropology, communications, history, cultural studies, political science, and philosophy. While certainly not the fault of this author or the book, we find ironically (and also predictably) that language and disciplinary structures repeat the fractured lenses of our own present day chronicles, once again writing upon history its distortions in ways that further obscure the significance of indigenous performance in the Americas.

Nevertheless, there are few books that discuss with such depth, detail, and clarity the archived accounts of Mesoamerican performance as this one. Moreover, the book is gorgeous and a pleasure to read, with a full-color glossy illustration center insert, elegant typeface, and a large page size. Scolieri’s careful sifting of these texts bring them into lively relief, alongside stunning illustrations of the codices, stone carvings, and other visual documentation. The appendix includes several excerpts of the chroniclers’ accounts and letters, another useful feature that makes this book ideal for any serious research and teaching, even at the undergraduate level. Author Paul Scolieri and the University of Texas Press deserve high praise for this truly extraordinary volume.

—Angela Marino

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The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing.

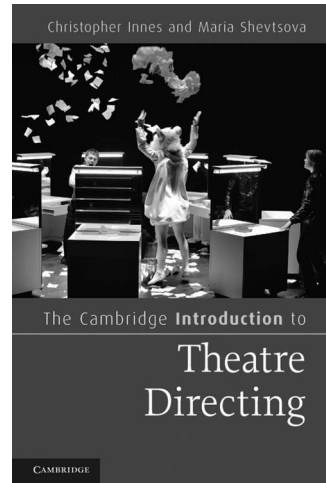
Edited by Christopher Innes and Maria Shevtsova. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; 296 pp.; \$75.00 cloth, \$24.99 paper, e-book available.

Although titled an “Introduction” this volume is far from introductory, offering us new insights along with a survey of contemporary directing styles through a careful selection of directors who relate to one another in terms of “schools of directing,” defined by variants like theatricality, the epic, total theatre, ensemble acting, improvisation, and uses of media and musicality.

The opening chapters, set historically, seem all too predictable when compared with other like introductory texts still in print: the birth of modern European art theatre directing as opposed to the tradition of actor-managers in the Anglo-American theatre. We hear yet again about the changes wrought by the Duke of Saxe Meiningen and his Players, which sound less innovatory with each retelling. We get yet another recounting of the contrasts between naturalism, realism, and symbolism. The opening chapters are the obligatory ones, straight out of the many academic theatre history books, which all say pretty much the same things.

About a third of the way through the book, however, the essays begin offering significantly new observations about the theories and practices of directing. The examples are well chosen and bold, and potentially unfamiliar to readers without broad and eclectic experience in viewing contemporary theatre. Examples begin with the Russians first and then the Germans, a bit from the French, and finally we travel into Eastern Europe and to a few experimental outposts in North America and Britain. No one coming to this introduction is likely to have heard of, much less seen, the kind of work that the authors go on to describe in detail.

What many will find contentious about this book is its Eurocentrism. Nothing is said about Asian directors or directing processes (apart from the obligatory nod to Asian practice reflected in the work of Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine). But the authors state at the outset that the restrictive length of the volume meant a choice had to be made to sacrifice Asia—and, they might have added, Africa, Australia, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Possibly more awkward is the paucity of directors from contemporary North America (only Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage, Peter Sellars, and Elizabeth LeCompte are mentioned) and Great Britain (a group slimmed down to Katie Mitchell, Declan Donnellan, and Simon McBurney). Crucially missing, too, is Italy (a bit is included on Giorgio Strehler, but his name is misspelled in the index), and there is nothing from Spain, where great directing abounds. Most highly celebrated and showcased is Russia, early in the 20th century with “The four great strands: Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov and Tairov,” (94), though no one more contemporary appears except for Valery Fokin, Lev Dodin, and Anatoli Vassiliev; and Germany, with quick jumps from Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, and Heiner Müller to Frank Castrof, Christoph Marthaler, Roberto Ciulli, and Thomas Ostermeier. The final heavy emphasis is on Denmark’s sui generis laboratory Odin Teatret and director Eugenio Barba; and Polish and East European directors Jerzy Grotowski, Włodzimierz Staniewski, Anna Zbrzycki and Grzegorz Bral, Jarosław Fret, Silviu Purcarete, Eimuntas Nekrosius, and Oskaras Korsunovas. I imagine this process of selection comes from the viewing history of both authors: Christopher Innes’s strength is in the avantgarde theatre from the turn of the 19th into the 20th century (particularly André Antoine, Edward Gordon Craig, and Adolphe Appia) and after, while Maria Shevtsova’s main sphere is the 20th century to the present, primarily in Russia and Europe. The territory they chart is what is familiar to them and, crucially, what they have seen up close, turned over and examined in detail.



The book is at its best when it makes connections between the directors chosen for study, defining both their similarities and differences. For instance, when Stanislavsky's use of "noise"—denoting a kind of silence onstage or suspension of activity—is discussed in some detail, a cogent link is made with the contemporary: "Stanislavsky's remarks regarding quiet square with decidedly anti-realistic director Robert Wilson's contention that seeing and hearing on stage is channeled best through the juxtaposition of opposites—in Stanislavsky's case, the inception of silence through noise. Here [...] Stanislavsky attempted to turn 'detail' into a directorial rather than a pictorial device" (67–68). After Stanislavsky, directors' use of theatricality or *teatralnost* (Театральность) becomes a defining feature of this study.

By the third chapter, this *Introduction* shifts gears by dropping straight chronology in favor of a more complex interweaving of history, theory, and practice. The section on Stanislavsky, the keystone of the book, is full of epiphanies that begin to help us see the errors of much previous writing in English about Stanislavsky, aided by some helpful corrections in translation from the Russian; it looks at how Stanislavsky influenced the next generation of directors in Russia and elsewhere.

With Stanislavsky, too, the discussion shifts to the notion of a "performance score" and the director as conductor. His production of *The Seagull* (1898) is highlighted through a comparison of Chekhov's script with Stanislavsky's promptbook, and we see the director bring a scene to life as if it were a Russian *partitura*, or musical score. In detailed analysis like this we move beyond the merely introductory to the revelatory, as we get a glimpse of a director at work in rehearsal, imagining and shaping both a production and performances in concert with a play's text. The magic of directing is laid out as something pragmatic and useful. Throughout the second half of the book there are more of these illustrative rehearsal scenes. Sometimes, as in sections on Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson, Lev Dodin, and Anatoli Vassiliev, the reader seems to be sitting in the rehearsal room with the director, absorbing their working practice and watching the way the impulses of the actor and the director mesh.

The ways that directors work with actors and companies of actors are noted throughout, providing a wealth of actor-centric methods, sometimes with directors egoistically manipulating actors (like Vsevolod Meyerhold) and some that come from deeply felt and seemingly democratic ensemble work (Grotowski and others in Poland). The book reminds us at every point that a director shapes and manipulates performances as much as he or she shapes and sometimes deconstructs space, time, scenography, lighting, society, history, and audience experience. But this is also a book about ensemble practice. A director like Yevgeny Vakhtangov may have been what the authors call "a sculptor of stage action" but a more typical philosophy of the directors discussed here is articulated by Ariane Mnouchkine: "directors and actors learn from each other, and teach and shape each other [...] being a director means 'giving' each actor 'the right horizon and good oars, after which we have to row together'" (101).

—Michael Earley

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The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance. By James M. Harding. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013; 234 pp. \$60.00 cloth, \$32.50 paper.

James M. Harding's latest book is a manifesto calling for an overhaul in contemporary scholarship on experimental performance of the last century. Harding notes "a pressing need" (15) for scholars to dig deeper into territory thought to be well known. The structure of *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* formally parallels the process Harding suggests this excavation should follow: while the first five chapters revisit key controversies and "fissures" (32) in the historiography of the avant-garde, the final two chapters look forward and investigate current vanguard performance. This structure reveals Harding's twofold agenda: one, to propose a double-take on well-known subjects in theatre history and the way these theories and practices are historicized; and two, to push the field forward toward reconsidering how ongoing experimental theatre practices are studied. Harding's titular "ghosts" are the obscured foundations he tracks through the book, and they are also the specters of the avant-gardes themselves.

In his body of work to date, Harding has emerged as a contemporary leader of avant-garde studies. In *Ghosts*, he critiques the field's dominant voices, including Peter Bürger, Hans-Thies Lehmann, Richard Schechner, and Renato Poggioli. Harding also engages with scholars beyond these prominent voices, and proposes a new way to discuss experimental performance. Because "avant-garde," he argues, is as encompassing a term as "theater," Harding begins by renaming the field: "the avant-garde is always the avant-gardes" (4). Harding emphasizes the plurality of the term and the way these performances are studied in their historical contexts. This shift proposes a field-wide reorientation.

Several preoccupations shape Harding's call to action. Throughout, he examines the "underpinnings" of experimental makers and their practices, and the foundations of avant-garde studies. He presses most firmly on "gendered underpinnings" (20) and "the rough edges of cultural exchange and appropriation" (23). He exposes gender and colonialist biases not only in the work of specific artists but also in accepted theories themselves. This follows Harding's long-standing project of reshaping the field, as seen in *Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminist Artists, and the Avant-Garde* (University of Michigan Press, 2010); *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance* (coedited with John Rouse; University of Michigan Press, 2006); and his work with Cindy Rosenthal and Mike Sell.

Harding also reassesses the chronological narrative of avant-garde history. He refuses the idea of the avant-garde's evolution as linear, and revels in moments of fracture and negotiation within movements. Some of his liveliest writing occurs when he retells old stories, such as the 1921 Paris debate between the Dadaists and the Surrealists, in which the rivalry between Tristan Tzara and André Breton played out in a staged trial. Harding looks again at this event and its aftershocks, which "served as the catalyst for a telling implosion of the avant-gardes' rhetoric beneath the weight of contradictions they could no longer mask" (30). In this vein, Harding uses moments in theatre history to rewrite the avant-garde(s) as plural performance histories that do not unfold chronologically or into easily divisible categories. He rejects "the presumed authority and intentionality of avant-garde performance" (115) at the heart of much scholarship. In *Ghosts*, Harding asserts that there is something lurking underneath the way this experimental theatre is studied and historicized; he complicates this history, bringing these unseen foundations and uneasy narratives to light.

James M. Harding

The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)

Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance



Harding bases his analysis on close readings of dozens of studies about the avant-garde. His seven chapters unfold as case studies of the field's key debates and controversies. Through a rereading of the Tzara-Breton rivalry, the first chapter proposes a recognition and reorganization of the way vanguard performance is historicized. Chapter 2 uses the work of John Cage to reveal the "ideological" (61) and "gendered underpinnings" of the American avant-gardes. The Living Theatre and Andy Warhol's distinct interpretations (1965 and 1974, respectively) of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) provide the basis for the third chapter. Here, Harding probes the links between romanticism and the avant-garde, the patriarchal foundations of both, and how networks of vanguard performances open up avenues of theorizing the avant-garde. In chapter 4, Harding takes up the controversy of Peter Brook's *Mababharata* (1985) as a way to discuss Brechtian aesthetics, and to introduce his idea of avant-garde intentionality. Citing Una Chaudhuri, Harding refuses the conflation of Brook and his work, a kind of artist/work collapse that, he argues, dominates avant-garde studies. Chapter 5 is a detailed exploration of "colonialist underpinnings" (137) and invites a reorientation of avant-garde studies from "the cutting edge" to "the rough edges" of cultural exchange and borrowing (143).

In the final chapters, Harding takes up the question of how to talk about the avant-gardes today. His mandate is for scholars to investigate the avant-gardes in terms of both their failures and successes; and further, to resist a domino effect approach, in which the demise of one avant-garde is necessary for a new one to emerge. He unpacks the vogue to decree the avant-gardes dead, and the desire to link failed individual movements with the death of the avant-garde. The enthusiasm to proclaim these experimental trends dead holds back the field, Harding argues, not only from revealing new historical arguments, but also in the analysis of contemporary forms of the global avant-gardes. In chapter 6, he discusses The Riot Group's *Pugilist Specialist* (2003) and the "theater of operations" of the "War Against Terrorism" (174), putting into practice his imperative to address ongoing avant-gardes.

With *Ghosts*, Harding asks for another look at moments in theatre history thought to fit comfortably under the "avant-garde" label. In embracing the uneasy upheavals of this history, the seductive narrative of "the avant-garde" is lost. Also abandoned is the nostalgia that saturates avant-garde studies. But what is gained is an ongoing discussion of experimental theatre that itself continues in ongoing recyclings. In Harding's view, the ghosts of the avant-gardes are anything but dead, as he illustrates in his final chapter about "vanguard ghosting" (189), which circles back to avant-garde darling Julian Beck while, at the same time, analyzing contemporary US military policy and practice. Looking back and ahead at the same time, Harding demands a shake up of the way we study and practice theatre history. In *Ghosts of the Avant-Garde*, he proposes an exorcism of an entire field.

—Kate Bredeson

Kate Bredeson is Assistant Professor of Theatre at Reed College. She has published essays in journals including PAJ, Theatre, Theatre Symposium, and Modern and Contemporary France, and chapters in the books May 68: Rethinking France's Revolution (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); International Women Stage Directors (University of Illinois Press, 2013); and The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy (Routledge, 2014). A director, dramaturg, and theatre historian, she is currently at work on a book about theatre surrounding the May 1968 events in France. kbredeso@reed.edu

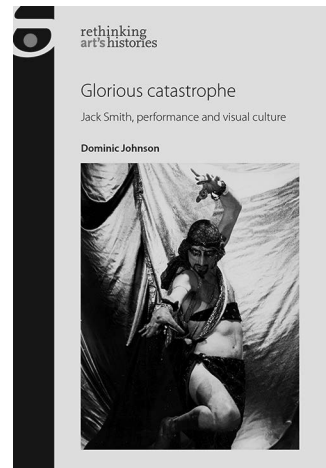
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Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture. By Dominic Johnson. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012; 256 pp.; illustrations. \$95.00 cloth, \$32.95 paper.

Performer Jack Smith is infamously difficult to talk about. This is due not only to the difficult and often incomplete nature of his work—scholars have no published play texts to draw on and the ephemera that remain of his performances are stashed away in difficult-to-access archives—but also to the fact that there is something in his work that almost demands that it *not* be talked about. Smith was an ostentatious performer, but he was also notoriously withholding, seldom publicizing his loft performances and eschewing any easy identification between artist and audience. Given his fears that his films might be stolen and illegally edited if he allowed them to be housed in the Anthology Film Archives, and his request to Penny Arcade that she burn his papers after his death, Smith seems at times to ask us to let him just fade into obscurity.

The questions of how to do justice to Smith's work and how to respect its alterity in a way that does not simply recuperate it into dominant histories of 20th-century art are at the center of Dominic Johnson's *Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture*. In this wide-ranging and vividly illustrated book, Johnson takes on Smith's Janus-faced legacy. Smith is at once infamous, because of the controversy (and United States Senate hearing, which he did not attend) that followed the release of his 1963 film *Flaming Creatures*; and obsolete, as he has since dropped out of dominant narratives of the visual art of the 1960s. Art historians such as David Hopkins and Rosalind Krauss fail to include Smith in their discussions of the decade—but, of course, Smith's work also knowingly resists archivization and deliberately refuses to "assimilate to the tendencies and fashions of the 1960s" (11). In other words, Smith's exclusion from dominant art-historical narratives is, in part, borne from a self-marginalizing impulse present in his work and his relation to the art-world public. Though Johnson's methodology is necessarily interdisciplinary, his primary interest is in challenging the modes of art historiography that are inattentive to the messiness and plurality of art during this time. For Johnson, Smith has evaded these dominant art-historical narratives because his work refuses to tether itself to any one medium. Smith's eschewal of the boundaries between film, live performance, and photography resists the modernist investment in the singular medium. (On this point, we might remember, from his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," Michael Fried's famous and negative association of intermedial artworks with theatricality [1998].) Johnson's approach is not additive: his interest is not in restoring Smith to a supposedly rightful "place" in the canon, but in questioning the logics by which the canon is constructed in the first place. Johnson sees Smith as a "minor artist" operating on the margins of cultural history, and he asks that Smith be "allowed to persist in [...] his difference" (18). Smith occupies a curious place within art-historical narratives because (contra Andy Warhol) he allows his homosexuality to stand unabashedly at the forefront of his work, because his work is defiantly political (as seen in his castigation of New York City "landlordism"), because the work delights in its own failure, and because he traffics in retrograde affects that run counter to the "cool" minimalism and pop art of the 1960s. Smith's work is deliberately marginal and Johnson's study works tirelessly to respect this marginality.

Though Johnson is critical of the ways in which the word "queer" has been deployed within academic writing—he is rightfully uneasy with the way scholars often unmoor the word "queer" from specific sexual practices—he nonetheless situates *Glorious Catastrophe* within recent debates in queer theory about negativity, failure, and utopianism, drawing on the work of



scholars such as J. Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, Leo Bersani, and Lee Edelman. For Johnson, Smith is at his best when exploring the political and aesthetic possibilities of “apocalyptic utopianism” (197). This impulse is most forcefully present in Smith’s constant recourse to the myth of Atlantis. He does not, however, invoke Atlantis as a pure utopia, but stages the “rehearsals” for its “destruction.” In other words, his work looks towards a utopian future at the same time that it calls into question the integrity (and politics) of that vision. Johnson situates Smith in the interstice between queer theorists such as Edelman who seek to disavow the future altogether in the name of negativity and those such as Muñoz who seek to champion queer-ness’s future-oriented “hopefully enigmatic faith in the ‘not-yet’” (196).

Smith’s work is littered with contradictions. It both bores and disgusts; it is affectively withholding but melodramatic, mytho-poetic but quotidian, and self-revealing but self-effacing. These contradictions form the material for Johnson’s analysis. *Glorious Catastrophe* is the first book-length study of Smith’s work, and Johnson is equally attentive to Smith’s performance art and to Smith’s filmmaking. He also explores Smith’s (mostly unpublished) writing in Chapter Six. Smith’s legacy has often been reduced to *Flaming Creatures*, but Johnson importantly explores the depth and expanse of Smith’s three-decade artistic career. Johnson’s interviews and extensive archival research have enabled him to provide detailed and well-analyzed descriptions of many of Smith’s lesser-known performance pieces. The book also collects 40 photographs and stills from Smith’s performances and films, providing keen visual insight into an artist for whom the visual and the spatial were always front-and-center. Littered with objects of refuse and eschewing commodifiable forms that would allow them to be contained within the vaults of an archive, Smith’s films and performance pieces tirelessly rehearse their march towards obsolescence. Dominic Johnson’s *Glorious Catastrophe* respects Smith’s desire to languish splendidly in obscurity at the same time that it mines that desire in search of new and not-yet-conceived ways for thinking about performance and visual art.

—Elizabeth Wiet

Reference

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“We’re People Who Do Shows”: Back to Back Theatre: Performance, Politics, Visibility. Edited by Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall. Aberystwyth, UK: Performance Research Books, 2013; 284 pp.; illustrations. £33.50 paper.

An emerging feature of European theatre of the new millennium has been the appearance within “postdramatic” or non-narrative theatre frameworks of performers marked by apparent difference from those who are normally represented in more traditional contexts, a trend that might be described as “outsider theatre.” A few prominent examples include: the Swiss actors with learning and mental disabilities in *Disabled Theater* (2012) by Jérôme Bel/Theater HORA; the young children performing versions of themselves in work such as Tim Etchells’s *That Night Follows Day* (2007) and Gob Squad’s *Before Your Very Eyes* (2011) (both collaborations with the Flemish organization Campo); and the diverse panoply of bodies on display in

the work of Romeo Castellucci and Societas Raffaello Sanzio. It is in this context that the Australian company Back to Back, who describe themselves as “an ensemble of eight actors perceived to have intellectual disabilities,” has rightly gained international acclaim with striking and provocative works such as *small metal objects* (2005), *Food Court* (2008), and *Ganesb Versus the Third Reich* (2012). And yet, while the company’s work certainly resonates with this current trend, it is also rooted in the shifting relationships and individual strengths of its longstanding creative ensemble, drawing on trust and expertise developed over a history of nearly 30 years. This new volume from Performance Research Books testifies to this distinctive history, drawing on the voices and personalities of the company and its collaborators as well as offering a range of critical perspectives from scholars. Critical essays, in-depth interviews, a rich selection of photographs, and full playscripts of recent productions are carefully interwoven in what the volume’s coeditors describe as a “dramaturgical” structure that “expresses the artistic sensibilities of the company’s work” (20). As with the company’s theatrical work, text, image, and idea are mutually supportive, and no single voice or perspective is given final authority.



An interview with some of the company’s early artistic directors and collaborators locates the origins of Back to Back in disability outreach services in the 1980s, when a policy emphasis on “deinstitutionalization” favored initiatives that might be expected “to alter the lives of people with disability and ‘normalize’ them” (30). Yet Cas Anderson, who directed the company’s first production in 1987, and subsequent artistic directors Barry Kay and Ian Pidd quite consciously chose to place the work within aesthetic rather than vocational or service frameworks. The company has continued on this trajectory with its current artistic director, Bruce Gladwin, who joined the company in 1999. Indeed, references to “disability” are pointedly absent from this collection’s title, and the company’s descriptions of itself similarly shift the focus away from disability toward the perspective their theatre might offer on wider culture: “Back to Back is uniquely placed to comment on the social, cultural, ethical and value-based structures that define the institution known as ‘the majority’” (220).

And yet, how can one approach this theatre without also approaching the subject of disability? The question of what it is to be perceived as disabled is inextricably bound up in both the ideas this work addresses and the company’s material processes of working together. Indeed, that carefully modulated phrase from the company’s self-description—“perceived to have intellectual disabilities”—gets right to the crux of the issue: again and again, as spectators or collaborators, people who encounter Back to Back’s work find themselves reflecting on issues of perception, mediation, and visibility, and these are recurring themes throughout this collection. Eddie Paterson surveys the company’s work in relation to shifting ideas of text and textuality in contemporary theatre, writing that *Ganesb Versus the Third Reich* “makes the process of ‘writing’ visible and shows that hierarchical notions of power inherent in language are debatable” (82). Barry Laing offers an honest and revealing account of his own presuppositions as a visiting artist invited to work with the company’s summer school; the challenge, as he puts it, was not to impose his ideas but instead to find a way “to step into the image of a particular culture” embodied by the participants in the workshop (88). Helena Grehan describes the way *Food Court* works to “unravel any firm position the spectator may occupy” (112), such that the work is “not about the disabled other or disability per se but about how each of us responds to the other and at the same time acknowledges (or hides from) our own prejudices” (109). And a particularly acute critique of spectacle, co-written by Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake, describes Back to Back’s work as inviting the audience “to undertake an act of double or triple perception: to perceive perceived disability as it were, rather than simply disability” (120). Through

these varied approaches, then, the essays in this collection offer a unique contribution to disability studies, mediated by questions of perception and visibility. As Richard Gough puts it in an interview with Gladwin, “Whose disability is being perceived? Is the disability one of perception?” (246).

Alongside these and other critical essays, a wide selection of other resources provides insight and background to the company’s work. The lengthy interview with Gladwin reveals, among other things, how each new work has developed out of issues that arose during the creation and performance of the previous piece. For example, *Ganesb Versus the Third Reich* is a direct riposte to audience members of *Food Court* who said they did not believe these particular actors could have been capable of devising work as complicated as this (246). For many commentators, the unsettling effects of Back to Back’s work is exemplified by the resulting metatheatrical scene in *Ganesb*, in which some of the actors, playing brutal parodies of themselves, argue about whether their fellow actors are capable of understanding the implications of the themes they are representing. It is a moment in which the line between reality and artifice is blurred—a moment that establishes “a zone of uncertainty” for the audience, as Grehan writes (204). Yoni Prior offers a “behind the scenes” glimpse of the devising process for this scene, and one might think that this perspective could offer some relief from the anxieties raised by this moment, showing some critical separation between the real and the fictional. However, no such relief is offered; instead, as Prior writes, “everyone lost the reality line in this improvisation” (211). Above all, the sense that this collection gives about the company is that over 27 years they have become comfortable inhabiting a realm in which it is not always possible to distinguish the theatrical from the real, the constructed from the factual. This theatre might be made out of the “real” circumstances of the lives of the ensemble members, but, more significantly, the reverse is also true: theatre, with all its ambiguity, care, and risk, has become a way of making a life. As the company states in a collaboratively written declaration, “We are not afraid to step into the cold, dark side. [...] We go deep into the work” (11). They identify themselves not by their perceived differences, but instead, as they put it in another ensemble statement that lends the collection its title, “We’re people who do shows.”

—Theron Schmidt

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More Books

Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda. By Deborah R. Vargas. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012; 288 pp.; illustrations. \$67.50 cloth, \$22.50 paper.

Deborah R. Vargas’s work considers women whose “dissonant” musical presence lies at the limits of *la onda*—the sonic wave of Tejano or Tex-Mex music—from the advent of radio broadcasting and recording until today. Though their music was widely circulated, influential, or

both, their performances nevertheless placed them at odds with the masculine, heteronormative sonic imagery of the borderlands. Vargas's initial chapter examines the discordance San Antonio singer Rosita Fernandez sounded (and embodied) around calls to remember (or forget) the Alamo; a chapter on singer Eva Garza also considers narratives of nationality, as Garza's borderland migrations from the US to Cuba and Mexico did not follow a traditional south-north pattern. Through singer Chelo Silva, Vargas considers soundings of female sexuality and the musical form of the *bolero* as a gendered counterpoint to that of the *corrido* or "border ballad." The theme of queerness runs through Vargas's chapter on female accordion players in *conjunto* music, as well as her chapter on Selena's disco-inflected and "brown" *cumbia* sound. An epilogue on indie rock band Girl in a Coma brings women's dissonant soundings to the present day. Sounding less of Tex-Mex music than through it, Girl in a Coma's music lies at the limit of Tejano sound.

Performing Captivity, Performing Escape: Cabarets and Plays from the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto. Edited and introduced by Lisa Peschel. New York: Seagull Books, 2014; 446 pp.; illustrations. \$25.00 paper.

From November 1941 to May 1945, tens of thousands of Czech and Austrian Jews lived in, perished at, or passed through Terezín/Theresienstadt. As Lisa Peschel's introduction explains, Terezín/Theresienstadt was a camp of great brutality that Nazis nevertheless promoted as a "model ghetto" to the international community. Prisoners of this singular ghetto succeeded in cultivating a rich cultural life in spite of their privations, as surviving dramatic works show. Peschel's edited collection of these works includes texts translated from Czech and German, ranging from plays and puppet shows to the songs, skits, and poems of cabarets. Peschel contextualizes the works with the inclusions of records and survivor testimony, making appreciable both the number of prisoners involved in theatrical life and the powerful presence of a few recurrent figures. Through the prisoners' words and Peschel's introduction, readers come to understand resistance as a far more nuanced project than one of simple defiance. This also resonates in the book's many illustrations, which include sketches, sheet music, dramatic posters, and photographs.

In Motion, At Rest: The Event of the Athletic Body. By Grant Farred. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014; 192 pp. \$67.50 cloth, \$22.50 paper.

Grant Farred considers the nature of the event through the idioms of its occurrences in sport. In so doing, Farred is careful to distinguish sport's event—its moment of unscripted irruption—from the "pseudo-event" of the sports calendar. Methodologically, Farred pairs memorable irruptions with philosophers: chapter 1 uses Alain Badiou to think through basketball player Ron Artest's actions—especially lying supine on the scorer's table—during Detroit's "Palace Brawl"; chapter 2 uses Gilles Deleuze's ideas on movement and time to consider French footballer Eric Cantona's "kung-fu kick" into a figure in the stands; chapter 3 revisits Zinedine Zidane's *Coup de Boule* in the last moments of the 2006 World Cup final through an engagement with Jacques Derrida and the figure of the *voyou*. Though Farred is concerned with the philosophy of the event, his winning passages deal with the problems of transgressive embodiment. His chapter on Artest, for example, is a valuable contribution to scholarship on black stillness, theorizing *how* the situation of an unmoving black body gathers into an event, and how such gathering hails past occurrences of spectacular black stillness.

Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History; A Play in Three Acts. By C.L.R. James. Edited by Christian Høgsbjerg. Forward by Laurent Dubois. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013; 240 pp.; illustrations. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper, e-book available.

Long presumed lost, C.L.R. James's 1934 play is an important companion to his nonfiction work, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), and a precursor to the eponymously titled dramatic adaptation of *The Black Jacobins* first performed in 1967 (adapted by James with Dexter Lyndersay). Published here for the first time, Høgsbjerg's edition offers James's play in its entirety, as well as information about its 1936 production at Westminster Theatre in London, with Paul Robeson playing the lead. The play was somewhat shortened in this production, and a revised scene is also included, together with notices, reviews, and images of the program. Høgsbjerg's introduction orients us to the young James in England, and the appendix includes several contemporaneous writings by James.

—Tina Post

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