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Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11: Patriotic Dissent

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Book Reviews

Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11: Patriotic Dissent. Edited by Jenny Spencer. Routledge Advances in Theatre and Performance Studies, no. 21. New York: Routledge, 2012; pp. 260.

This excellently edited volume analyzes activist performances and protests created in the United States and UK between 9/11 and the 2008 election of Barack Obama as president. Pointing to the close alliance between these two governments during this period, Spencer finds it important to include works created in both countries by artists enacting related strategies of protest. The book's subtitle, "Patriotic Dissent," reflects the surge of nationalism in both countries after 9/11, which seeped into performances rife with anger and frustration. The book is divided into two parts, "Mainstages" and "Alternative Spaces," and contains essays on musicals, adaptations of classical, Renaissance, and Vietnam-era plays, documentaries and verbatim theatre, and street performance. While focusing primarily on the pieces created during these seven years, it is solidly grounded in historical work detailing the long trajectories of street performance and radical protest plays. Additionally, the chapters' analyses and descriptions offer a rich history of the military and political events that defined the War on Terror. It will prove invaluable, in part or in whole, in theatre courses on political, activist, and protest performance.

In her introduction, Jenny Spencer establishes the stakes of this work by articulating a new artistic moment in the history of protest performance. Arguing that political theatre, by the end of the millennium, had shifted from the broad social movements directed at the expansion of civil rights and peace to more local, community-based gestures, she finds that 9/11 created a resurgence in global activism and civic engagement through performance modes. Essentially, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 created a paradigm shift not only in politics, but also in the aesthetic range and depth of political theatre. This new mode of protest performance, while often Brechtian in style, avoids looking at politics and international relations as black and white, instead focusing on the gray areas overlooked by two government administrations intent on using an "us/them" rhetoric to justify violence.

Two chapters take up the conversation about Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and the representation of prisoner abuse. In chapter 2, "The Ubiquitous Orange Jumpsuit: Staging Iconic Images and the Production of the Commons," Joshua Abrams wonders if the use of the orange jumpsuit onstage might reveal the performative construction of these atrocity photographs, underscoring the audiences' complicity in creating the conditions that produced these images. He considers the 2005 London remounting of *Hair*,

the National Theatre's 2004 *Measure for Measure*, and Peter Sellers's 2002 production of *The Children of Herakles* to argue that adaptations "interrupt the fixity of photographic images" (38). By combining affection with rationality, the intertextuality of these adaptations and the anachronism of characters from previous eras attired in the orange jumpsuit opens a space to reconsider the state, interstate relations, and the public, from the Enlightenment down to the present day. In chapter 4, Spencer draws connections between the brutality of images and footage showing prisoner abuse and the aesthetics of stage brutality in "in yer face" theatre, such as Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat* (2007).

In addition to considering prisoner abuse, more broadly, the anthology tackles the way that post-9/11 politics have made a spectacle out of rights and questions of identity. In chapter 3, Amelia Howe Kritzer analyzes Caryl Churchill's *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006), which argues that the governmental violations of civil and national rights are representative of a long-standing practice. Marcia Blumberg, in chapter 5, delves into the National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch* (2006), which used theatrical spectacle to critique the government's coercion of soldiers. Examining the different approaches to staging trauma before and after 9/11, Emily Klein, in chapter 7, looks at Eve Ensler's *The Treatment* (2006) and Kathryn Blume's *The Accidental Activist* (2004), pieces that directly address the changing role of the artist in a new political climate. Jeanne Collier's essay (chapter 8) on plays by the Culture Project examines the cultural differences between the United States, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In chapter 13, Jennifer Chan expands on the imperative to perform patriotism and citizenship in the immediate aftermath of the attack, using *The Concert for New York City* (2001) to suggest that performance might open spaces for "alternative networks of affiliation" that might displace the primacy of the state (209). Jenny Hughes, in chapter 11, tackles the attitudes toward power found in protests that rely upon what she calls "critical mimesis." The performances that these various contributors examine reflect the artistic imperative to celebrate difference in the face of new state and international paradigms.

Katy Ryan's essay "A View of *The Brig*: From the Cage to the Street" (chapter 10) is useful in a variety of contexts, and is not limited to classes on political theatre. Although both the 1963 and 2007 productions of The Living Theater's *The Brig* won Obie awards, by 2007, critics and audiences felt that the brutality of the piece no longer matched the public's view of the military, particularly in light of the Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo prison abuse. Pointing out what got overlooked by reviews of the 2007 remounting, Ryan

recuperates the production by linking it to the structural terror of war and imprisonment, rather than to particular acts of brutality in a specific context. Teachers interested in helping students understand the gaps between the structures of a piece and its critical reception would do well to turn to this essay; similarly, instructors hoping to illuminate various rehearsal processes would be well-served by assigning it. Ryan details the physically rigorous rehearsal process led by military personnel that *The Brig* actors underwent, and connects the actors' commitment with the verisimilitude necessary for the political force of the play.

Indeed, while squarely grounded in this genre and time period, the book offers a number of essays that could stand alone in classes devoted to different topics. For example, Stacy Wolf's "The 2003–2004 Season and Broadway Musical Theatre as a Political Conversant" (chapter 1) would be useful in a class addressing the musical, Broadway, and/or the intersections of commercial and activist art. In considering Broadway's engagement with post-9/11 politics, Wolf suggests that we take a more expansive view of what a "timely response" to contemporary policies might be; because it takes years to produce a Broadway musical, the effects of 9/11 on Broadway can best be understood by examining the musicals that opened a few years after the attacks. Focusing on *Avenue Q*, *Wicked*, and *Caroline, or Change*, she argues against the common assumption that Broadway is apolitical or conservative, finding that despite its delayed response time, the different forms of political engagement in all three musicals can be used as frameworks for a broader analysis of the politics of musicals.

Ryan Claycomb's "Voices of the Other: Documentary and Oral History Performance in Post-9/11 British Theatre" (chapter 6) would be useful, essential perhaps, to a class on "theatre of the real." He traces the history of the form, starting with Erwin Piscator and Peter Weiss, moving through the Tectonic Theater and Anna Deavere Smith's work, before arriving at antiwar pieces by London's Tricycle Theatre. By comparing dramaturgy and representational strategies, Claycomb carefully parses the distinction between subcategories, such as oral history, verbatim theatre, life writing, and autobiography. Regarding the upsurge in documentary plays and this new wave of the form, he argues that artists and citizens who were derided or dismissed when they participated in antiwar protests or rallies turned to the seriousness and gravity of documentary theatre to express their dissent and argue against violence.

Likewise, Dalia Basiouny's "Descent as Dissent: Arab American Theatrical Responses to 9/11" (chapter 9) would be useful in other contexts, especially for courses on Arab American performance or performance art. She tracks the history of Arab American (in)visibility in US society, and the stark contrast in representation after 9/11. In particular, Rania Khallil and Laura Shamas offer different performance models for negotiating the political and cultural complexities of a post-9/11 world.

Similarly, Sara Warner's "The Maladapted *Hothead Paisan*: A Lesbian Comedy of Terrors" (chapter 14) has application outside of courses on political theatre. Classes dedicated to music (festivals) as performance, LGBT theatre,

and the intersection of arts with nationalism would benefit from including this essay on Animal Prufrock, of the dyke punk-band Bitch and Animal, and her own performance of *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* at the 2004 Womyn's Musical Festival in Michigan. Likening the fear of militant lesbians to the fear of terrorists, Warner explores "the affective economy of terrorism, the theatrics of revolutionary violence, and the efficacy of militant forms of queer protest" (221).

While the majority of these chapters are most appropriate for theoretical and historical courses, Claycomb's essay on documentary theatre and L. M. Bogad's on street performance would be useful in practice-based classes on making activist performance. In "Patriot Acts: All-American Tactical Performance in the Age of Permafrost" (chapter 12), Bogad argues that activist performances, facing the "most censorious administration in recent American history," adapted and outflanked performance restrictions and their own clichés by employing a broad range of theatrical techniques to model active citizenship (192). Challenging the claim that activist street and theatrical performances have lost their political power, he draws from the long lineage of performances that empower audiences to act as he analyzes the performance group Billionaires for Bush, the street performance "One Thousand Coffins," and other acts of protest in New York City during the 2004 Republican National Convention. Bogad concludes by offering a new approach to measuring the efficacy of activist performance.

The range of essays included in this volume speak to the breadth of work generated as a direct response to the United States' and UK's policies in their War on Terror, torture, and issues that dominated the political landscape and cultural imagination after 9/11. I would go so far as to argue that theatre history courses ought to develop a new category devoted to this political and protest material as part of its mapping of performance. And if our foundational courses were to include this body of work, I would suggest that teachers start with this book for secondary material.

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