

## **Introduction:**

### **Theatrical (anti)theses: effective alternatives or risky ventures**

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In his “Prescript to Politics,” Richard Schechner urges the artist “to lay aside his aloofness” and engage more actively with contemporary social and political issues. Regrettably acknowledging “a failure of nerve” on the part of theatre artists and practitioners as well as an overwhelming “passive compliance” on the part of the public, he underlines the theatre’s unabated responsibility in alerting people’s consciousness, especially at times of political crisis and social upheaval, and prescribes a “direct and involved contact with politics” for the artist (1967: 18-20).

Quite a few years later, Harold Pinter adds his own personal touch to Schechner’s theatrical prescription by positioning himself as a politically-involved artist who seeks the truth daring to “smash the mirror – for it is on the other side of the mirror that the truth stares at us.” In a similar vein, Victor W. Turner, a cultural anthropologist, underlines the experiential significance of performance stressing the essential connection between the anthropology of experience and the anthropology of performance. For Turner, experience is both “living through” and “thinking back;” it is also “willing or wishing forward” (18). Turner sides with Schechner in that they both “envision theatre as an important medium for the intercultural transmission of painfully achieved modalities of experience,” inviting “other ways of seeing and apprehending the ‘reality’ [which] our symbolic formations are forever striving to encompass and express” (18). In this interplay between theatre and “truth” or “reality,” Turner highlights cognition as “an important aspect, facet, or ‘dimension’ of any kind of experience” (13), anticipating, in a way, Bruce McConachie’s intriguing exploration of the theatrical event through the perspective of cognitive studies. McConachie incorporates many of the ideas of cognitive studies in order to challenge fundamental assumptions about the way audiences perceive and respond to the theatrical experience, prioritizing empathy and emotion over a semiotic decoding of the stage.<sup>1</sup>

It is within the framework of this dynamic between performance and audience that questions have been raised about the culture of spectatorship as well as the role of theatre as a socially-critical art. Theatre has consistently functioned as a platform where national narratives are enacted and political ideologies debated, challenging audiences to assess representations of their society and culture. In recent years, a number of scholars have examined how theatrical works are designed in ways that seek to engage audiences in a

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<sup>1</sup> According to McConachie, “most spectators engage in empathetic observation as soon as a performance begins. [...] This is not the same as reading the body as a sign. Rather, it is a mode of cognitive engagement involving mirror neurons in the mind/brain that allow spectators to replicate the emotions of a performer’s physical state without experiencing that physical state directly”(5).

process of meaning-making and experiencing the theatrical event through their own, often conflicting, responses to political and ethical issues.<sup>2</sup>

In theorizing the role of the audience, Erika Fischer-Lichte has placed emphasis on the transformative power of theatre both in its effort to set new aesthetic standards and its unavoidable confrontation with a society in transition. For Fischer-Lichte, the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators in the theatre space “collapses the ostensible dichotomy of the aesthetic and the political” (44) creating a sense of community where the spectators experience the performance event as “a self-organizing system,” not as “an autonomously created work of art” (44). Writing about the theatre and exploring its full range and potential involves a wide spectrum of interpretations that embrace both artists and audiences in multiple ways of “seeing” and responding to radical socio-political changes, quite frequently imbued with a sense of cultural duty and ethical responsibility. Jacques Rancière challenges the opposition between “seeing” and “acting” and argues that “viewing” is a form of action, a process of active interpretation of the performance and being a spectator involves refashioning spectacle in an individual rather than collective way.<sup>3</sup> Along the lines of the actor-spectator binary, Helena Grehan also acknowledges the complex nature of spectatorship in that it involves “spectators in a play of seduction and estrangement where they must engage deeply in order to unravel the questions, ideas, and feelings the works stimulate” (5).<sup>4</sup>

While discussions about the political nature of the theatre have been resumed with renewed energy in the last couple of decades, questions have also been raised about the conditions, forms and contents, impact and activism of performance art: “How can theatre still create spheres where alternatives can be collectively imagined, tried out, discussed, confronted? How can theatre create alternative models of how we might live together, or what kind of society or world we want?” Florian Malzacher, among other theatre scholars, formulates these questions in an attempt to re-imagine the potential of engaged theatre today. As he points out, “a look at the contemporary performing arts scene shows a strong desire for a theatre that not only focuses on pressing political issues, but also becomes a political space

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<sup>2</sup> Ric Knowles, in his editorial piece to the special issue of *Theatre Journal* on audience reception and spectatorship, points out that since the publication of Susan Bennett’s ground-breaking *Theatre Audiences* (1990), scholars have tended to write less about audiences and more about spectators and spectatorship. According to Knowles, this is probably because “the audience” refers to a collectivity, while “the spectator” connotes something more atomized, indicative of a more fractured or pluralistic understanding of reception” (xi). See also, Andy Lavender’s book on new possibilities for spectatorship, increasingly drawing on participatory models of engagement, and privileging sensory experience.

<sup>3</sup>As Rancière explains, “being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal condition. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed (17).

<sup>4</sup> Using Emmanuel Levinas’ ideas regarding the ethical responsibility toward the Other, Grehan frames her theory of ethics in performance drawing attention to the fact that her focus is “on thinking about the limits and the potential of practical responsibility both within and beyond the performance space” (172). Another performance theorist, Jill Dolan had earlier explored the power of the theatrical event to “incite people to profound responses that shake their consciousness of themselves in the world” (456). Dolan’s support of an invigorating theatrical utopia has triggered an examination of the theatre’s potential in creating citizens and engaging democracy as a participatory forum in which ideas and possibilities for social equity and justice are shared (456).

– a public sphere – in itself. There is no common organum to follow. We are in a period of trying out, of finding out – artists as well as audiences (20).<sup>5</sup>

As social and political challenges intensify in a world of paradoxes and compromised ideas, the theatre experiments with new approaches and methodologies, aesthetically diverse, yet converging to confront humanity with directness and honesty.<sup>6</sup> In a way circling back on himself, Schechner seems to have come up with a new “prescription” for present-day performance theorists and artists within the conceptual framework of *The New Third World*, a community of purpose seeking to imagine, invent, and perform alternative ways of becoming. In an ever-more-timely revisiting of his “old” ideas about a broader understanding of what performance is and what performing can do, Schechner’s *New Third World* embraces performance as experimentation with new relationships, as a crossing of borders, not only geographical but emotional, ideological, political, and personal, as a means to become someone else and yourself at the same time, to empathize, react, grow, and change (2015: 1-15).

Either by empowering spectators through more participatory modes of engagement with the performance experience, or by resonating Pinter’s desire for the “truth” in art through the more solid realism of verbatim and documentary drama, twenty-first-century theatre seeks ways to relate to the rapid changes and internal contradictions of today’s globalized world, its conflicts, failed promises, recession, vast immigration, and environmental problems. However, in a world brimming with political ambiguities and social tensions, the theatre’s age-old quest for an artistically-effective representation of reality is more difficult than ever. Contemporary theatre seems to be making a concerted effort to create a space where social and political discourses are (de)constructed and new artistic models of representation “tried out.” Whether this materializes in the familiar space of enclosed theatres or more unconventional public places that host the performance event, the artists’ greatest challenge is to capture a surprisingly elusive reality and convey their aesthetic concerns and political sensibilities to an audience whose perceptive skills are largely determined by the thrust of present-day information culture.

In essence, contemporary theatre attempts to reinvent representational modes and forms of perception so as to creatively relate to a fast-moving mediated reality and preserve its political momentum. Theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann has explored the new theatrical forms and aesthetics that mark the transition from a text-based culture to a new media age of image and sound. In a manner reminiscent of Schechner’s terminology, Lehmann contends that the “diagnosis” for contemporary theatre is that it is radically affected by the conditions of a mediated world, of “a civilization of images” which shape all perception and disrupt the

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<sup>5</sup> Political theatre today seems bent upon extending its social role of representing largely silenced social groups and critical issues, and embracing a wider definition of its identity through new methods for social stimulation that underpin both the act of spectating and the various theatrical elements that range from narrative construction to the use of technology to the selection of performance venue. As Jenny Spencer states, political theatre “takes place both inside and outside conventional theatre spaces, in improvised or scripted forms, for audiences who may or may not be affected by the issues it addresses” (1). See also, Adiseshiah and LePage.

<sup>6</sup> Practices such as theatre for social change, applied theatre, community theatre, immersive theatre, involve some degree of efficacy in seeking to explore the complexities of the theatrical event, its aesthetic value and political intent. See, Schechner and Thompson. See also, Machon.

connection between the sending and receiving of signs.<sup>7</sup> The political dimension of the theatre's "true-to-life" representation of reality is compromised by the media's consistent theatricalization of all aspects of social life and the uncontrollable dissemination of images which transform citizens into a global audience and widen the safety gap between experienced reality and its passive reception. For Lehmann, theatre can respond to this "mediated by media" reality with a "*politics of perception*" which could at the same time be called an *aesthetic of responsibility (or response-ability)* (185). This concept embraces a shift in the understanding of theatre's political engagement from a "reflecting immersion in political topics" to the *mutual implication of actors and spectators in the theatrical production of images* thus making visible the broken thread between personal experience and perception and initiating not only an aesthetic but also an ethico-political experience (emphasis in the original, 185-86).

Still, the questions of what is real and how to reproduce it on stage as well as how much reality theatre can take to retain its artistic quality seem to be stirring a sense of anxious creativity and frustrated responsibility among contemporary artists who claim that theatre can remain political not through its message but its form and strive to transgress traditional boundaries in an attempt to re-sensitize the audience's social consciousness. Although theories, practices and approaches may differ from one another, they all seem to agree that theatre, like culture, is directly related to polis, whether local or global, that is, related to a particular reality. The problem, as already stated, will always be the definition and subsequent dramatic penetration of this reality. It is not an easy matter. As Lucy Prebble writes in her hit *Enron* (2012), "a strange thing goes on inside a bubble. It's hard to describe. People who are in it can't see outside of it, don't believe there is an outside." People live in a bubble or bubbles of all sorts. With globalization we all live in a huge bubble. And so does theatre. We understand Dennis Kelly, a political writer par excellence, when he says that "political theatre is a complete fucking waste of time," if by that he means that theatre is simply incapable of changing the world in one full swoop. In the same way that we will agree with W. H. Auden's claim that no poem has managed to rescue a single Jew from Auschwitz. There are other media that can do all these things more efficiently. At the same time, however, theatre can still be an act of resistance in its own right. It does not necessarily have to do with revolutions, pickets, factory occupation. It could be all this, but it could also be about sexism, about various taboos, personal experiences of racism, of ecological and environmental problems, of corruption, of loss. We are surrounded by crises or potential crises and challenges which can take on many faces; and theatre must be there to interrogate the way in which we receive and translate information in everyday life. Given the changes that the internet culture has brought, theatre strategies as well as theatre's understanding of reality have to change if one wants a future for theatre as a communal, political and ethical force.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Lehmann, "we enter into (mediated) contact with everything, and simultaneously experience ourselves as radically detached from the plethora of facts and fictions we are being informed about. While the media perpetually dramatize all political conflicts, the glut of information, combined with the factual disintegration of clearly discernible political frontlines of events, produces within the omnipresence of the electronic image a *disjointedness* between representation and represented, between image and reception of the image" (185).



The essays that constitute this volume contribute in significant and diverse ways to the ongoing research and discussion concerning the social force of the theatrical event and the strength of the audience's engagement. The scope of this volume is premised on the recognition of theatre as a public space of collective imagination and a major forum of political discourse. Our contributors seek to open up new ways of thinking about the range of the theatre's responses to historical events, cultural conflicts, political oppositions, and environmental issues. Baz Kershaw's essay calls attention to a crucial, yet still nascent, field in theatre and performance studies: theatre and ecology. Focusing on a 1970 multimedia masque titled *H.C.A.W. – Happy Cleaner Air Week* – and a 2011 installation known as *A Meadow Meander*, the essay addresses a number of questions pertaining to the new aesthetic challenges theatre faces in an ecologically threatened world, often functioning as an apocalyptic harbinger in an attempt to raise awareness about ecological issues and stimulate activism.

The first part of this volume revolves around the intersection of theatre and history as materialized through various aesthetic practices and ideological wanderings. The revisiting of historical events from a contemporary theatrical outlook, on the one hand, attests to the unfailing impact of the complexities of history on art and culture throughout time and, on the other, affirms the existence of a vicious circle of ideas, concerns, and questions perennially addressed on stage. Elena Delliou and Christos Tsarouchidis examine Charles Mee's rewriting of Euripides' ancient tragedy *The Bacchae* within a present-day context of insecurity, violence, and war. The essay explores how Mee's *The Bacchae 2.1* addresses the diachronic issue of human suffering and the painful quest for meaning and fulfillment in a world where individual freedom and morality are compromised by abusive state politics. Mee's play invites the audience to re-evaluate the human condition within the larger framework of history and culture as well as embrace an awakened sense of personal responsibility.

Chrysovalantis Kampragkos' essay considers three historical plays through the prism of the wide-ranging ramifications of ideological inconsistencies and political contradictions. Caryl Churchill's *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?*, presents the US-British political-military relations as the conspiracy of a gay couple, Howard Barker's *The Dying of Today* re-enacts the news of the Athenian fleet's defeat in Sicily during the Peloponnesian War, while Charles L. Mee Jr.'s *The War to End War* revisits the 1919 Versailles Peace Treaty and the Manhattan Project. The essay underscores the plays' commitment to non-realism as a most effective technique to draw the audience into a process of understanding the workings of history beyond the confines of time and space.

Efterpi Mitsi brings to light Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris* (ca. 1592) through two contemporary artistic creations, Guillaume Delaveau's 2007 performance *Massacre à Paris*, and Wolfgang Mitterer's operatic version of *Massacre* (2008). Using as a starting point Marlowe's early – and incomplete – text, and moving on to its revival through Delaveau and Mitterer's adaptations, the essay argues for the power of theatre to expose the horrors of history and the senselessness of violence to audiences triggering the rather disconcerting realization of perpetual instances of human brutality as well as a feeling of uncomfortable empathy.

Lina Rosi's essay explores the theatre's undiminished potential to evoke historical memory in a painful interplay of memories, feelings, and traumatic experiences. Focusing on Jean Magnan's *Algérie 54-62*, Mehdi Charef's *1962, Le dernier voyage*, and Aziz Chouaki's *Les oranges*, the essay discusses the theatrical representation of the Algerian War, as one of the most strongly debated chapters in the *guerre des memoires*, which marked the end of France as a colonial Empire, and had a deep impact on the postcolonial societies of both France and Algeria. The final essay of this section, Nicole Ollier's, also moves within a postcolonial context examining the chronicle of the Haitian revolution through Derek Walcott's poetic drama *The Haitian Earth* and the musical comedy *Marie Laveau*. Ollier brings these two texts together in an attempt to discuss the disruptive impact of politics in the public domain and private life where compromises are made and redemption never attained.

The second part investigates the complex relationship between stage, society, and culture in the representation of power structures and cultural negotiations. The theatre emerges as an alternative space where national narratives are both shaped and challenged, questions of identity redefined, and political contradictions addressed. Rooa Ali's essay explores how the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack and its ensuing political discourse of national safety generated a social climate of prejudice and discrimination against Arab Americans as threatening Others. Focusing on Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* (2005) and Sam Younis' *Browntown* (2009), Ali argues for the consistent effort of Arab American playwrights to resist the negative stereotyping of Arabs and reclaim self-representation in a hostile sociopolitical context.

Konstantinos Blatanis' essay offers a comparative reading of Sam Shepard's *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007) and David Mamet's *November* (2008) as imaginative efforts of the American theatre to respond to the tumultuous – almost paranoid – post-9/11 political atmosphere. Blatanis underlines the new challenges that the theatre needs to face and the delicate balances it needs to retain in both the aesthetic and ideological depiction of a social and political reality where what is defined as American and what is not proves increasingly hard-to-pin-down. Christina Dokou's essay explores the portrayal of the Other on stage as an instance of rebelliousness and defiance. More specifically, Dokou examines Migdalia Cruz's *Fur* (1995) and Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* (2005) arguing that their resistance to the sexist and racist representations of the female body either as fully clothed or stark naked raises wider issues of cultural identity-formation, exclusion and assimilation, within a highly consumerist society and global capitalist economy.

The third part of this volume sheds light on theatre's multidisciplinary potential and the new theatrical/artistic practices that embrace the domain of social sciences within the context of an ongoing exchange between stage and audience, performativity and cultural experience. Focusing on Heiner Müller's *Germania Death in Berlin* (written between 1956 and 1971) and Christoph Schlingensief's artistic exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2011, Virginia Dakari's essay underlines their aesthetic and ideological power that derives from the intense interweaving of historical circumstances, political transformations, and personal experiences. For both Müller and Schlingensief, the diseased body becomes a powerful allegory for social and political criticism. George Sampatakakis approaches the idea of the diseased body through the self-portraits of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) and performance artist David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) arguing that AIDS Art is a visual study

on *autothanatography* with the artists' autobiographical works functioning as spaces where personal experiences and emotions intersect with cultural expectations and moral dictates. Katerina Ziaka's essay explores how a significant number of 21<sup>st</sup>- century British plays draw on the field of psychopathology combining political criticism with the representation of insanity. Ziaka argues that this dynamic interplay creates a new stage aesthetics and a new political discourse engaging the audience in a painful realization of the social and cultural nosology of British society and the Western world in general.

In the final part of this volume, Anna Suwalska-Kołecka examines Caryl Churchill's plays *The Skriker* (1994) and *Far Away* (2000) underlining their polemical nature and their intended effect on the spectators' sense of personal responsibility and political involvement. Both plays are inventive responses to the sinister reality of global conflict and ecological destruction. Ivan Lacko attempts to address some crucial questions regarding the development and viability of political theatre in Slovakia. Lacko argues that although state-funded theatres attract a wider audience, they nevertheless avoid tackling controversial, political issues, while smaller fringe theatres, which promise a more radical political discourse, are essentially marginalized. HollyGale Millette's essay explores the ideology and aesthetic of Occupy as public performances of civil discontent where the bodies of constituents and spectators interact in a new concept of politicized theatricality challenging traditional forms of performance and spectatorship and initiating a new language of social protest.

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