

Knowles, Ric. *Reading the Material Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 (pp 246). ISBN 05216441 6X.

Reading the Material Theatre by Ric Knowles is a richly illuminating study that reminds us *why theatrical performance matters*. In an era when media images from film and television cast their shadow on the new global cultures, we tend to overlook the powerful, lived immediacy of theatrical productions and the relationships of the everyday lives of people with dramatic performances and texts (17). Knowles looks afresh at the interplay of connections between the production and reception of dramatic works by eschewing the so-called universality of all artistic forms that speak “across various kinds of difference to our common humanity” (9). What interests him, instead, is the ideological and cultural work done by individual productions as they are mediated by both the cultural and theatrical/material conditions through which they have been produced (10). Coining the term “materialist semiotics” (10-12), the author offers a dynamic model for performance analysis, “linking semiotics and materialist theory” as a way of mapping the interactions between “the politics of the sign [in the performance] and the politics of reception . . . [showing how] those signs are received, decoded, interpreted, and used” (18).

Drawing on examples from theater companies and productions in England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, and the United States, *Reading the Material Theatre* depends strongly on case-study work or located performances, almost exclusively those viewed by the author himself, as a “culturally positioned spectator” (21). In this role, he strikes at the heart of the purported neutrality of conditions of production governing English-speaking theater; setting up a standard of value at the outset, he examines the “transgressive or transformative potential” of a particular script or production, whereby specific categories of difference—race, nation, ethnicity and class, among others—can be interrogated or contained to different degrees in a given performance text (10). This approach is successful in this book because while avoiding the familiar clichés of political correctness, Knowles exposes the dichotomy between the liberal and liberatory premises of innovative theater companies and productions and their co-optation within consumerist/corporate institutions, often eluding any self-conscious interrogation of their own theatrical practices. Such an exposure of the ideological faultlines in the theatrical productions and their reception is evident throughout the book.

Chapter 2 of the book offers a comparative analysis of many aspects of the material conditions of production and reception; these range from

practices of theatrical training, working conditions (including funding and regulations), and the physicality of space and place, among others. Two findings stand out here: first, the reception/interpretation of different productions (even of the same play) is shaped by factors as divergent as the audience-stage spatial arrangement or the geography and location of the theater. Second, there is no such thing as “an empty space” on stage or in nature, and theatrical productions become “unconscious conduits of ideology” whereby (Western) audiences are constructed as consumers and empathetic individuals (27). Thus, genuinely “interventionist” theater such as London’s *Theatre de Complicite*, requires a consistently self-conscious interrogation of theatrical representation itself (46).

Following the history of Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre’s changing locations, from a theater club in an old tenement building to its most recent move to the upscale Festival Square—“worlds away from the squalor and anarchy of the theater’s earlier manifestations” (85)—the author analyzes the effects of this move on the reception of the 1999 production of Aileen Ritchie’s *The Juju Girl*, a trenchant critique of Scotland’s role in colonial Africa with parallels in contemporary Western neocolonialism. Given that a “predominantly white and middle-class audience base shaped the play’s production and reception,” it is not surprising that the director’s notes and popular reviews of the production deploy a “hegemonic (Caucasian Western) ‘we’ . . . with little sense of how the collective may be more splintered and culturally diverse than their first-person pronouns suggest” (87-88). In another instance, two productions of Sue Glover’s *Bondagers*, a play about exploited Scottish women agriculture laborers, reveal the effects of theatrical location on the politics of reception. In the original production in Glasgow’s downtown *Tramway Theatre* in 1991, a former garage for trolleys, with an industrial ceiling and brick walls, the play was reviewed as an “epic theater,” a “feminist show about work” (77). When performed at the *Traverse*’s new trendy site, the show lost its social context and instead, as one reviewer notes, it became a universal “metaphor” for the agricultural cycle (79).

The cultural “we,” noted by Knowles in many reviews, typifies the production of Western audiences as embodiments of a so-called universalism; his interrogation of Peter Brook’s directing practice in terms of an “empty space” is particularly pertinent here as it shows how “the “open” directing process, while purportedly exploring primitive, universal instincts, is “likely silently to be filled with cultural, historical, and ideological imperatives” (27). Part 2 of the book extends such findings about the material conditions and practices as they apply to case studies of distinct cultural communities

of individual theaters and Companies: The Stratford (Ontario) Shakespeare festival, the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, the Wooster Group, and the English Shakespeare Company. While this review cannot map the complicated landscape of all these entities, some glimpses into the particularities of their practices and goals demonstrate, yet again, the universalizing and non-transgressive tendencies of both theatrical and cultural determinants. Two striking performances from the *Tarragon Theatre*, known for its tolerant and inclusive “house style,” foreground how potentially subversive productions can be subsumed within a liberal humanist emphasis on personal relationships (via a naturalistic psychologism) based on an erasure of historical, economic, and public policy contexts. Thus, Tarragon’s solidly naturalistic *The Glass Menagerie* (1997) totally depended on an emotional identification with the characters, offering its audience a cathartic release, but without any unsettling hints of the social/economic contexts of this tragedy. Even a more overtly political play, *The Retreat*, by Jason Sherman, dramatizes the characters’ struggles with their Jewish identities in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but ultimately is more about private relationships than about political conflicts of the Middle East (145-46).

The final chapter, and perhaps one with the broadest global implications, examines the way in which the dramatic productions of international festivals mediate the global and the local, but nevertheless function on the principles of the “market place.” As a result, when plays travel to festivals, they frequently lose their social contexts in the service of a universal appeal. Overall, what drives this compelling book is the struggle between the “potentially chaotic, Dionysian world of the theater” and the “socially reproductive tendencies” that drive the commercial aspects of theater (57-61). The book sides with the “Dionysian energy” but does not offer any clear answers. Instead, it raises some interesting questions: How can “we”—the always already individualized Western audiences—resist the seductive pleasures of emotional identification and cathartic release? Is there a way “we” can imagine communal life that demands from us a public morality and social responsibility? These questions lurk on the edges of the book—not quite addressed here—but perhaps, the subject of another study.

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