

***Theatre: A Very Short Introduction.*** By **Marvin Carlson.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Pp. 131 + 10 illus. £7.99/\$11.95 Pb.

*Reviewed by Jen Harvie, Queen Mary University of London, [j.harvie@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:j.harvie@qmul.ac.uk)*

I suspect Marvin Carlson is theatre studies' greatest living polymath. Having founded the journal *Western European Stages* (now *European Stages*) in 1969, he has for decades had an eagle eye on theatre production across Europe. His 1993 *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present* gave us the kind of epic critical and historical survey few would hazard today – or would have to, given his pioneering work. With the stunningly detailed while still geographically wide-ranging *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (1989), he forged materialist theatre studies. In *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (1998), he navigated the sometimes rocky terrain of performance studies. And though much of his focus is European and American (with his home base in north eastern USA), his expertise is genuinely global: he is a collaborative leader of scholarship on Middle Eastern theatre; he is enormously knowledgeable on theatre in Asia and Central and South America; and he sustains an alert postcolonial awareness of global inequalities, including of scholarly prejudice. A theatre and performance studies polymath, authority, and on-going pioneer, Carlson's agreement to write on theatre for Oxford University Press's massive and successful series of Very Short Introductions is a very large boon for our disciplines.

The first and longest of five sections addresses 'What is theatre?'. Three middle sections explore relations between theatre and religion, drama, and performance. The final part examines 'The makers of theatre', including actors, designers, and directors, but also audiences and puppets. This kind of range of reference is typical of the widely inclusive, lateral-thinking, and enormous erudition Carlson routinely delivers. Though most sections move chronologically, they all,

insistently, range globally. Of course Carlson pays careful attention to theatre history's most widely celebrated epochs: Classical Greece and Rome, Medieval Europe, and Renaissance England, France, Italy, and Spain. But he also focuses on Classical India and China and Medieval and seventeenth-century Japan, and he references numerous theatre and performance examples from Africa, Central and South America, the Antipodes, and other part of Asia. Reliably, he explores theatre's relationships to Christianity, but he also examines its relationships to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. He considers theatre's texts, but also its spaces, makers and many forms, right up to postdramatic theatre.

Occasionally, I would have sacrificed some details of history and examples for more developed social and cultural analysis, for example about theatre and performance's relationships to democracy (pp. 16, 21, 91), nation (p. 21), the everyday (pp. 25-6), tourism (p. 48), 'secular capitalism' (p. 52), anti-theatricality (p. 81), institutions and industry (p. 100), and feminism (pp. 77, 90). That said, I deeply appreciate both the challenge of the short form and, even more, what I perceive as Carlson's greatest commitment: to provide global insight, and to do so in ways informed by postcolonial criticism's warnings against imperialist, colonising attitudes. This politically crucial approach and this vast knowledge are the greatest gifts of Carlson's admirable, important, welcome, and rich – if 'very short' – introduction.