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Book Review: Enacting History

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Scott Magelssen, Rhona Justice-Malloy, eds. *Enacting History*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011. vi + 230 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5654-5; \$39.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1728-7.

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Enacting History is a critical addition to the expanding canon of scholarly literature that examines the intersections of history and performance. As more people than ever learn their history through the performances and interpretations of enactors, it is more important than ever to deconstruct what they are seeing and learning. This compilation of essays, edited by Scott Magelssen and Rhona Justice-Malloy, contributes new and innovative ideas about this phenomenon, while examining modes of performing history outside of the traditional theater.

In his introduction, Magelssen notes that performance offers audiences a more accessible understanding of the past than do books, and has the potential not only to reinforce cultural ideologies but also to challenge them. He suggests that practitioners of performance create space for the past in the moment of the present, simultaneously giving voice to “those who have been silenced by other histories” (p. 9). The question of authenticity, of course, is always looming over performance of the past, in much the same way that it looms over any attempt to accurately and fairly represent a historical moment. Magelssen and his contributors take this question head on, arguing that not only do enactors shape historical understanding, but audiences do so as well through the knowledge and interpretation that they bring to every performance. As Lindsay Adamson Livingston writes in her chapter, “‘This Is the Place’: Performance and the Production of Space in Mormon Cultural Memory”: “through performance, the body (of both spectator and performer) is made complicit in the authenticity of origin and aids in the perpetuation of those claims” (p. 31). In fact, this reimagining of authenticity—one that actually privileges the emotive connection that historical recreation offers—is central to the analyses offered in this book. Enacting history works precisely *because* its very existence depends on the active process of questioning truth in historical representation.

Themes covered in the book address the importance

of performance in maintaining a historical connection to religion, gender roles, race, slavery, and migration, as well as the complexities involved with developing, directing, and performing historical tributes. Magelssen and Justice-Malloy selected essays that create a cohesive dialogue with one another. For example, Leigh Clemons’s chapter, “Present Enacting Past: The Functions of Battle Reenacting in Historical Representation,” dovetails nicely with the chapter by Amy M. Tyson, “Men with Their Muskets and Me in My Bare Feet: Performing History and Policing Gender at Historic Fort Snelling Living History Museum,” in examining the gendered construction of historical performance as it relates to both the past, which is represented, and the present, in which it is contained. Clemons, in addressing the participants in a Texian reenactment “Remember Goliad,” notes that “most of the participants are self-reflexive about their role in reenacting, seeing the need for communication with the audience as more important than the need to be continuously ‘in character’” (p. 14). However, at Fort Snelling, Tyson argues, the need to be “in character” is, in the park management’s view, the greatest indicator of the authenticity of a reenactor’s performance. She notes that “while women were subject to scrutiny about, say, sewing, cooking, and cleaning, men were most often scrutinized for their ability to march, fire muskets, be ‘good soldiers’—and to convincingly portray masculinity, in both its historic and present-day dimensions” (p. 43).

The critique of “affective and emotional” performances of history, and its relationship with authenticity, is taken on by Patricia Ybarra in “Performing History as Memorialization: Thinking with ... *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi* and Brown University’s Slavery and Justice Committee.” Slave history is largely unavailable for us to analyze, as so much about the lives of slaves went undocumented. As such, Ybarra argues, creating fictional representations “such as *Jesus Moonwalks*, which acknowledge these absences, but nonetheless try to write subjectivity within and through them,

complicate[s] the issue” (p. 120). She writes about a research-to-performance method that produces “a necessary supplement not only to dialogue but also to monuments as memorialization of slavery on the Brown campus” (p 128). Magelssen’s chapter, “Tourist Performance in the Twenty-First Century,” also addresses the emotional performance of history when he tells the story of his “tourist” adventure as a Mexican migrant illegally crossing the U.S. border in the dead of night. Putting oneself in the shoes of the subject of representation, this experience offered people the opportunity to be chased, hunted, and led across precarious terrain in search of freedom. A story of race and poverty that is often ignored, this method of performance permanently changed participants’ perspectives on issues of border crossing on the U.S./Mexico border, creating a fiction for themselves while commemorating the real pasts of others.

In “Ping Chong & Company’s *Undesirable Elements/Secret Histories* in Oxford, Mississippi,” Justice-Malloy describes a style of playwriting that collects the voices of local people who “share the common experience of being born into one culture but living as part of another” (p. 204). In this particular production, Justice-Malloy follows director Leyla Modirzadeh as she researches and writes a performance based on residents of Oxford, Mississippi, called *Secret Histories: Oxford*. One of the operating questions examined by this performance was “how can a work of art provoke or move an audience that has not felt excluded to better understand those who have? How can it help those who feel excluded feel less so” (p. 204)? This question is critical to this entire edited compilation: enactors create a bond with the spectator that evokes an emotional response, connecting them to history in a way books cannot. Oftentimes, in so doing, enactors are able to bring light to histories that have traditionally been kept in the darkness.

The book is composed of twelve highly accessible chapters, each of which engages readers with the prob-

lem of performance when it comes head to head with historical authenticity. What is refreshing about this text, however, is that it does not treat this intersectionality as a problem; rather it is this space of interconnectedness that improves the experience of history for enactors and for audiences. In “Is This Real?: An Exploration of What Is Real in a Performance Based on History,” Catherine Hughes argues that the “engagement of visitor/spectator’s imagination” is the general goal of most museums and performance sites. Using reader reaction theory as her methodology, she notes that “meaning cannot be found solely within a text, but must be realized in the construction of interpretation by a reader” (p. 143). As such, the interpreter’s experience is significant—and interpreters here are multilayered as text, enactor, and audience. It is what happens between these interactions that actually forges meaning. Authenticity, Hughes argues, is elusive: when text and reader—or performer and audience—meet, they necessarily change each other. Spectators are always involved in the making of meaning, despite the control enactors might wish to wield over their interpretive craft. Furthermore, in her conclusion, Justice-Malloy argues that performances of the past “direct our attention. We look, and when we attend to something we are changed by it. When we tell our stories and hear them and attend to them we are connecting with one of the most human of attributes: storytelling ... the sense that ‘we are all from the same place’” (p. 221). In our modern, mediated world, this analysis is provocative and insightful, and opens doors to new possibilities of theorizing about history’s authenticity as the subject of performance.

This text is well suited for general academic audiences, and works well with theater and performance studies, history and public history, memory studies, American studies, and popular culture. The text is accessible for undergraduate and graduate students, and is an excellent guide for researchers seeking to theorize about issues of public history and memory.

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