

The Theatrical Public Sphere. By **Christopher B. Balme.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xi + 234. £64.95/ \$99.99 Hb.

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Christopher Balme's new book takes on the question of how theatre, as an art form and institution, can participate in the arena of public debate and contestation that we know as the public sphere. This does not simply involve theatre that comments on topics of public concern; rather, Balme argues instead that theatre can become a locus or participant in public political struggles. Balme helpfully distinguishes between the rational-critical public sphere of Jürgen Habermas and the agonistic public sphere of Chantal Mouffe; the tension between the two forms a useful theoretical spine to the book. The former is an arena of rational discussion about issues of public between seemingly equally-placed individuals outside of the purview of the state; the latter is a political space characterised by opposing affects and passions that, ideally, ought not be suppressed into a rational consensus but rather channelled into a larger democratic project.

Balme's important task faces two distinct challenges. First, because the public sphere is a social and intellectual structure, he necessarily focuses less on the aesthetic work of theatre performances and more on the institutional relationships that surround, shape and condition them. This means that Balme is concerned with the study of theatre as a set of social institutions and the ways in which they are related to the society around them, though points of interface such as advertising, censorship, diplomacy policing and public

scandals. This is a welcome development; our field would benefit from more examples of institutional analyses of theatre, especially when they are as elegant and compelling as Balme's. But this move does mark a shift away from what Balme calls 'the modernist and postmodernist fixation on the eventual temporality of the aesthetic dimension of theatre' (pp. 13–14), a shift which may be disorienting for many scholars.

The second challenge, however, is greater. The modernist project transformed theatre from a forum of social gathering into an artform that facilitates individual aesthetic experiences. This means, according to Balme, that today's theatre has largely excluded the public sphere from its remit in order to offer its spectators a more concentrated aesthetic affect. In Balme's words, 'the darkened auditorium has become to all intents and purposes a private space' (p. 3), as evidenced by how very uninterested government and the public sphere is in contemporary theatrical life.

Because of both of these challenges Balme largely focuses on the institutions of European theatre before the coming of modernism. After an introduction and first chapter which set out the roots of theatre and both the agonistic and rational-critical public sphere in the political thought of ancient Greece, Balme examines the history and social function of the playbill and its contemporary successors in blogs and social media. The second chapter examines the seventeenth-century English public debates connecting Puritanism, preaching, pamphlets, and the closure of the theatres. The third discusses the diplomatic controversies around a would-be 1890 production of Henri de Bornier's *Mahomet* at the Comédie Française (and a later London spin-off), its opposition by the Ottoman Sultan, and its echoes in the 2006 scandal around the production of *Idomeneo* at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin. Balme then turns to examples of theatre generating disruptive public

protest: the performance culture of Weimer Germany, Romeo Castellucci's 2011 production *On the Concept of the Face*, and the practice of blackface performance in contemporary Germany. He closes with an examination of the public debates that developed around four contemporary performances: Schlingensief's *Please Love Austria!* (2000), Rimini Protokoll's *Call Cutta* (2005), Marina Abramovich's *The Artist is Present* (2010), and DV8's *Can We Talk About This?* (2011).

For all the current interest in theatre's social and political potency, very few works have been as clear and specific as this one on the precise ways in which theatre can engage with public life. Balme develops his argument with a maximum of clarity and a minimum of jargon, despite the important developments in applying both Habermas's and Mouffe's views of the public sphere to the field of theatre. The book is both appropriate for advanced-level undergraduates but would benefit any scholar with an interest in European theatre's past and present public life.