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review

Patrick Campbell

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AUTHOR QUERIES

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The Five Continents of Theatre: Facts and Legends about the Material Culture of the Actor by Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese

5 Leiden and Boston: Brill Sense, 2019, 411 pp, ISBN 9789004392922 (paperback)

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A far-reaching, insightful, and engaging mapping of theatre historiography, *The Five Continents of Theatre* is the latest book by renowned director Eugenio Barba, founder of Odin Teatret, and scholar Nicola Savarese. Whilst the pair's previous co-authored publication – *The Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer* (1991) – focused on the pre-expressive level of the actor's embodied craft, this latest work traces the broader material culture of the actor across the ages and around the globe.

Though nearly thirty years apart, these twin publications represent the culmination of the authors' joint research, and map out the multivalent complexity of theatre: on the one hand, there is the intangible materialism of affective forces and drives that underpin the actor's embodied craft (as described in *The Secret Art of the Performer*) and on the other, the concrete material pressures of the sociocultural, economic, and political contexts in which theatre develops as an art form and a praxis. The latter, broader context is the particular focus of this new publication. Barba and Savarese give the name of 'auxiliary techniques' to the material contexts in which the actor's craft develops, which include the different structural, organisational, civic, and pragmatic factors that fundamentally shape the varied manifestations of the profession (7). These techniques are 'auxiliary' as they complement the actor's body-mind techniques, which, according to the authors, form the primary foundation of the actor's kinaesthetic relation with the

spectator and correspond to the recurring tenets underpinning the field of theatre anthropology.

In many ways, *The Five Continents of Theatre* is a response to earlier scholarly criticisms of theatre anthropology as a project. The field's transcultural aspirations and the tendency to focus on decontextualized elements of culturally specific performance forms during sessions of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) were the subject of heated critique during the so-called intercultural debates of the 1990s and 2000s. Barba and Savarese's adoption of a materialist approach to theatre historiography in this latest volume marks a shift away from the technical investigations of theatre anthropology towards a post-Marxian mapping of theatre as a polyvalent, embedded cultural practice. Their explicit reframing of pre-expressivity in this work as a consideration of the actor's somatic expertise marks an important step in their thinking and a historic reconfiguration of their earlier research.

Lavishly produced and richly illustrated, featuring contributions from a range of scholars based in Europe and Latin America, the book is arranged loosely around Kipling's 'Five W's' and separated into the following different sections: 'When?', 'Where?', 'How?', 'For Whom?', and 'Why?' (6). This organisation and the focus given to the revelatory potential of the visual image enables the authors to foreground the material remnants of theatrical activities (such as props, posters, theatre tickets, architectural plans, photographs, and pictorial representations), allowing them to expand upon and elucidate the historical development of the actor's craft around the world. Much of the book charts the evolution of theatre from religious festivity to commercial product, offering a fascinating overview of how shifts in patronage, architecture, technology, culture, and spectatorship transformed the actor's material culture over the centuries. Chapter Five – 'Why?' – interrogates the emerging values of the actor's craft, with a specific focus on the pioneering practitioners who transformed theatre over the course of the twentieth century in Europe, Asia,

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and the Americas. The final (supposedly supplementary) chapter, 'Theatre and history', which includes fragments that did not fit into the other chapters but were too important to omit, notably locates theatre in relation to histories of destruction and cruelty that indelibly marked the twentieth century.

The authors' encyclopaedic knowledge of theatre as a phenomenon is gently deconstructed over the course of the book through recourse to two pseudonyms: Barba and Savarese adopt the personae of Bouvard and Pécuchet in an allusion to Gustave Flaubert's unfinished satirical novel of the same name, which lampooned Enlightenment attempts at cataloguing and classifying scientific and historical knowledge. The sly humour of the authors is apparent here: they are aware of the provisional nature of knowledge, of the dangers of articulating the complex assemblage of theatre in and through writing, and of the inability of any dictionary or encyclopaedic text to encompass the tacit knowledge of a life devoted to theatre. Bouvard and Pécuchet's light-hearted dialogues frame the different sections of the book, lending it a disarming charm.

The jauntness of Bouvard and Pécuchet is, of course, a ruse. Barba and Savarese systematically map out a comprehensive history of the actor's material culture over the course of the publication

with a particular *telos* in mind: a precise trajectory that culminates in the aesthetic innovations, organic learning environments, and ethical forms of cultural action developed by the Theatre Reformers, the pioneers who transformed theatre over the course of the twentieth century, enlarging the boundaries of the craft by responding to new sociopolitical and technological paradigms. *The Five Continents of Theatre* is written in light of the unique contributions made by these particular, visionary practitioners, even whilst it surveys two and a half millennia of theatrical phenomena across five continents.

A moving paean to theatre as a form of cultural and political resistance and as a way of thinking and being-in-the-world that potentially transcends aesthetic concerns and market values, *The Five Continents of Theatre* is a superlative book that makes an important contribution to the field of theatre and performance studies. Its accessibility, tone, and comprehensiveness make it appropriate for use in an undergraduate classroom, where it could be an essential text, presenting a rich and rounded view of theatre historiography from the perspective of the actor's craft.

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