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Theatre Research International / Volume 37 / Issue 02 / July 2012, pp 101 - 103
DOI: 10.1017/S0307883312000016, Published online: 03 May 2012

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0307883312000016

How to cite this article:

ELAINE ASTON (2012). Editorial: Aesthetics, Politics and the Public Sphere. *Theatre Research International*, 37, pp 101-103 doi:10.1017/S0307883312000016

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Editorial: Aesthetics, Politics and the Public Sphere

ELAINE ASTON

Aesthetics. Politics. The Public Sphere. These emerge as connective headlines in this edition of *TRI*. Taken as a whole, the articles provoke key critical questions about the choice of aesthetics in relation to the potentiality of theatre's transformative capacities, and also about how the possibilities (and limitations) of the transformational power that theatre is commonly deemed to be capable of are conditioned by the kind of role theatre and performance have or are permitted to have in the public sphere.

The issue opens with Emine Fisek's enquiry into aesthetics and the reparative possibilities of theatre, an investigation that is located in her treatment of the documentary film *Arna's Children* (2004). As a documentary about young people's theatre activities initiated by Israeli activist Arna Mer Khamis in the Jenin Refugee Camp of the occupied West Bank, the film occasions Fisek's critical pursuit of 'the vexed relationship between aesthetic practices and transformative/rehabilitative ideals'. On the one hand Fisek acknowledges how the documentary traces the restorative possibilities that theatre offers the children in Jenin whose lives are caught up in violence, trauma and atrocities, while on the other she also wrestles critically with the role theatre is able to play in this 'at-risk zone'. Moreover, the risk to theatre and to lives in Jenin is heightened by the fact that during the time of Fisek's writing and submission to *TRI*, the actor, political activist and maker of the documentary, Juliano Mer Khamis, was assassinated in Jenin on 4 April 2011. Her article appears here in dedication to his memory.

'Aesthetic practices and transformative/rehabilitative ideals' are returned to in Emma Cox's concern with theatre that stages refugee narratives. Here, the performance that is core to Cox's analysis is Cape Town-based Magnet Theatre's *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, directed by Mark Fleishman, and the 'vexed relationship' that surfaces in this article is that between victimhood and hope. Attending to how the refugee story is aesthetically formed and how it is received in performance contexts outside its local, South African milieu, Cox teases out the 'how' and the 'where' that shape the politicizing possibilities (and difficulties) of realizing 'affects of hope'.

A reading of these two articles together provides an affective experience, not least because both pieces call attention to lives, children's lives especially, that are in jeopardy, whether this is in the West Bank or Cape Town. But, more precisely and crucially, they provide a *critical-affective* reading. By this I mean the way in which both articles resonate in their writing with a critical sense of how theatre and performance criticism

engaging with the aesthetics and politics of hope or change needs also, like theatrical, transformative practice(s) themselves, to be resistant to the 'romance' of transformation.

In their close 'viewing' of Robert Lepage's *The Blue Dragon* through the lens of Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualization of liquid modernity and liquid love, Chris Hudson and Denise Varney return us to the question of aesthetics. Entering into the debate over whether the archetypal love story at the 'heart' of the show appears as 'pure soap opera' or more productively draws on and figures the love story as 'a cross-cultural romance', the authors proceed with an insightful analysis of the aesthetics of Lepage's work, paying particular attention to 'globalization and intermediality'. Adopting this approach ultimately allows them to lay claim to the performance as one that 'transforms the archetypal love story into a drama that takes place in the space of flows between two cultures, where love and intimacy are implicated in the transience and mobility of human life in the twenty-first century'.

Taking us back to the early years of the nineteenth century and to an overlooked period of German theatre history, Meike Wagner examines theatre's struggle to intervene in the public sphere: to challenge the Prussian authorities' monopoly on public and political discourse. To argue how theatre became a 'potential player in an incipient public sphere', Wagner takes the censorship case of Gotthilf August von Maltitz's *The Old Student* in 1828 at the Königstädtische Theater, Berlin. While an illuminating case of censorship in and of itself, Wagner's study maps out much larger considerations, analysing this period of (theatre) history as a 'critical phase' of the public sphere, tracing the developments in media technology, and looking in between key revolutionary moments with respect to questions of social reform. Working in this way she intervenes in the commonly received idea that because of censorship and political repression it was seemingly impossible for theatre at this time to have a political voice, instead making and evidencing the case 'for theatrical action in the public sphere in early nineteenth-century German theatre'.

From the archival theatre history research that underpins Wagner's case study, we move to a dossier contribution conceived and constructed as a 'working archive'. 'History, Memory, Event' focuses on the 'politics of performance between 1970 and 1990', and documents a research collaboration between the School of Art and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi, India) and the School of Theatre, Performance and Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick (Coventry, UK). Compiled by Nobuko Anan, Bishnupriya Dutt, Janelle Reinelt and Shrinkhla Sahai, the dossier documents the group's aims to achieve an 'international dialogue capable of approaching performance through multinational lines of inquiry'. It provides a methodological account of how the group worked to more thoroughly engage in international, cross-cultural dialogue, and presents their key findings under four main topics: constructing the nation through performance, performativity and the public sphere, representations and exclusions of the other, and the role of media in relation to performance. Hence questions about aesthetics, politics and the public sphere are woven throughout the fabric of these international performance investigations.

The concept of a 'working archive' constitutes something of a compositional and editorial challenge. As a participant in the research group's meeting back in November 2010 at the University of Warwick, I witnessed at first hand the process of working

towards a meaningful international dialogue centred on performance and politics, and came away with the sense that this was an important process to document in *TRI*, given how it exemplifies the international concerns and interests of the journal. But how to share this in a published form has taken intensive labour and lengthy negotiations between all parties involved. Arguably the most experimental of submissions that I have engaged with as editor, the attempt to find a published form for this work finally emerged as a composite dossier and supporting, on-line supplementary details. Working between the two, readers can grasp both archival artefacts and reflective insights and map out their own further connections to the materials and findings.

Taking a moment in this editorial to draw attention to how this works is also my way of signalling how this particular archival experiment might serve to prompt ideas for future submissions: how cyberspace can be used as a supplementary or complementary publishing space. While a regular practice in scientific journals, this is a more unusual step for a journal in the arts, but a step arguably worth taking. In this particular instance, the artefacts of the 'working archive' presented between the dossier and the Web point up an important concern for our discipline: the need for working methods and strategies that move us outside our comfort zones of individually thought-about specialisms and theatre cultures, in the interests of more thoroughly internationalizing the research dialogues in the field of theatre and performance scholarship.