Against Theatre: Creative Destrucions on the Modernist Stage
(review)

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Shepherd also examines theatre spaces, analyzing how those spaces both influence and produce spectators. As a place of entertainment, the theatre focuses the attention of the audience on the performer, allowing the spectator to inhabit the dramaturgic space of the play both physically and vicariously. Shepherd extends the dynamic to include interactions among the spectators. He especially examines the theatre of Victorian England, where the spatial arrangement of the theatre stratified and organized the audience into social classes.

Part 3 looks at bodies that seem to go beyond the limits, lose autonomy, and are seemingly excessive. Using examples such as Edward Alleyn’s bombastic performance in Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, Shepherd emphasizes the functionality of the performer’s body: muscles acting as a display of power, a physical embodiment of the text in flesh and blood, excess and noise. It is a performance tradition seen even today in the medium of the music video, in raves, and dance clubs, with the presentation of bodies worked into a physical fervor for the pleasure of an audience.

Linking phenomenological descriptions of the body to careful literary analysis, Shepherd persuasively connects the body, society, and pleasure. The performer’s body, he demonstrates, is the essential language of the theatre—a language that can support or counter a society’s values, morals, and politics.

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AGAINST THEATRE: CREATIVE DESTRUCTION ON THE MODERNIST STAGE.
Edited by Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner. Performance Interventions Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; pp. xii + 259. $85.00 cloth.

Most theatre scholars are familiar with Jonas Barish’s influential 1985 study, The Antitheatrical Prejudice, which explores the history of attacks on the theatre from the time of Plato to the fascist anti-theatricalism of the twentieth century. Building on and then questioning or reframing Barish’s arguments, Against Theatre looks at the anti-theatrical tendencies evident in many modernist and post-modernist movements. The major premise of this collection is that “anti-theatricalism always emerges in response to a specific theatre and, by extension, that the modernist form of anti-theatricalism attacks not theatre itself but the value of theatricality as it arose in theoretical and practical terms throughout the nineteenth century” (2).

By exploring the attacks on traditional theatre forms made by a wide variety of playwrights, poets, artists, and directors, the works in this collection explore the ways in which anti-theatrical destruction can also be a creative tool for reshaping the theatre. As Ackerman and Puchner note, “anti-theatricalism presents itself as a paradoxical way of affirming the capacious powers of the theatre: far from fearing its own extinction, the theatre can host its own critique and profit in the process” (15). Combined with the strict historical grounding of the various chapters here, this focus on the means by which theatre uses anti-theatricality to drive the creation of new forms pushes the essays here beyond the “trans-historical notion of anti-theatricalism” (2) seen in Barish’s work.

For this collection, the editors have selected works that are diverse, covering a range of topics and time periods (including some that fall outside the traditional definition of modernism), viewed through a number of different theoretical lenses. In some senses, the collection of essays here is quite modernist in its fragmented exploration of a single topic (anti-theatricalism as a means of theatrical regeneration). This fragmentation is especially evident in the introduction, which does not provide the reader with an overarching sense of the organization of the book, but instead offers hints as to how the different contributors deal with some of the major themes of the collection. As a whole, though, the work does have a clear organizational structure, as it is divided into three distinct sections. Part 1 deals with the issue of “Frames;” the essays exploring many of the aspects of both literal and metaphorical framing (expanding the frame, breaking the frame, and so on) that are central to modernist theatre. Part 2, “Materials,” is similar in its literal and metaphorical exploration of the materialism of the stage, the properties and set pieces on stage, the bodies (or lack thereof) that populate the theatre, and the materiality of audiences. Finally, part 3 looks at the “Values” that define modernist attacks on theatre, exploring many of the issues and ideas for and against which modernist theatre fought.

The essays in the first part bring up many of the interesting ideas surrounding frames and framing that other writers on modernism have addressed, adding to these previous discussions a grounding in the specific historical theatre forms that inspired particular “re-framings.” Arnold Aronson’s contribution, “Avant-Garde Scenography and the Frames of the Theatre,” makes an excellent first chapter because it introduces many of the issues that the other scholars will be exploring. Aronson notes that the anti-theatrical gesture involved in fragmenting the frame leads to the creation of new theatrical types, arguing that “[i]f, since the Renaissance if not since ancient Greece, the theatre had transformed the
spectator into a passive observer of a simulation of life, this rejection of theatre through the elimination of the frame (or, in some cases, more precisely, the incorporation of the spectator within the frame) was intended to re-engage the spectator in an active role in the performance in order not simply to entertain but to transform” (34).

The other essays in part 1 deal with numerous aspects of framing that are essential to modernist (and postmodernist) theatre. From the “metatheatrical” plays that Elinor Fuchs discusses in her contribution to the avant-garde operas analyzed in Herbert Lindenberger’s chapter and the modernist cinema that Charlie Kiel explores, these works all use anti-theatrical attacks on traditional framing as a means of creating new types of theatre.

The essays in part 2, “Materials,” are set up nicely by Kirk Williams’s, “Anti-Theatricality and the Limits of Naturalism.” His essay explores the ways in which the use of “real” material artifacts onstage, which was supposed to lead to “real” social change, instead may confirm that the material world is theatrical or performative. Elin Diamond goes on to examine the materiality of human bodies in her discussion of primitivism, “Deploying/Destroying the Primitivist Body in Hurston and Brecht.” She also demonstrates how reality depends in many ways on representation. In a similar manner, Patrick McGuinness’s “Mallarmé, Maeterlinck and the Symbolist Via Negativa of Theatre” shows how the symbolists’ reduction of the materiality of the stage leads to “a triumphant reclaiming of the theatrical” (149).

In part 3, “Values,” the essays discuss issues such as the conflict between narrative and drama and between legitimate theatre and other forms. Also explored are significant terms like “obscenity” and “illusion.” As in the book as a whole, these chapters cover a wide range of time periods (basically the entire twentieth century) and diverse works (from the novels of Joseph Conrad to jazz clubs in Harlem and belly dancing). Again, each chapter is grounded in specific historical developments, as seen in David Savran’s nuanced discussion of “legitimacy” in the American theatre of the early twentieth century. The collection ends with Herbert Blau’s heavily theoretical chapter, “Seeming, Seeming: The Illusion of Enough.” Building upon some of his earlier writing, Blau claims: “What I’m essentially saying here—in a period of jaundiced value, where the familiar is distrusted, . . . taken for granted and essence disqualified—is that the theatre is essentially, in every nuance, the site of anti-theatre, and would hardly exist without it” (245). This idea, that anti-theatricality is inherent to the theatre and perhaps a necessary feature of theatrical production, runs throughout the entire collection and represents a significant addition to previous works on anti-theatrical tendencies.

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**MISTERO BUFFO. THE COLLECTED PLAYS OF DARIO FO, VOLUME TWO.** By Dario Fo. Translated by Ron Jenkins, based on the editing of Franca Rame. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006; pp. xxxii + 169. $15.95 paper.

The political and cultural contexts of the plays of 1997 Nobel Prize–winner Dario Fo are usually downplayed in the US, where most of his plays are produced to highlight their comedic value, and where books about the author focus mainly on his commedia dell’arte acting style. These choices limit the depth of experience of both playgoers and readers because they fail to acknowledge the roots of Fo’s work and its far-reaching implications within postwar Italian culture. Ron Jenkins amends these faults in the introduction to his recent translation of Mistero Buffo, the best-known of Fo’s plays, by acknowledging the political turmoil and the religious scandal provoked by this piece and by locating it within Italian culture of the 1970s. Mistero Buffo attempts to correct the ecclesiastical censorial view of the Bible by rewriting pivotal moments in both the Gospels and Church history, just as the giullari—traveling storytellers and jesters—would have done in the Middle Ages when performing in public squares.

In his introduction, Jenkins, who has translated and written extensively on Fo, reports on the political blackballing of the playwright from all public media, allegedly due to the political intervention of the Vatican. Jenkins also includes excerpts of the 1977 vitriolic argument between Franco Zeffirelli and Fo following the broadcast of Mistero Buffo on Italian public television. The devoutly Catholic Zeffirelli attacked Fo for his de-sanctifying portrayal of the Gospels, and Fo counterattacked by accusing Zeffirelli and the Catholic Church of having sanitized Jesus’ revolutionary message and silenced the “pagan, almost Dionysian joy for love, feasting, beauty, and earthly things” (xxxi) found in the popular interpretation of the New Testament. According to Fo, the popular tradition is free-spirited, disrupting the homogenizing attempts of the official history, and is also revolutionary because it places humanity back into the Gospels.

Like the giullari, “who countered official church Gospels with tales that grew out of the oral and pictorial folk tradition of religious stories” (3), Fo