
Una Chaudhuri

Like the six works—four plays, a digital opera, and an installation—which Helena Grehan treats in this book, her own project here is deeply challenging (in all senses of that word), even daunting. Mirroring the complex dramaturgies and multiple, layered stylistics of the works she analyses, Grehan’s argument is intricate and deliberately difficult, not in the sense of being obfuscating or inaccessible but in the sense of modeling a rare level of toleration—even appreciation—of ambiguity and ambivalence. The willingness to remain present to deeply disturbing ideas and emotions is understood here as the central task of ethical spectatorship in the globalised present, and the book is a detailed demonstration of how certain contemporary works are constructed to engage their audiences in a process of experiencing and working through their conflicting responses to subjects of vast ethical and political import.

Grehan’s argument is premised on a recognition of the special nature of theatrical spectatorship, which always involves inhabiting a dual identity as an individual and a member of a collective. This duality is further complicated by the duality between spectator and actor, where Grehan, following (and quoting) Claudia Castellucci, locates a great deal of ethical potential: ‘the actor who looks at the spectator reveals to the spectator his own gesture, a form of mirroring that also creates a profound equivocation and puts in doubt the spectator’s proper role.’ The equivocating reflection of the spectator in the actor’s gesture (and the character’s discourse) emerges, in Grehan’s discussions of specific works, as a rich vein of emotional and ethical ore for painstakingly forging the chains of responsible understanding between the spectator and the disturbing subjects of these works.

An additional layer of complexity characterises spectatorship in the heavily mediatised and globalised age we are now living in, and here Grehan links the now-familiar perspectives of theorists like Guy Debord and Hans-Thies Lehmann to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s speculations on the modes of subjectivity produced by consumerist postmodernism and their implications for ethics and politics. Grehan’s thoughtful application of Bauman’s ideas to the field of performance is both original and valuable, almost as valuable as the conversation she is virtually initiating here between performance and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Levinasian thought has been hugely influential in recent cultural and political theory and philosophy, with Bauman having joined Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Zizek and many other thinkers in expanding the range of spheres in which Levinas’s insistence on the ethical primacy of the Other can be productive. Grehan gives us the first sustained discussion of the relevance of an other-centered ethics (and the counter-humanist model of subjectivity it implies) to performance and spectatorship, a contribution made all the more impressive by the fact that Levinas was himself deeply suspicious of art and artistic enjoyment, once comparing it to ‘feasting during a plague.’ Grehan works through his concerns in two early sections entitled ‘The Limits of Levinas’ and ‘The Limits of Art,’ before going on to make a compelling case for inverting Levinas’s negative conception of ‘participation’ in order to outline a complex process of response, imbued with a sense of ethical responsibility, that performance is especially suited to engender. In redefining participation as an ethically enabling process rather than a self-indulgent and ethically oblivious state, Grehan models a temporalised and highly differentiated mode of performance analysis, one that pays as much attention to the dynamics of performance as to its proxemics. This move involves, among other things, an openness
to tracking and registering the constantly shifting and often contradictory responses evoked in the course of a play, instead of subsuming them all under some compulsory over-arching effect, or meaning, or affect. The fact that this method is demonstrated on material that is in general deeply disturbing, even shocking and horrifying, makes the subsequent chapters seem to be presided over by an extremely unlikely pair of theatrical forbears: Antonin Artaud and Gertrude Stein. What Grehan is advancing here is not only a theory of spectatorship but also a methodology of spectatorship, one in which Steinian contra-punctuality and syncopation is invited to repeatedly disrupt the force of the cruel theatres that arise in response to traumatic histories and overwhelming realities of modernity.

Chapter 1, ‘Situating the Spectator,’ provides a lucid account of such foundational Levinasian concepts as the ‘face-to-face,’ the ‘saying’ (le dire) and the ‘said’ (le dit), and the ‘call of the Other,’ all of which shape the all-important category of responsibility which Grehan, like Levinas himself, places at the heart of her theory of ethics in performance. By insisting on the (counter-intuitive) Levinasian sense of responsibility as non-intentional, as prior to rather than produced by subjectivity, Grehan also usefully identifies the pitfalls of a sentimental or literalistic mapping of the Levinasian ‘face-to-face’ with the theatrical encounter between actor and spectator that lies at the heart of so much avant-garde theatre and its theorizations. For Grehan as for Levinas, responsibility is neither consciously chosen nor unconsciously provoked; it is not constructed for the spectator by the work, nor imposed on the work by the spectator (another way to put this is that this model of responsibility does not align with either reader-response theory-based nor reception theory-based theories of spectatorship). Rather it emerges as the spectator ‘negotiates his or her vulnerability, exposure, sadness, trauma, despair, as well as joy, warmth, exhilaration and hope in relation to the work and the artists within it as well as to the responses, where discernible, of the other spectators’ (14). The experience that most definitively heralds the arrival of the kind of responsibility that Grehan is after is what she calls ambivalence, and defines as ‘a form of radical unsettlement, an experience of disruption and interruption in which the anodyne is challenged’ and spectators are forced to engage with ‘the other, the work, and with responsibility,’ and that continues ‘long after they have left the performance space’ (22). The spectator’s opening to ambivalence translates, for the critic, into a commitment to tracking, describing, and reflecting on her journey through that space. The ardoir, arduousness, patience, and courage this critical practice requires—and the rewards it reaps—is vividly on display in the following four chapters of the book.

Each of the following four chapters focuses on one ambitious and important work of theatre, two of which are by internationally renowned companies—The Societas Raffaele Sanzio and Le Theatre de Soleil—and all of which engage large questions of historical, political and ethical responsibility using a wide range of theatrical styles, techniques, and aesthetics. The fifth chapter expands the frame to include other art forms (the digital opera Three Tales Steve Reich and Beryl Korot (2002), and two works from Australian sculptor Patricia Piccinini exhibition 2004 Nature’s Little Helpers) so that Grehan can extend her ethical theory beyond human subjects and consider our responses and responsibility to machines and non-human organisms. All the works analysed are recent, dating from 1999 to 2004, and international, hailing from three continents. While covering a wide range of topics—genocide and war, the holocaust and colonialism, refugeehood and imprisonment, experimentation and catastrophe—all these works share one feature that makes them ideally subjects for Grehan’s project: all are difficult, demanding works, with imagery that repels and horrifies as much as it engages and transports the spectator.
The Societas Sanzio Raffaello, whose 1999 production *Genesi: from the museum of sleep* is the focus of the second chapter, has received a great deal of sophisticated critical and theoretical attention recently, most notably in important volumes by Gabriella Gianacci and Nick Kaye, Nicholas Ridout, and Alan Read. Grehan engages productively with this critical discourse, drawing from it to verify and amplify her main argument, which links the widely noted visceral and non-verbal qualities of Castelluci’s ‘pre-tragic’ theatre to questions of ethical response. For example, building upon Read’s account of what it feels like and what it means to inhabit the space opened by Castelluci’s rendition of Auschwitz—a space that offers no safety or distance from its horrific subject, putting us ‘in the same state of exception that allowed for those conditions, now being played out in front of us, to become the rule’—Grehan works through her own reactions to the often grotesque stage imagery, staging the reflections that took her from her initial feelings of ‘confusion and dismay’ to an appreciation of the complex ethical opening that is the culminating (and on-going) gift of the work.

Grehan’s discussions in subsequent chapters of Black Swan Theatre’s *The Career Highlights of the MAMU* (2002), TheatreWorks and Ong Ken Seng’s *Sandankan Threnody* (2004), and Ariane Mnouchkine and Theatre du Soleil’s *Le Dernier Caravanserail (Odyssees)* (2003) allow her to test and demonstrate her theory of ethical spectatorship as critical methodology in relation to several key tropes of contemporary political, ethical, and performance theory: alterity and shame, testimony and polyphony, empathy and participation. Each chapter is richly—but never exclusively—descriptive, always carefully theorising the spectator’s experiential trajectory as keyed to the micro-level of performance (set elements, costume, gesture, scenic discourse) and the meta-level of theory. For readers who might have witnessed these performances, the discussion illuminates and amplifies one’s memory in ways that initiate—or re-initiate—the kind of ethical response Grehan is arguing for; for those who have not, it offers a vivid account of both content and context, the latter including both the critic’s and the culture’s preoccupations, investments, and limitations. *Performance, Ethics, and Spectatorship in a Global Age* is a work of original, generous, and—above all—responsible theatre theory.

Una Chaudhuri is Collegiate Professor and Professor of English and Drama at New York University. She has lectured internationally and published extensively on modern drama, performance theory, and ecocriticism. She is the author of *No Man’s Stage: A Semiotic Study of Jean Genet’s Plays*, and the award-winning *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, editor of *Rachel’s Brain and Other Storms: The Performance Scripts of Rachel Rosenthal*, and co-editor, with Elinor Fuchs, of *Land/Scape/Theater*. She was guest editor of a special issue of *The Yale Theater Journal* on ‘Ecology and Performance,’ and of *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies* on ‘Animals and Performance.’ Her current research and publications explore ‘zoolisis,’ the discourse and representation of species in contemporary culture and performance.