

Critical Theory and Performance, eds., Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach
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This is a revised and expanded edition of an influential essay collection originally published under the same title in 1992. Of the twenty nine essays, nineteen are new or newly prefaced, and there are additional sections on race theory, postcolonialism, gender and sexuality, and mediatised cultures.

An anthology of this kind is a big gesture, and a bold one. The expansion reflects an ambition in the original collection to achieve a kind of scoping exercise for discipline of Performance Studies, though, as the editors acknowledge, one of the limitations is that this is an essentially North American anthology. From an Australian point of view, it's good to see that a fine essay by Joanne Tompkins has found its way into the Postcolonial section, but for a readership outside the US context, there are some issues. To draw so many of the contributors from one part of the globe is problematic in a collection that purports to offer an authoritative overview, but more problematic is that the references within the essays are also largely restricted to work that has appeared through North American journals and presses. I don't want to labor this point, because scholarship from that part of the world has played a catalytic role in the discipline (something appropriately reflected here), and many of the most prominent US writers and publishers have been generous in their support of work from other regions. But it must be said that here and there in this hefty volume one encounters an essay that comes across as a conversation in the comfort zone, where relevant work done elsewhere has gone un-noticed, when it might have done something to refresh the terms of enquiry.

Blindspots, though, are also a legitimate fascination in a scoping exercise on this scale. What didn't we see in 1992? ('We' being here the intellectual community of the discipline.) Has our vision broadened since then, or do we need to be reminded of wide-angle views that we've shied away from in our present habits of focus and framing? How, in our role as intellectual observers, did we fail to see ourselves, and which of our posturings might now embarrass us, including, maybe, the embrace of veto on using the word 'we.' Yes, we can.

In their Preface to the second edition, the editors allude retrospectively to a 'theory explosion,' with the rider that in their view, the age of theory is not over. In the original Introduction, written from the midst of the explosion, the temperature is rather higher. There's an air of urgency that we've lost, along with the conviction that we were experiencing a cultural moment that was some kind of epicentre. Re-reading this Introduction, it's curious what washes and what

doesn't. As an opening salvo, for example, we have the declaration that to take up a theoretical volume such as this 'is immediately to encounter the topography of the *post*.' (xiii) Since then, we seem to have got past the post. We occupy a cultural timezone that lacks for labels, and for the scrabbling energy of debate that goes with them. The debates are elsewhere, taking their direction from the media-driven rhetorics surrounding US foreign policy, free market capitalism, the environment, democracy, the clash of civilizations, the treatment of refugees. Against these, the self-consciously 'political' positioning associated with the theory explosion starts to look a bit naff. When the editors in 1992 see 'an inherently political character to the performance analysis that has emerged from critical theory' they envisage a project that 'revises, challenges, rewrites, interrogates, and sometimes condemns received meanings.' (3) Yes, I remember being all for all of that. But didn't we have just a few tickets on ourselves? With hindsight, isn't there some rather troubling presumption in constantly playing the role of surgeon to blind-spots in the visual field of the other? The 'other' being in this case all that we the theoretically minded chose to dissociate ourselves from, in the interests of reversing cultural capital so that another kind of other could get a look in. Between the new Preface and the original Introduction to this volume lies a vast terrain of cultural change, and I found myself wishing that this had been more centrally the focus of the revised edition. But then, that would lead to a completely different set of essays and enquiries.

The editors keep a steady hand on the tiller as they mediate between the timeframes, introducing each section with a genuinely authoritative overview and focusing on the relevance of particular methods and angles of enquiry. They choose a minimalist approach to the new introduction, and tread lightly over the shifting ground. Some of the original contributors, though, offer cogent bridging statements that have an engaging candour. Jill Dolan prefaces her essay on performative representations of gay and lesbian sexuality with an acknowledgement that she has moved away from a commitment to transgressive extremism. 'I now find it rather bold and naïve,' she confesses, 'that I assumed gay and lesbian standards for representations of sexual practice would inevitably be more permissive and transgressive. (335) Nonetheless, she stands by the core argument of her original essay, which is concerned with the way realism operates on marginalized sexuality. What drives her enquiry is a probing concern with different approaches to representation and their different kinds of cultural influence. This is a critical focus that doesn't date.

The collection contains some fine contributions, that hold their own as classics. John Rouse's 'Brecht and the Contradictory Actor' is a textbook example of finely angled scholarship directed towards the elucidation of a key area of theatrical practice. His premise is simple: that Brecht's work with actors was governed by dramaturgical practicalities. Rouse explores the particulars in a systematic way, giving the reader a compelling sense of being close to the working process through which a scene or an occurrence within it took shape under Brecht's

direction. Elin Diamond, writing on 'The Violence of "We"' gives as crisply argued an account as you will find anywhere, on a matter of critical protocol that has become vexed and confused. If it's time to lift the embargo on this dangerous pronoun, we need to do so with the kind of awareness that her psychoanalytically based analysis provides. We need to know who 'we' are, and to be conscious of the different scales and forms of collective to which we feel we belong. Reading Peggy Phelan's 'Immobile Legs, Stalled Words,' I'm reminded of how the theory explosion created a new space for inventiveness in critical writing, where fictional narrative could be fused with analytical commentary. Phelan splices segments from the autobiography of an alter-ego who is an injured Balanchine dancer with a psychoanalytic discussion of how physical impairment tells strange truths. 'Dragging feet, feet with sharp cramps, feet that swell and limp, feet that are suddenly too heavy to move, feet that support legs frozen in contractions, give *Studies in Hysteria* a strange rhythm and a rocky gait,' she observes. (435) The idea of 'ficto-criticism' has provided a licence for some appalling stuff over the last couple of decades. Phelan's essay is state of the art, and might serve as a salutary reminder that this kind of experiment is no game for the novice. It's an art to be attempted only by someone who, like her dancer-narrator, has some advanced technique at their disposal: a virtuosity with language, and a nuanced sense of how to employ its different registers.

'The Phenomenological Attitude' by Bert O. States reminds one that ground breaking was an activity before it found its way into the domain of adjectival weasel words. Breaking ground – philosophical and perceptual ground, in this case – is difficult work, calling for a well tuned sense of how and where to dig. The essay sets off by plucking an extraordinary and unexpected passage out of the literary canon: a pronouncement from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, in language so full of itself that it has fired off a full round before you can quite see what direction it's coming from. Poetry, Shelley proclaims, 'defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain, or draws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being.' (26) Here is a voice that speaks from another cultural epicentre, from a time of revolution and untrammelled idealism, a voice that is the more extraordinary for being pitched without the backing of any theoretical repertoire. States pitches his own argument pretty high by starting off this way. He proposes that the phenomenological approach is concerned with 'the first four seconds of the perceptual explosion,' and he equates Shelley's poets with critics in the Shklovsky school of defamiliarisation: they have the phenomenological attitude 'to excess.' It's refreshing to have this essay in the collection because, amidst all the terminological disclaimers focused on cleaning out anything that smacks of universalism, phenomenologists still get to talk about 'the world.' With a focus on perception as experience, theatre can be seen as a medium that double tracks the sense of reality, making us suddenly aware of things we knew but didn't know we knew. States is one of those thinkers who gets you following into an enlarged mental space. At its best, that's what the theory explosion gave us. There was

adventure, exhilaration, a sense of discovery: we should never have allowed those qualities to get railroaded from our intellectual work.

In the last fifteen years, we have seen an expansion in historical scholarship, and that might have been more fully represented here (especially as Joseph Roach is surely the most distinguished writer in the field.) Reconnecting with the past is as important a way of checking and renewing perspectives as connecting across cultures geographically, and after getting to the end of the volume, I find Shelley's voice ringing in my ears, prompting a view of the criticism/poetry convergence that inverts the priorities of the theoretical approach. Theory at its best is a work-out for consciousness. Poetry is a sensory work-out. Both have a flow-on effect into our cognitive relationship with the world. They're best not divorced from each other, and theatre can do both together, but by foregrounding a mission to render the senses newly alert, Shelley vitalises the connection between human being and the natural world at large. He too brings the poet and the critic into a near identical space, but it is the sensing of the poet that leads the way to the conceptual formulations offered by the critic. Something like an ecological model of consciousness is at issue here. Surely that's the model we need for the cultural climate unfolding right now.

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