

## **BOOK REVIEWS OF:**

***Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre.*** By **Joanne Tompkins**. London: Palgrave, 2006. Pp. xii. + 204 + 11 illus. Hb.

***Unstable Ground: Performance and the Politics of Place.*** Edited by **Gay McAuley**. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2006. Pp. 306 + 43 illus. SFR 50.00; €41.20 £27.00; US \$45.95 Pb.

***Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australian Theatre.*** By **Helen Gilbert** and **Jacqueline Lo**. London: Palgrave, 2007. Pp. x + 245 + 12 illus. £45 Hb.

*Reviewed by Rachel Fensham, University of Surrey.*

Distinctively these books focus on how space, place and location inform understandings of performance although they are concerned more with social geography than spatial abstraction or semiotics alone. Because colonialism splits history in two, such as the long history of indigenous peoples (40,000 years) and short white history (less than 250 years), the dominant concern of postcolonial representation in Australia becomes geography - the land, landscape, an island, in Asia. Indeed, visiting Italian theatre director Romeo Castellucci whose own work excavates the iconography of Western art history and literature claims that 'the concept of geography, the richness of space' could lead to another mode of making theatre in a country like Australia.<sup>1</sup> And it is this proposition that these three books interrogate.

Tompkins introduces the spatial theme by drawing on Lefebvre's writings on 'social space' to suggest that 'space is theatre's medium of articulation' (3), since the text, the building and the circumstances of performance represent space that is full of meanings rather than empty (as Peter Brook once proposed). Through a careful analysis of plays by key writers including Nowra, Sewell, Davis, Bovell, Frankland, and Christian, she examines the multiple and complex differences of imaginative representation of space in relation to the three key topoi of monuments, contamination, and borders, and shows how they 'unsettle' the dominant and binding national narratives of white settlement.

As with the primary acts of colonisation for Aboriginal people, these plays show how space that is inhabited can be reterritorialised or rendered void. Whether in the colonial past or the uncertain present, the imaginative representation of these 'non-places' translate, depict and reanimate an ongoing 'anxiety surrounding spatiality' (162). The methexis, or mixing of spaces in Australian theatre, as Tompkins suggests, may be haunted by the history of dispossession and displacement, but through its work of inventing spaces, theatre 'exceeds'

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<sup>1</sup> Personal interview, Italy 2001.

(164) other discursive acts, such as apology or reconciliation, or the minimalist substitution of one relationship to history or place with another.

Place is more quietly, and more locally, worried about in McAuley's collection of individual essays that emerged from a working Place and Performance seminar (University of Sydney). As an ongoing conversation (for which there are satisfying intertextual references), each contribution has a different point of departure, although the collection has reflective coherence through Edmund Casey's work on memory and place, as well as through the group's practical interactions with performance artist Tess de Quincey and her site-specific research, Triple Alice project (1999-2002) in the central desert of Australia. These 'grounds' assist each writer to theorise the experience of immersion in a felt and lived reality of place - Dwyer, writing on protest movements; Schlunke describing the commemoration of an Aboriginal massacre; Maxwell dissecting working class hip-hop lyrics; and Brown creating verbatim theatre about nuclear testing.

Other essays address the violence performed in specific places that may or may not be recuperable by the actions of performance, defined here not as theatre but as events, actions, training processes. Several others are concerned with the effects of memory, whether in memorialising, remembering, forgetting or producing counter-monuments. The shared phenomenological emphasis facilitates, what Lowell and McAuley call, a bringing into 'embodied co-presence' of that which has been erased in the history of place. Unlike the other two books' concern with negotiation or contestation through theatre texts, this collection excavates how experiments taking place in performance practices, or critical writing practices, become the new narrators of 'memory-places' (154). As a criticism, however, these personal voices resonate across a somewhat uneasy, partially unexamined, white middle class desire for place-making, that is however disturbed by the real emplacement of Aboriginal people, as bodies who 'are place', in the river beds of Alice Springs.

The most ambitious book in this trio is that of Gilbert and Lo which proceeds from an engagement with the relatively recent and complex literature on cosmopolitanism which, as they explain, is a term with political, ethical and cultural significance. This tightly argued volume utilises different sites of crosscultural exchange or 'praxis' in theatre performance to consider how a nation, that of Australia, might embrace difference as the cosmopolitan gesture, or alternatively act with hostility towards Others in a period of anti-cosmopolitanism. Examples include Vietnamese and Aboriginal comic artists; Japanese-Australian co-productions; indigenous reworkings of the canon; Asian-Australian monodramas; and political theatre about refugees; these localised performance practices are placed in tension with critical readings of the globalising forces that shape intercultural theatre as well as in relation to the politics of Australian history. Their argument that cross-cultural theatre can be readily

exoticised when dislocated from its localised histories and politics sounds a powerful caution to the all too-wilful 'culturalisation' of the global festival circuit.

As a syncretic, co-authored text, the book gathers vast amounts of different kinds of information together - Australian cultural policy and media discourses, production histories as well as multiple theoretical ideas from different disciplines - and each chapter departs on new terrain, oscillating between investigation of indigeneity in white theatre aesthetics, Asian diasporic embodiment, and a mixture of the two. The carefully historicized narrative succinctly frames individual works for maximum pedagogic effect. There are some provocative insights, such as the discussion about political theatre and its efficacy through affect in Chapter Seven, however as a whole, the narrating voice and thus the binding logic of cosmopolitanism gets somewhat blurred in the mass of detail.

Read against and with each other, it is possible to discern an eclectic thematics in these three texts that estrange dominant views of a 'relaxed and comfortable' or 'lucky' Australia: ghosts and hauntings, nuclear testing, Olympic spectacle, indigeneity, protest marches and actions, the Tent Embassy, race riots, terra nullius, and detention centres. These heterotopic performance spaces and hybrid body politics co-exist with the Anglo-Celts of beach and suburbs, and thus destabilise the anti-cosmopolitanism of a conservative national ethos.

More significantly, however the iconic site of Australia provides a valuable 'distancing' device for political and ethical concerns elsewhere - globalisation, migration, racial tension, hospitality. Each author makes this claim in different ways, by arguing that the representational strategies, performance practices, localised negotiations or ethical transactions of Australian theatre illuminate the functions of contemporary theatre. For the international readership they deserve, they provide a critical and provocative repertoire of concepts with which to interrogate intercultural and trans-cultural production more generally. McAuley's ideas about 'vanishment' and 'feral memory syndrome; Tompkins's reading of the 'uncanny' as theatrical presence and absence; and Gilbert and Lo's fresh work on hybridity in the diasporic body or on the affective ethics of spectatorship, are strikingly innovative contributions to the theorising of crosscultural performance. As such, they represent some of the best of Australian writing about theatre and performance because they remain inspired by the closeness of critical practice to theatrical practice and cultural work.