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Routledge describe the second edition of this book as ‘the key introductory text to all types of performance’. While this is a big claim, *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* is certainly an absorbing, wide-ranging collection, especially useful for students, comprising fifty readings (essays, extracts, interviews) by leading directors, performers, writers and theorists. Eleven articles have been added since the first edition of 1996 (though none of these post-dates 1996), and one or two of the old ones have been dropped. Most of the key figures of twentieth-century Western performance are represented: Artaud, Barba, Beckett, Brecht, Brook, Grotowski, Meyerhold and Stanislavski, as well as more recent practitioners such as Foreman, Lepage and Wilson, and major theorists including Benjamin, Carlson and Schechner. Thirteen of the fifty contributors are women. Text-based theatre figures only marginally in the readings, so playwrights hardly appear at all; Shaw and Pinter, for example, are not included. However, all forms of live performance are encompassed: theatre, dance, opera, music and performance art. Alert to the multi-disciplinary character and complexity of performance, the editors seek to unsettle neat disciplinary boxes. In surveying a century of work and ideas often expressed as manifestos, their own manifesto is ‘away with categorisation’ (6).

Given its historical scope, the book’s thematic range is naturally wide. The earliest reading - ‘Of the Futility of the “Theatrical” in Theater’ – is by Alfred Jarry, whose *Ubu Roi* in 1896 in many ways marks the beginning of the modernist play’ (243). The most recent is an interview with Stelarc, who describes his work *Ping Body* in which ‘we were telematically scaling the body to the point where its musculature is driven not merely by its internal nervous system but rather by [the] external data field – this data flow – of the Internet’ (395).

The territory, then, is vast. But rather than adopt a chronological or thematic structure, the editors organise the texts in alphabetical order of authors. This arbitrary arrangement, designed to counter ‘spurious intimations’ (xxi) of evolutionary development, nonetheless produces a narrative effect. One of the things made clear by the collection as a whole, for example, is the particular impact of dance theory and practice on the twentieth-century performance landscape. Dancers’ interest in the body and space, in avant-garde and post-modern experimentation, is a defining feature of twentieth-century performance, and illuminatingly discussed in articles by (for example) Trisha Brown, John Martin and Yvonne Rainer. John Cage’s ‘Four Statements on the Dance’ offers a number of important insights, including the claim that his dance/music collaborations with Merce Cunningham in the 1950s were not designed to ‘say something’: ‘We are simpleminded enough to think that if we were saying something we would use words. We are rather doing something.’ (141) This becomes a keynote for most of the work represented here.

Several features are included to contextualise the readings, to suggest relationships and provide pathways for the reader. A section on ‘How to Use this Book’ precedes the Introduction, offering various methods of approach. Following each reading is a ‘contextual summary’, comprising brief biographical and historical notes, and some general editorial comments on the nature and purpose of the reading. These summaries, however, would probably be better placed before each reading rather than after; I found myself flicking ahead to get the overview before plunging into the reading proper. Also following each reading are suggested comparisons with other articles in the reader - though some of these are tenuous - and suggestions for further reading as well. A comprehensive index is appended.
What these various reading strategies recognise, of course, is that no singular approach to this material is possible. The editors describe performance as a ‘multifaceted, international phenomenon’ (3), but that’s as far as they’re willing to go towards definition. In the foreword to her 1979 book *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (reproduced here), Roselee Goldberg remarks that by its very nature, ‘performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists’ (214). More tellingly, Marvin Carlson cites Strine, Long and Hopkins’ observation that performance is ‘an essentially contested construct’, along with Erik MacDonald’s contention that performance art ‘problematises its own categorization’. Carlson adds that ‘recent manifestations of performance…are so many and so varied that a complete survey of them is hardly possible’. Nevertheless, he does state that ‘despite its international diffusion, *performance art* [my emphasis] is both historically and theoretically a primarily American phenomenon’ (146-7).

Despite its elusiveness, performance is clearly associated here with a set of values, assumptions and ideals which are anti-Aristotelian, anti-psychological, anti-pictorial and anti-realist, which often resist ‘meaning’ and which valorise the irrational. Performance work is not about something; it is something. The modernist rejection of Aristotelian poetics appears in various guises, including Walter Benjamin’s 1939 account of Epic Theatre, and Augusto Boal’s claim that ‘the poetics of Aristotle is the poetics of oppression…[whilst] Brecht’s poetics is that of the enlightened vanguard’ (90). Taken as a whole, then, these readings privilege the experimental, the avant-garde, and the ‘performance art’ aspect of performance. Historically, of course, the avant-garde has been neither ideologically nor formally monolithic, and Richard Schechner brilliantly outlines ‘the five avant-gardes’ (historical, current, forward-looking, tradition-seeking and intercultural), which collectively engage the ‘four great spheres of performance – entertainment, healing, education, and ritualizing’ (355).

Whilst the book surveys and celebrates performance’s manifold forms, relatively scant attention is paid to Performance Studies’ interest in the broader manifestations of *performativity*, or non-designated modes of performance, recognised and understood through anthropological, ethnographic, and sociological lenses. An important exception is Judith Butler’s ground-breaking 1990 article *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, which argues that gender identity, ‘compelled by social sanction and taboo…is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed’ (121,128).

The editors are careful to point out that performance itself – performance enacted and embodied in time and space - is central to the study of performance; at the same time, they make the finer observation that performance ‘is a practical manifestation of a theorised position’ (8). In one sense, then, an inevitable tension exists between this book and its various sites of analysis. However, many of the readings are grounded in the pragmatics of performance, detailing creative processes of design, choreography, mise-en-scene and physical/vocal expression, often highlighting the importance of the unplanned - of chance and serendipity - in making performance. Elizabeth LeCompte, founder of the Wooster Group, says: ‘[W]hen I go downstairs I don’t have any thematic ideas….I don’t have anything except the literal objects – some flowers, some images, some television sets….In the last piece, something someone brought in by mistake. That’s it. And then the ideas come after the fact. It’s a total reversal of most of the processes.’ (277) In the same vein, Robert Lepage believes that ‘an important word…has lost its sense in the theatre, and that’s the word “playing”’ (283). Both observations echo Peter Brook’s famous claim, also cited here, that
‘the Deadly Theatre approaches the classics from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done’ (109).

Many of the essays emphasise the ‘total work’, insisting on fundamental relationships between body, text and design. The full scenic potential of space and light are considered in articles by Adolph Appia and the Bauhaus’ Oskar Schlemmer, while Piscator’s accounts of his Berlin productions in the 20s and 30s detail some of the most important staging experiments of the twentieth century. Richard Foreman’s approach to language and space suggests that words become an aspect of scenography, and in Samuel Beckett’s work, in fact, so does silence. Tim Etchells, director of UK performance company Forced Entertainment, talks about ‘physical action and set construction as forms of writing…about writing words to be seen and read on-stage rather than spoken’ (178). More than anything else, though, it is the body – live, present, actual, unmediated – which becomes the key expressive medium of performance. As Judith Butler says (122), the human body is ‘fundamentally dramatic’, while writer/choreographer Susan Leigh Foster states: ‘Its fascination as a topic of research resides in its responsiveness as an instrument of expression and in the degree to which it eludes precise verification of its instrumentality’ (202). So performance artists express ideas not through the medium of character, but through their own bodies, ‘their own autobiographies…made performative by their consciousness of them and the process of displaying them for audiences’ (Carlson, 150).

But if there is an impulse towards ‘pure expression’ in much of this work, there is, often, a committed politics as well (cf. Schechner’s ‘activist political’ avant-garde). Foster, for instance, regards the body as a potential agent for intervention in cultural production and for social change: ‘Body stands along with Woman, Native and Other as a neglected and misapprehended subject of inquiry….If body claims consideration as more than holding ground for unconscious desires, instincts, drives, or impulses, then it may point the way toward new kinds of coalitions and new forms of collective action.’ (202-3) An enticing resonance occurs here, incidentally, with Stelarc’s questions (398) about whether a body can ‘operate without memory and desire’. Laurie Anderson discusses her use of narrative as polemic, while for Heiner Müller (315), ‘the political task of art today is precisely the mobilization of the imagination’. Once again, there are resonances here with other authors and other times: Grotowski contends (218) that we make art ‘to experience the truth about ourselves; to tear away the masks behind which we hide daily’. Finally – and most emphatically, most provocatively – is Artaud who, railing against Racine and his legacy of psychological theatre, exhorts ‘direct, violent action…a full scale invocation of cruelty and terror, its scope testing our entire vitality, confronting us with our potential’ (33-44).

This is a handsome volume, and a great resource for students, although some of the readings (including articles by Roland Barthes and Tadeusz Kantor) are dense and obscure, and might be hard going for First Years. At 465 pages it is a substantial text, both materially and in terms of content, but certainly worth including as a reference work for any performance-related course.

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