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The faces of European direction

Theatralia. 2012, vol. 15, iss. 2, pp. 192-194

ISBN 978-80-210-5571-1

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/124422>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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REVIEWS



Nad'a Satková |
*The Faces of European
 Direction*

**Maria M. Delgado, and Dan
 Rebellato (eds.). *Contem-
 porary European Theatre
 Directors***

Abingdon: Routledge, 2010. 428 pp.

“The relationship between a director and an actor is similar to the relationship between a trainer and a sportsman: the director should teach the actor to bring everything into play and walk near death...” This is what the French director Kristian Frédéric says in an interview with Judith G. Miller, Professor at the Department of French, New York University.

The interview and Miller’s essay “Kristian Frédéric: Boxing with the ‘gods’” are part of the book *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, which introduces eighteen trainers – directors. They come from various European countries and receive invitations from international theatre festivals. Apart from direction, many of them also pursue acting, playwriting or teaching. What also connects them is that the opening nights of their key productions took place mainly in

1980–90, and that in their work they strive to find out the role of cultural, religious and ethnic diversity in an age of ‘global citizenship’, where geographical and social boundaries have become fuzzy.

Each of the twenty chapters in the book was written by an expert in 20th century European theatre. The chapters aim at describing production styles. Having put the director’s work into a European context, the essays go on to either present a comprehensive view of the director’s work, or focus on a detailed analysis of one key production. Each chapter also contains bibliography and a list of collaborators on the director’s five key productions.

Authors of the studies analyze the performances, drawing upon their own experiences as spectators. If they quote from other reviews, they assume a critical standpoint. For example, in his essay “Romeo Castellucci: The director on this earth”, Alan Read writes about performances directed by Castellucci at the Avignon Festival. Despite being emotional and subjective (which introduces the risk of overrating personal experience), Read’s description seems to be so accurate that it absorbs the reader completely.

The book puts essays next to theoretical studies dealing with the director’s entire work and its context. These are supplemented by interviews, in which the directors answer questions about the role and future

of a director working in a European theatre, artistic reaction to political changes, and relationship to national identity.

The interviewers often mention the problem of globalization and the worldwide dominance of English. Being able to communicate with people from other countries and take part in multi-national projects is an undisputable advantage; however, English eliminates the uniqueness of national cultures.

With an eclectic choice of directors and each chapter written by a different author, the editors naturally run the risk of incoherence. Patrice Pavis' essay "The director's new tasks", written in a highly formal language, is found next to the ironic and rather relaxed text by Aleks Sierz, "Declan Donnellan and Cheek by Jowl: 'To protect the acting'", which of course does not devalue any of the texts. Writing about visual extremes is comparatively easier. The most engaging essays describe productions of "Théâtre du Soleil" (Brian Singleton's study called "Ariane Mnouchkine: Activism, formalism, cosmopolitanism"), or the combination of personal history and fiction in Jan Lauwers' performances (Janelle Reinelt's essay "Jan Lauwers: Performance realities – memory, history, death"). The edifying study "Frank Castorf and the Volksbühne: Berlin's theatre of deconstruction", written by Marvin Carlson, not only describes what Castorf's productions looked

like but also mentions performances made by other directors (Marthaler, Kriegenburg, Pollesch) and extends its scope to the development of German direction from the 1970s to the present (from Stein to Zadek).

Maria M. Delgado and Peter M. Boenisch describe productions of Calixto Bieito (Delgado's essay "Calixto Bieito: Staging excess in, across and through Europe") and Thomas Ostermeier (Boenisch's study "Thomas Ostermeier: Mission neo(n)realism and a theatre of actors and authors"), which change the usual renditions of classics: Bieito situated his *Hamlet* in a private night-club and *Macbeth* in a mafia living room filled with leather sofas, whereas Ostermeier's Nora used her laptop and shot her husband.

Each essay is complemented by a photograph; however, the choice is not always appropriate. If the author of the essay extensively describes the visual perfection of a performance, one would expect to see a photograph taken from this very performance – which is not always the case.

Further, the reader can get confused by the lack of unity in the naming of playwrights: sometimes the name is given, other times it is not. Presenting a play without mentioning its author is a rather tricky thing to do. Shakespeare's or Chekhov's plays are famous enough, but not mentioning Martin Crimp can present problems for a reader that is not well acquainted with contemporary British drama.

To sum up, *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* is a book that provides a quick overview of the European theatre at the end of the millennium. As many directors featured in the book are still active and the world of theatre has not changed drastically, the book makes a good departure point for the understanding of contemporary theatre trends.

REVIEWS



Pavel Drábek |

John Russell Brown. *Studying Shakespeare in Performance*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
231 pp.

John Russell Brown is one of the key figures in both late twentieth-century Shakespeare and theatre studies and British theatre, having worked as Associate Director of the Royal National Theatre in London. Among his numerous publications are *Shakespeare Dancing: A Theatrical Study of the Plays* (2005), *Shakespeare and the Theatrical Event* (2002), *New Sites for Shakespeare: Theatre, the Audience and Asia* (2002) or *William Shakespeare: Writing for Perform-*

ance (1996). On a personal note, the last two books have inspired the present reviewer profoundly, and it was only the exorbitant price for publishing rights that prevented a Czech translation of the 1996 book from materializing (despite the author's intervention). J. R. Brown has been admirably active as an editor for *The Shakespeare Handbooks* and *Theatres of the World* series, the *Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre* or the brace of *Routledge Companion to Directors' Shakespeare* (2008) and *to Actors' Shakespeare* (2012; this collection is reviewed in this issue). It is far from an exaggeration to see Brown as the founder of a new discipline of Shakespeare in performance studies with a generation of (by now well-established and recognized) scholars.

At first sight, the present volume pretends, perhaps over-modestly, to be little more than a compilation of previously published lectures, articles or book chapters, coming from a period of more than half a century (from 1960 to the present). The reality, however, is different. They have been carefully rewritten, meticulously brought up to the present, especially the first half of the volume, interlaced with references to recent works, and – symptomatically – enlivened by J. R. Brown's characteristic polemic. It is this belligerent feature of permanent fencing with intellectual opponents that gives the book a thriller quality. It is also worth noting that