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# A Pair of Maiden Worlds Unconquered

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orientace

In its promotional material, the Cambridge Elements series positions itself as a platform for provocative and urgent criticism. The publication of a volume on intermedial, extended reality theatre underscores the series' claim of urgency. As for provocation, author Aneta Mancewicz's contribution does indeed deliver thought-provoking ideas that are certain to engender healthy scholarly debate. The volume's succinct form facilitates a focused discussion of the diverse material, resulting in a book that is both informative and innovative.

Why the volume, indeed, fills an important gap, is because we have to agree with Mancewicz, who states that 'the field of theatre and performance studies still lacks a systematic approach and critical tools that might fully capture the implications of augmented and virtual reality for the evolution in stage practice, in particular their power to make us reconceive the essential characteristics of theatre and our categorization of this medium' (5). The author's scholarly roots in performance criticism and her training in theatre scholarship are a great forte of the book. While she successfully guides the reader through the latest modes of technology and their uses in performance, aided by her extensive knowledge of intermedial productions, her continuous focus on the theat-

rical and the workings of the theatre as an event of social interaction is especially praiseworthy. She has a great eye for spotting metatheatrical moments enabled by the use of technology, as well as pointing out instances when the experiencer uses synesthetic negotiation to interpret the layered theatrical experience.

'Extended reality', as Mancewicz explains, is the theatre practitioners' 'new favorite buzz word' (2). It serves as 'an umbrella term that currently covers augmented, virtual, and mixed reality (respectively abbreviated to AR, VR, and MR), but might come to include future technologies as well' (1). As part of the 'Shakespeare in Performance' subcategory within the series, the volume addresses how adaptations of Shakespeare's works use augmented, virtual and mixed realities, to 'reconfigure the senses of the experiencers [formerly known as spectator, in traditional theatre studies], enabling them to actively engage with technology' (3). However, as Mancewicz later shows, it is precisely this engagement where most productions appear to be in their infancy, achieving varying degrees of success in enabling audience interaction.

Rather than developing new terminology for the technological devices employed in extended reality performances, the book aims to create a taxonomy

– a continuum or spectrum – on which productions can be classified, based on their level of technicity. Mancewicz utilizes three existing taxonomies of extended reality productions. Firstly, she draws on the RV Continuum theory by Milgram et al., which situates mixed reality artistic projects on a continuum from real environments to virtual environments. Secondly, she references the $MR^X$ model introduced by Rebecca Rouse et al., which focuses on engaging experiences, placing them on a coordinate system of experience and information transfer, as well as of location. Lastly, Mancewicz considers the material-mediated performance spectrum developed by Bay-Cheng, which emphasizes space, time and bodies as crucial factors that shape the extended reality experience in performance. In conversation with these theories, the book develops its own taxonomy, one that privileges space as the central element determining the performance. This taxonomy distinguishes between productions that utilize only physical space, those that incorporate physical space with some virtual elements, those that balance physical and virtual space throughout the production, those that use virtual space with some elements of physicality, and finally, those that rely entirely on virtual space in the performance.

To test this taxonomy in practice, the book offers a detailed analysis of three productions: *Hamlet's Lunacy* (2019), which, through Hamlet's example explores the question of how to act honorably in a conflicted world; *Current, Rising* (2021), a unique short operatic experience that drew on *The Tempest* as inspiration, and finally, *Dream* (2021) by the Royal Shakespeare Company, a short virtual reality production drawing on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for ideas. By examining these productions, Mancewicz not only successfully demonstrates that her taxonomy is a working model but also highlights important issues, such as the impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown on the recent history of extended reality productions. She never shuns to mention the financial aspects of these ventures, and urges collaborative efforts from theatre practitioners, scholars and tech companies to further the exploration of possibilities. She discusses how technology enables theatremakers to address current topics like the environment and gender, and, most importantly, how our concepts of audiences and their experiences are transformed due to these mixed media experiences.

The most enjoyable part of the book, at least for this reader, was Mancewicz's discussion of the productions. Although she expresses enthusiasm for the various ways they incorporate extended reality, she also critically, and with a keen eye, highlights their shortcomings. One of her most compelling arguments is that extended reality productions are most effective when they embrace their hybrid nature, allowing for both technology and the performative aspects of theatre to synergistically work their magic. While she advocates for theatres to reinvent themselves 'within the novel framework of reality as an overarching and hybrid entity that combines physical and virtual realities' (72), her emphasis on the liberating, enabling aspects of the theatrical situation – its playfulness, metatheatricality, and communal elements – reads as a manifesto for the enduring power of the theatrical that persists, even if transformed or challenged by technol-

ogy. Mancewicz's repeated insistence on Shakespeare's plays as great source materials for extended reality theatre, particularly due to their metatheatrical nature, further supports this argument.

Albeit concise, this volume serves as an excellent introduction for everyone who wishes to familiarise themselves with the state of the art of extended reality theatre, for theatremakers, scholars and students alike. It also stands as a provocative contribution to scholarly debates on Shakespeare performance criticism. The book concludes with predictions about the future of extended reality theatre. What the reader can hope for, besides exciting projects, are more such volumes to explore the evolving landscape of mixed media theatre and the uncharted 'maiden worlds' yet to be conquered.

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