

Book Reviews

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The Aesthetic Exception: Essays on Art, Theatre and Politics. By Tony Fisher.

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023. Pp. 275. £85/\$130 Hb.

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While reiterating the significance and relevance of the political theatre of the past and present, Fisher challenges fundamental tenets, argues against a taxonomy, asks provocative questions, and complicates research on political theatre in the time to come. The book is a comprehensive and eloquent study of the history, genealogy, theories and practices of political theatre. Calling it a genealogy rather than a history and ‘genealogy as a historical dimension of the problem’ (p. 5), Fisher maps his genre of political theatre from the Russian Revolution of 1917 to Erwin Piscator and Brecht, for whose theatre and institutional histories he offers a range of critical perspectives.

The eloquence lies in its contextualization through the critical debates of the times to include Adorno, Althusser, Sartre, Lukacs, Gramsci and Stuart Hall and the careful shifting to the theory–practice interface, which makes the theories relevant for theatre scholars. Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall provide the critical methodological approach, thinking of political theatre as the ‘critical theatre of the conjuncture’ (p. 24) with specific determinants. Fisher challenges the conventional binaries specific to political theatre – aesthetics and/or propaganda, autonomy and/or efficacy, realism and/or non-realism, and content and/or form. The aesthetic exception in the title forms the spine of his trajectory and refers to political theatre’s engagement with aesthetics as always in question and as an exception from all other forms of theatre, but also an exception when it focuses on aesthetics and experiments with forms, such as the avant-garde transgressions, Brecht’s theatre and many others – both historical and contemporary – such as Dread Scott, Jana Natya Manch, Thomas Ostermeyer and Milo Rau.

Fisher’s book assumes particular significance in light of the current debate in the discipline on the role of political theatre in the present times and whether there is still a need for critical components that characterize political theatre – interests, representations, identities and redistributions – so that it can continue to play a significant role in democratic and civil practices, participate in political processes, and build consensus amongst different constituencies and people, or is it enough to abandon altogether the older categories of political theatre and focus on dissensus and the distribution of the sensible, internal working of theatre within its aesthetic autonomy and look inwards to examine apparatus. Fisher responds to this debate in detail;

sceptical of ideological and hegemonic tendencies, he establishes his argument for antagonism (Mouffe and Laclau) and Habermas's pre-illocutionary art (not illocutionary). He argues for a political theatre which is symbolic through speech, which produces an effect, which is not derivative but original, and which unsettles aesthetic conventions. Not unrelated is Fisher's critical argument for acknowledging the failure of the evolution of the proletarian subject, but he also indicates the contemporary need to recognize the multiplicity of subjectivities and intersubjective identities, which is an invaluable insight and signifies the relevance of political theatre in today's context.

He also offers an international perspective, given that the post-war/postcolonial conjuncture colluded, and the political theatres of many postcolonial nations forged strong links, with trends in world political-theatre practices. Hence the importance for Fisher of leftist street theatre practices in India, and the case study of Janam gives the work a larger perspective than many histories of Western political theatre. However, the ambivalence appears when he regards it as a vibrant practice which still exists in the global South despite the decline of left politics and the crisis of democracies. To attribute to it a flourishing practice in contemporary India unfortunately no longer reflects the precarious reality of street theatre companies such as Janam. Instead, a critique and understanding of its current precarity and marginalization are significant for its attempts to reinvent itself and develop a mode of self-reflective criticism in the form of political possibilities.

While Fisher does not disregard the need to bring back effective, meaningful theatre, which constantly strives to advance aesthetics as an exception, it also leads him into momentary pessimism. The scholarship on political theatre needs to offer hope, and Fisher holds on to the tenuous egalitarian–democratic logic of political theatre. Nonetheless, while he critiques ideological theatre, he does urge a critical aesthetic approach, possibly rooted in ideology rather than devoid of it, which challenges rather than endorses the depoliticization processes of contemporary cultures.

The book is and will be a comprehensible and invaluable study of the genealogy of political theatre contextualized and theorized particularly as it offers methodological perspectives that apply to students, researchers and academics working on politics and performances.

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It's Not Your Fault: Five New Plays on Sexual Harassment in Egypt. By

Jillian Campana, Dina Amin and the Cairo Writers Lab. Foreword by Hoda Elsadda.

Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2023. Pp. ix + 103. \$29.95/£24.95 Pb.

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Theatre cannot help but engage with society. Many playwrights choose to write in order to voice concerns and discuss problems related to the world they live in. The American University in Cairo (AUC) Press has recently published *It's Not Your Fault: Five New Plays on Sexual Harassment in Egypt*, featuring five short plays in English by the Cairo Writers Lab, a collective of Egyptian AUC students in collaboration with Jillian Campana and Dina Amin. The 2023 release, which is also available in Arabic, addresses sexual-harassment issues. The collection includes a Foreword by Hoda Elsadda.

In the Foreword, Elsadda maintains that after the 2011 Revolution, this type of book is able to broach the relatively taboo social issue of sexual harassment. She traces how individuals, groups, institutions, laws and online and social media spoke up to counter 'gender-based violence' in