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The Scottish Journal of Performance
Volume 7, Issue 1; June 2022
ISSN: 2054-1953 (Print) / ISSN: 2054-1961 (Online)

Publication details: <http://www.scottishjournalofperformance.org>

To cite this article: Grøn, H., 2022. Book Review: *Dramaturgy of Migration: Staging multilingual encounters in contemporary theatre*, edited by Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny. *Scottish Journal of Performance*, 7(1): pp.91–97.

To link to this article: <http://doi.org/10.14439/sjop.2022.0701.05>



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Book Review: *Dramaturgy of Migration: Staging multilingual encounters in contemporary theatre*, edited by Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny

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DOI: 10.14439/sjop.2022.0701.05

Publication date: 30 June 2022

***Dramaturgy of Migration: Staging multilingual encounters in contemporary theatre*, edited by Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny. London: Routledge, 2021; ISBN: 9781032088983 (£16.99 pb.)**

In *Dramaturgy of Migration* the editors, Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny work from the hypothesis that 'multilingual theatre practices bring forward new 'dramaturgies of self' that reflect the everyday alienation experienced by both migrant theatre makers and their audiences' (p. 2). Set against an era of mass migration and a rise in right-wing-populism, the chapters cover the artistic, political and interpersonal realities of migration, as the authors consider stage practices and dramaturgical choices from settings ranging from rehearsal, workshops and performance, and from processes of translation, conception and audience reception. Guided by theatre's inherent multilingual and non-verbal potential of embodiment, transcending language, and speaking across cultures, the chapters keep in mind how political backdrops are ever able to impose set frameworks on both bodies and language, by drawing, for example, on theoretical frameworks around migration, hospitality / hostility, colonialism / post-colonialism. The chapters are further united in their aim to explore the entanglement between stage-space, text-

space and worldly space, and the dramaturgy developed in staging the political and lived aspects of migration.

At a time where several Western countries are renegotiating their asylum systems with increasing efforts to externalise migration management and increasing the hyper-precarity of asylum seekers' journeys to safety, Christopher Balme's chapter on hiesia and rites of asylum in Ancient Greece reads pertinently. Hiesia 'can be regarded as a legal and ritual extension of hospitality' (p. 6), which needs to be performed in order to be effective, making it a more 'ancient practice than a legal principle' (p. 8). Set against the ambivalence of the host / guest paradigm offered for example by Derrida, hiesia nonetheless provides ways of thinking about asylum as a rite and a right beyond its legal dimensions.

Todorovic's chapter takes the reader inside the complexities of being an exilic artist. Considering the process of translating his book back into his native Serbian after receiving Canadian recognition, Todorovic becomes a stranger in his own language (p. 20). Circling the notions of nostalgia and home, Todorovic considers what it means to be displaced without occupying a legal category of displacement. Nonetheless, his chapter also delves into the creative freedom and potential that arises from working across languages and cultures, thereby following Meerzon's 2009 study on the potential of exilic artistry.

In 'Part 1, On migration and self-translation', the chapters explore translation as an embodied practice, a textual mediation and a cultural and political process. Ana Candida Caneiro explores the position of an artist and undocumented migrant by building a theoretical framework around the opposing desires of a migrant to fit in and to preserve connections to their roots. Caneiro grounds this in an analysis of the multilingual dramaturgies of her play *All is Filthy in Wonderland*. Set in an Italian detention centre, Caneiro further examines

the possibility of art and artistry as a uniting factor for the two main characters.

Kasia Lech's chapter proposes acting as a translating practice that opens new vistas of mobility and multilinguality. For Lech, embodiment becomes a way to 'actively employ and embody translation' (p. 39), and a tool by which actors 'highlight their authorship of the theatre event, and shape their representation within transnational socio-political and cultural spaces' (p. 39). Lech considers these notions in the context of the Irish-Polish production *Bubble Revolution*, and from her own position of a practice-as-research participant and a 'Polish-born and trained actor co-creating and performing the production' (p. 40).

Ameet Parameswaran looks at the adaptation of O. V. Vijayan's iconic Malayalam novel *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* for the stage, which was 'regarded as the novel of the century [and] credited with the transformation of the Malayalam literary language itself' (p. 53). Parameswaran here considers several languages: the languages of the stage and of the novel, the multilingual medium of the theatre, the multilingual nation-space of India and the region in which the play was performed, and, importantly, how the dramaturgical choices of the production play into this. Parameswaran foregrounds this analysis by problematizing the universalism sometimes assumed in theatre's ability to bridge divides while overlooking the hierarchies and cultural imperialism of theatre making.

The conversation between Margareta Sörenson and Jonas Hassen Khemiri looks at translation through the themes of Khemiri's writing, while paying attention specifically to the techniques of working differently between the mediums of stage and literature. Sörenson and Khemiri unfold the question of embodiment in the stage-space, on the page, and in the space of Sweden, as police were instructed to find undocumented people, and would stop anyone who looked foreign on the street (p. 66). Khemiri

here writes a letter to politician Beatrice Ask, asking her 'to switch bodies and memories with [him]' (p. 66) detailing that '[i]f I entered her body, I would understand male privilege, and if she entered my body, she would remember being followed in stores by security guards, being stopped in customs at airports, being stopped and put in the back seat of police cars, for no reason whatsoever' (p. 66).

'Part II On inter- and intra-multilingualism of migration' starts by bringing the reader into an ongoing conversation between Azadeh Sharifi and dramaturge and sociologist Laura Paetau about the production, *Frutas Afrodisíacas*, dramaturged by Paetau. Taking academic and dramaturgical perspectives into account, Sharifi and Paetau draw on frameworks of intersectional feminism, decoloniality and multilingual stage practices. Concretely, they consider how *Frutas Afrodisíacas* confronted and challenged the colonial gaze through its performance aesthetics and its multilingual aspects. Paetau here understands the dramaturgy of migration through multilingualism's potential to shift set patterns of meaningmaking and challenge 'one-dimensional translation' (p. 76).

Indu Jain's chapter explores the work of avant-garde director Anamika Haksar against the setting of forming a national theatre in a post-Independent India. Jain proposes that the 'challenge to the patriarchal, hegemonic, and post-independence national canon came from women directors who emerged in the capital in the 1980s' (p. 78), and takes into account Hakasar's training from the Soviet Institute of Theatre Arts in Moscow. Hakasar's theatre, then, 'deliberately seek[s] to present subject matter that does not conform to conventional patriarchal discourse, thus opening up a space for resistance by depicting these subaltern identities' (p. 78), not least by encouraging actors to consider their own regional identities able to contribute to 'a worldview of multiple perspectives through the language of their bodies in performance' (p. 79).

Alvin Eng Hui Lim takes the reader inside the question of Mother Tongue policy in Singapore, where English is a first language and where native languages often occupy only second-language status. Lim explores partly how this makes certain demands on cultural identity, and partly how the theatre challenges this; 'Singapore-based theatre companies often stage the struggle to embody language, whether consciously or not, and such stagings sometimes resist a simplistic performance of language' (p. 89). Lim here remarks on concrete text-based translingual choices and on performance being its own act of translation, while continually paying attention to the hierarchies and fluidities of language, ranging from the choice of performance surtitles, through to the development of pidgin, creole and language adaptation in the process of acquisition.

The chapters in 'Part III on dramaturgy of globalised, transnational and cosmopolitan encounters' speak to performance practices of making theatre across cultural, linguistic divides and in settings that are often multicultural and multilingual. Judith Rudakoff writes about working in culturally and geographically diverse communities, often without a shared language. This inspires creative, visual and embodied practices and 'dramaturgical tools that would work transculturally to inspire creativity' (p. 103). Taking the reader through a process of using these tools, Rudakoff describes the making of *The Ashley Plays: Blood and Water* when she was an artist / scholar in residence at the University of Cape Town.

Sun Weiwei interviews the Beijing-based artistic / social project *Folk Memory Project* about their work with African refugees project *African Memory: Crossing* to understand how 'these artists employ the artistic methodologies they developed in China to work in an international context and how they arrange the diverse languages to reflect the personal memories of the refugees (p. 117). Weiwei and Wenguang's conversation considers elements of memory and storytelling,

translingual and / or non-verbal communication in workshop-settings, and postdramatic performance practices converting 'oral memories into physical movements' (p. 120) and utilizing recordings as 'separated texts composing a socio-symbolic scene rather than a drama' (p. 117).

Alvina Ruprecht analyses Madagascan-born poet, musician, singer and performer Jean-Luc Raharimanana's work, and how Raharimanana's writing was driven by the impulse to explore the collective and personal trauma resulting from the colonial and postcolonial period in Madagascar. Having French citizenship by affiliation only because of to this colonial history, Ruprecht understands how Raharimanana's work seeks to recover Malagasy culture even if French became his first language. These issues are raised in two works, the play '47 and the essay *Madagascar 1947*, taking up the topics of postcoloniality, what kinds of history is available in official records, the imprisonment and torturing of his father and the colonial massacre of thousands of Malagasy farmers in 1947-1949, something rarely spoken about

Art Babayants chapter focuses on 'the potential of multilingual dramaturgy' (p. 133) of his practice-as-research project entitled *Sundry Languages*, where 12 mono and multilingual performers dramatize the process of language acquisition and its failures. Remarking on the difficulty of rooting the process in theory, Babayants proposes Ahmed's 'queer phenomenology' as a framework for considering multilingual realities. Babayants here argues that 'orientation and disorientation are not and should not be limited to sexual orientation' (p. 134). Rather limiting linguistic access can force the 'viewers [of *Sundry Languages*] to re-orientate themselves towards the presence of multiple languages' (p. 138).

References

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About the review author

HELENE GRØN, AHRC funded PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow and Glasgow Refugee, Asylum and Migration Network (GRAMNet). Helene is a Danish playwright, librettist, facilitator and researcher, currently residing in Glasgow. Helene co-founded the theatre company Leylines, bringing to the stage stories of home, homelessness and being caught between languages and cultures and has written librettos and operas for Scottish Opera, *The Night With...* and *Cottiers' Chamber Project*; her plays have had readings and been performed at The Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, The Arches in Glasgow, The Scottish Storytelling Centre and at The Copenhagen Theatre Circle. She has facilitated creative community projects with refugees and asylum seekers for Kaleidoscope, YCSA, Trampoline House and Detention Centre, and frequently works in the intersection between research, political engagement and arts practice.