

Violence: An All Time Classic

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Herbert, Ian, and Kalina Stefanova, eds. *Theatre and Humanism in a World of Violence*. Sofia: St Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2009. 287 pp. ISBN: 978-954-072827-8.

Theatre and Humanism in a World of Violence brings together thirty papers read at the 24th World Congress organized by the International Association of Theater Critics in Sofia, Bulgaria in 2008, plus two Forewords by the editors (Ian Herbert and Kalina Stefanova) and a postscript by Richard Schechner, the keynote speaker at the symposium on “Cultural Diversity” organized in Thessaloniki by the Greek section of IATC under the auspices of the Europe Theater Prize, 2008. The concern of the volume is to put into perspective how violence (sexual, physical, psychological, linguistic, sentimental, educational, aesthetic) influences theater practice and aesthetics. What makes it so “sexy?” the editors ask at the back page of the volume. And they have all the good reasons in the world to wonder.

Ever since the ancients, drama and violence have rarely been far from one another. Whether on or off stage, whether with Greeks or Elizabethans, with Japanese or South Africans, there has always been violence in theater. Yet, the staging of violence, apart from being a representation or dramatization of a powerful human trait, it is frequently (if not always) a reflection of larger socio-cultural and political forces. I know of no nation that did not or does not resort to violence, literal or figurative. As a matter of fact, the existence and continuity of all nations cannot be adequately explained without a study of the use/abuse of violence and, among other things, its representation on stage. Especially in present-day mediatized culture, violence is so wide spread that one wonders what’s left for theater to do? Become more violent itself in an effort to mirror reality (see the example of “in yer face” theater)? Talk in metaphors? Avoid confrontation? And what about the

critic? What is his/her role? What relation does critical writing have to the society it is a part of? Ian Herbert makes the point very clearly in his eloquent and scholarly foreword where he says that it is our responsibility as critics, “to point out when boundaries are being crossed [...]. Artists may deny moral responsibility in the cause of artistic freedom. That is a luxury which is not [...] available to critics” (24). Writing and the critical act cannot be severed from the institutional practices that define societies. In other words, when violence dominates, critics should commit themselves to clarifying things in order to change them. Otherwise, they themselves practice violence by not exposing violence.

By positing violence as a common denominator, and by describing processes, challenges, obstacles and excesses across national borders and eras, the contributors to the volume lead us through the intricate paths of this issue in a helpful and friendly manner without talking down to the reader. The thirty essays are arranged in separate sections that stand more together than apart, in the sense that they show interesting interconnections. The editors organized the available material under four headings that carry the reader through it thematically rather than chronologically. In Part I (“Violence Vs humanism”) the essayists look at current violence as an obstacle against “the inner movement theatre otherwise could create”(56), as Matti Linnavuori notes; as an easy way out, that “leaves no room for compassion and sorrow to purify our feelings,” Sanja Nikcevic claims in her own contribution (70). Yun-Cheol Kim turns our attention to the moral obligation of the theater which is “to restore, re-establish the dignity of human existence” (45), an idea that runs through Aglika Stefanova’s paper as well. Ivan Medenica provides an interesting alternative to the “velocifering” of civilization: “slowness.” The section concludes with the illuminating views of a practitioner, British playwright David Edgar who, in his straightforward essay with the title “A Theatre-Maker’s View,” argues that theater has always been characterized by its nature as extreme. It enables us to see the world through the eyes of others (including the violent and the outcast). “Theatre develops capacities without which we cannot live together in societies at all [...]. We all have the right not only to terrify and to outrage but to be terrified and outraged” (101).

Part II carries the title “The Critic as Citizen” and explores the role of the critic in a violent world. Michel Vais puts the issue into perspective when he says that the critic has an obligation towards his fellow citizens. He is also exposed to violence on and off stage and having a platform to express his views makes his task much easier and more effective (108). Chin A Lee,

Carmelita Celi and Louise Ghirlando also call for a more direct and not “roundabout” (117), “elastic” and “ambiguous” criticism (121, 133). Carmen Stanciu and Tiago Bartolomeu Costa argue against the “process of cultural standardization” (128), the production of plays that have nothing to say. This section also concludes with the views of a practitioner, this time the Bulgarian director Margarita Mladenova, who shows how today’s civilization creates violence and how theater can help change things a bit.

Part III entitled “Not About Blood and Sperm” features seven papers that draw on various texts and traditions (by Georges Banu, Valda Cakare, Randy Gerner, Brent Meersman, Akiko Tachiki, Kattayoun Hosseinzadeh Salmasi, Valda Cakare) and a concluding essay by Bulgarian director Mladen Kiselov. This part concentrates mostly on the uses of stage language and the power of metaphors, with references to particular contemporary productions (from Latvia, Bulgaria, Israel, South Africa, etc). The writers show how theater can still turn us back to humanity. As Tachiki writes, with particular reference to *Oresteia*, “theatre still reserves the right to speak about ‘hope for humanity’” (159).

The last part (IV) contains “more snapshots from the global theatre village” that include papers on Japanese, Swedish, Polish, Indian, Argentinean and Portuguese theater signed by Manabu Noda, Margareta Sorensen, Tomasz Milkowski, Deepa Punjani, Halina Tahan and Paulo Eduardo Carvalho. They all seem to be in accord with the fundamental premise of the volume which says that we need theater(s) that reconsider moral and social values, and criticism that resists “the winds of the moment” (228).

The volume also includes the Thalia Prize acceptance speech of French critic, theoretician and playwright Jean-Pierre Sarrazac. The last section features Richard Schechner’s ideas on the avant-garde and the 9-11 terrorist attack, an engaging essay, no doubt, that provides fertile ground for more sociological and ideological speculation.

As in so many collections generated from conference papers, there are few gaps and inconsistencies in the coverage of the main topic. Some of the essays do not engage critically with their own assumptions; some are more idiosyncratic—which is understandable if one considers the compelling nature of the topic. There are also essays that are more gentle and generous in praising strengths, others that exercise more restraint in their assessments, others that are more provocative, others that are more modest and others that offer a sophisticated discussion. All of them are eager to talk about violence in texts and in practice, but not all of them are as eager to engage in any theoretical discussion. Which is fine, although I have the feeling that a more

rigorous theoretical investigation of the issues raised would have in places given the volume the necessary intellectual consistency and a more thorough view of the context of the larger cultures in which the plays and the artists discussed are embedded. Also, the fact that there is no investment in an index to such a rich and wide-ranging collection, seems to be short-sighted.

Such strictures and suggestions are not meant, however, to mitigate the achievement of the volume. It is altogether a commendable and stimulating publication which, by targeting a gap in existing books on international criticism and theater violence, expands the available commentary and provides ground for more speculation. It reminds us that much research and analysis must be done. All essays, the more and the less sophisticated ones, conscientiously address the book's objective. They draw on an impressive range of sources that weave an intertextual and intercultural tapestry that enlarges the established critical perspective and allows opportunity for fruitful dialogue. They all seem to agree that the job of a critic is not to pacify or to reconcile work to political reality but to raise questions and question norms and practices, limits and (im)possibilities. Overall, this is a very useful addition to the scholarship on violence and theater.

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