

Marco Galea, and Szabolcs Musca, eds. *Redefining Theatre Communities: International Perspectives on Community-Conscious Theatre-Making*. Bristol; Chicago: Intellect, 2019, 262 pp., £ 76.00 (hardback)

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The notion of community and the practice of socially engaged theatre have long preoccupied scholars and theatre makers alike. As a concept and practice, community has been understood as malleable and subject to scrutiny; communities serve as “idealized symbolic constructions which not only bind people together, they also act as powerful means of exclusion, separating ‘us’ from ‘them’” (Marion-Young qtd.in Nicholson 85). The edited collection *Redefining Theatre Communities: International Perspectives on Community-Conscious Theatre-Making* is participating in this lively debate on the interface between community and theatre by bringing together transnational perspectives from scholars and theatre makers. The collection is one of the outcomes of an international collaboration between the University of Malta and New Tides Platform (UK) culminating in a three-day conference entitled “Redefining Theatre Communities: Community Perspectives in Contemporary Theatre-Making” that took place in Gozo, Malta in 2015. Following the conference, the participants were invited to further develop their initial presentations to be included in the edited volume which became a platform for “creatively *returning, rethinking and redefining* the multiple forms in which contemporary theatre connects with its various communities” (emphasis in the original, Galea and Musca 2). In doing so, the choice to focus on “community-conscious theatre-making” expands *the collection’s understanding of community* beyond a traditional focus on applied theatre to also include intersections with “theatre and architecture, theatre historiography, theatre translation and adaptation, festival studies, theatre and health, political theatre and intermedial performance” (3). In this sense, the scope of the collection is ambitious and complex as it aims to navigate community by *mobilising* more diverse and international methods, aesthetics and vocabularies. The book is carefully curated to create a through-line across its broad range of perspectives and contexts. It is divided into five sections, each including three chapters and a short preamble from the editors that introduces the key arguments of the different chapters; each chapter is also followed by short concluding remarks and a bibliography for further reading to *contextualise* and anchor the chapter within a wider scholarly field.

The first section entitled “Theatre Communities: Traces, Places and Belonging” comprises chapters that approach community from the perspective of “politics and ethics” (9). Stefan Aquilina’s piece on “Communal Solidarity and Amateur Theatre in Post-Revolutionary Russia: Theoretical Approaches” presents a fascinating historiographical study on the politics, aesthetics, and conditions that enabled amateur political theatre to emerge in early twentieth-century Russia by actors-workers. Inspired by Michel de Certeau, Aquilina specifically examines the DIY practices underpinning the workers’ amateur theatre production such as the development of collective dramaturgy as a form of “tactics” that resisted the “regulatory hand of the government” whilst promoting “communal solidarity” (28). “Theatre in Malta: Which Spaces does the Community Occupy?”, jointly written by Vicki Ann Cremona and Ruben Paul Borg, surveys the Maltese theatrical landscape, which has so far been largely amateur, discussing a project they undertook to capture the region’s theatre production in established theatres, community spaces and audiences in the form of a catalogue. This undertaking, the authors highlight, is a necessary first step that invites a more detailed exploration of theatre spaces and architectures in the future. The section closes with a thought-provoking essay by Zoe Zontou on “Performance, Dislocation and Spirituality: *Adrift Together*” that discusses a piece created by Liverpool-based theatre company Fallen Angels, who work with adults in recovery from addiction. Zontou draws on this work to make a persuasive case for applied theatre’s role in “reconstruct[ing] our notions of self-representation, belonging and interaction with others” (50).

Part Two focuses on “Performing Communal Identities: Ethics, Politics and Affect” and aims to raise ethical and political questions in three different theatrical contexts. Maria Eleni Capitani’s essay on “The Politics of Spectatorship: Community, Ethics and Affect in Contemporary British Rewritings of Ancient Tragedies” engages with well-established questions on spectatorship and ethics in four examples staged between 1996 and 2007 by Sarah Kane, David Greig, Liz Lochhead, and Martin Crimp. Pujya Ghosh’s chapter “Living and Working in Tepantor: Understanding Political Theatre and the Community” tackles the concept of “community-conscious theatre” head on by specifically focusing on the Ebong Amra community and Tepantor (‘Unbound Space’), their unique theatre space located in Saathkahuniya in Bengal. At the heart of Ghosh’s argument lies an interest in Tepantor as a practice of socially engaged performance in contemporary India which functions as a “potential roadmap to think in and through the community” as it “creates a rupture in social structure” (96) with regard to the marginalisation of low caste communities in the theatre and in society at large. The section closes with Galea’s chapter “Bodies without Organs and

Organs without Bodies: The Maltese Experience of Creating National Theatres” on national theatre communities in small nations. Galea uses the example of Malta to shed light on contemporary models of theatre production in the region, the lack of a sustained national theatre scene, and ongoing resistance to professionalising acting.

Part Three on “‘Glocal’ Representations of Theatre Communities” presents a tighter approach to notions of community through the lens of internationalization and multiculturalism. Musca’s essay on “Local and Global Stages: Translating Communities in Hybrid Cultural Spaces” draws on a wealth of theatrical examples presented as part of the European international festival circuit and cross-cultural partnerships; in doing so, Musca applies pressure on the “translating communities” involved in the processes of negotiating, making, commissioning, and reviewing theatre works as hybrid spaces of encounter (130). In her chapter “The Economic Communities of the Edinburgh August Festivals: An Exclusive ‘Global Sense of Place’ and an Inclusive ‘Local Sense of Space’”, Evi Stamatiou furthers the conversation around community and international festivals. Stamatiou’s dual perspective as performer-researcher enables her to critically engage with the economies of production of the Edinburgh festivals and raise questions regarding practices of inclusion/exclusion for “less powerful” artists (144). The final essay in this section entitled “Strategies of Empowerment: Postmigrant Theatre at the Ballhaus Naunystasse” by Hasibe Kalkan shifts the focus to questions of hybridity, representation, and artistic ownership within the same nation. With reference to the development of post-migrant theatre in Berlin’s Ballhaus Naunystasse under the auspices of Shermin Langhoff, Kalkan offers valuable insight into the theatre’s engagement with its local community, who are directly involved in theatre projects as spectators or participants.

The fourth section on “Creative Encounters: Changing Ecologies” further puts into practice one of the aims of the collection, that is, to develop a dialogue between academics and practitioners. Here, three interviews with directors and theatre makers from the UK, Greece, and Romania are conducted by academics. Mark O’Thomas discusses practices and understandings of community with the artistic director of London’s Royal Court Theatre, Vicky Featherstone. The interview critically engages with the Royal Court as an institution and its outreach activities as part of the Theatre Local initiative and raises significant questions about accessibility and ownership of artistic products as well as considering strategies of engaging with invisible voices within mainstream institutional settings. The second interview led by Zontou features George Sachinis’s Athens-based UrbanDig project, a city-specific approach to community theatre making which Zontou describes as capturing

‘the precarity of the everyday life as aesthetic’ in the context of socially engaged performance in Greece (177). Similarly to the previous interview, the conversation mobilises questions around marginalised communities by placing emphasis on how community projects such as UrbanDig can promote “active citizenship”, as they involve a complex network of stakeholders and participants to benefit from a wealth of diverse knowledge and expertise. The focus on marginalised voices also runs through the third conversation between Marius Bogdan Tudor and Ionut Sociu, and theatre maker and academic David Swartz, who speaks about the emergence of community theatre and the possibility of creating intervention in post-Communist Romania. Like Sachinis, Swartz is interested in uncovering local histories of place and communities that inhabit them, whilst also problematising popular notions of “diversity”, “visibility”, and community engagement in the context of neo-liberal discourses.

The fifth and final part of the book concentrates on digital technologies and verbatim theatre. Ágnes Bakk’s “New Technologies for a New Audience? Using Transmedia Storytelling towards a New Experience Design Form” reflects on the inclusion of technology and games design tools in the theatre as a way of addressing new audiences and creating virtual communities. Briefly referring to Erica Fisher Lichte’s concept of “autopoietic feedback loop” and Jacques Rancière’s ruminations on spectatorship, Bakk considers international examples created in the UK (*Karen*), Germany (*Efie Briest 2.0*) and Hungary (*Hamlet Online*), by asking to what extent these communities “can be built and maintained” (216). Nad’a Satková’s chapter on “Manipulation of Reality through an Interactive Game: *Remote X* as an Example of New Modes of Spectatorship” discusses a new way of reading participatory performance through the lens of psychodrama and sociodrama with specific reference to Rimini Protokoll’s *Remote X* city-specific performances. Bettina Auerswald’s chapter “Feeding Back: Verbatim Theatre and/as Communal Practice” proposes a useful new taxonomy of verbatim theatre, which includes what she names “communal verbatim” focusing on “exploring the limits and functions of theatre as a genre as well as on the responsibility of artists towards their community – and thus communal practices” and facilitating “communal interaction” between actors, spectators and interviewers as well as interviewees (231–232). Auerswald here specifically engages with questions of proximity and distance in Kaufman’s work *The Laramie Project* to suggest that a “redefined theatre community must be built on a diversity that is retained” (239). The book ends with concluding remarks by the editors who remind us, following Rancière, that the collection aims to “trace the engagement of theatre with the concept of community, grounded in time and space” (242).

This ambitious endeavour is impressive in its international scope, featuring several non-Anglophone examples; in this sense, it gives voice to scholarship and theatre that do not often appear in Anglophone volumes dedicated to theatre studies. At the same time, this choice also poses several challenges, as such disparate approaches and contexts do not always manage to sustain a rigorous and focused dialogue. Despite the careful dramaturgical curation of the book, sometimes the notion of community is obfuscated as other specific interests in individual chapters seem to take precedence, and depth might be sacrificed by an urge to cover too much content. Nevertheless, this is a timely collection of essays that asks us to consider the value of cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration between practitioners and scholars and the need to diversify notions of community in the twenty-first century.

Works Cited

Nicholson, Helen. *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke and New York, 2014. Print.