

THE POWER OF PERFORMANCE

Recent Research on Latin American Theatre History

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- THE MODERN BRAZILIAN STAGE.* By David George. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992. Pp. 176. \$30.00 cloth.)
- NEGOTIATING PERFORMANCE: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THEATRICALITY IN LATIN/O AMERICA.* Edited by Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994. Pp. 356. \$54.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)
- THEATRE IN LATIN AMERICA: RELIGION, POLITICS, AND CULTURE FROM CORTES TO THE 1980s.* By Adam Versényi. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. 227. \$44.95 cloth.)
- LATIN AMERICAN POPULAR THEATRE: THE FIRST FIVE CENTURIES.* By Judith A. Weiss, Leslie Damasceno, Donald Frischman, Claudia Kaiser-Lenoir, Marina Pianca, and Beatriz J. Risk. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993. Pp. 269. \$37.50 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

Theatre is the most immediate and palpable of the creative arts, turning today's current events into tomorrow's performances. Theatre often serves as a laboratory in which dramatists and actors experiment with new approaches to social, political, domestic, and philosophical problems. At times theatre practitioners are so focused on the immediate, the performance that will be given today, that documentation of what happens onstage as well as conservation of the script is left to third parties. Many Latin American countries have now established archives that record the visual and aural components of performances and also safeguard the play programs and handbills, scripts, and newspaper reviews. But these libraries or archives, whether public or private, exist precariously, always in need of funding and technology. Thus scholars of Latin American theatre facing the obstacles involved in obtaining information about the ephemeral (especially before the twentieth century) have preferred to write literary analyses of published scripts. As a result, large portions of theatrical activity involving commercial companies and university and amateur groups have not been studied. Information about popular events performed in venues outside playhouses—such as circuses, traveling shows,

and street theatre—resides only in the personal archives and memories of the performers, far from the reach of academicians.

Writing theatre histories requires the research and perception skills necessary to writing any history, but it also requires an active imagination that can recreate the excitement and audacity of a theatrical performance and then communicate that sense and information to the reader. With these exigencies in mind, it should come as no surprise that Latin American theatre histories, especially those that treat performances either on the stage or in the street, are more commonly written in Latin America by local theatre scholars rather than by U.S. Latin Americanists. For this reason, the authors of the four books reviewed here are to be commended for locating, collecting, and analyzing the materials needed to cover their chosen periods and countries.

Three of these four books lay the foundation for a history of theatre performance in Latin America. They provide readers with written analyses and bibliographies but also complement their studies with crucial photo documentation that captures theatre's immediacy and visibility. The scope of the historic studies ranges from the narrowly focused treatment of Brazilian theatre companies from the 1940s to the 1980s in David George's *The Modern Brazilian Stage* to the panoramic consideration of popular and religious elements in the theatre from colonial times to the present in Adam Versényi's *Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortés to the 1980s* and Judith Weiss and her collaborators' *Latin American Popular Theatre: The First Five Centuries*. The fourth book under review here, Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas's, *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin America*, is a collection of essays that examine marginal social and cultural positions as performed in recent spectacles that are difficult to label as theatre.

The arguments advanced in these four works revolve around the regenerative power of the theatre to encourage its audience to reform through the power of its performances and at the same time theatre's ability to reinvent itself—its aesthetic and its structure—through ongoing self-improvement and contacts with local and foreign elements. This push toward evolving forms and meanings, which responds to and interacts with the audience, can be perceived in the questions asked and answered in each of the studies. What is the relationship between commercial and popular or marginal theatre? How have foreign and native theatrical models resisted or blended with each other? What kinds of organizational or political forms have theatre groups adopted, and what is the relationship between the form of a group and its function? And finally, what do the words *theatre* and *performance* reveal about who has performed for the public and what they have done?

The Modern Brazilian Stage traces how the innovations of five theatre groups modernized theatre practices on and off the stage in São Paulo and

Rio de Janeiro. Those innovations were accomplished through the synthesis of creative energy from amateur theatre, European émigrés, and national topics chosen by local playwrights. The result of this synergizing of energies was a national aesthetic that replaced the moribund commercial theatre of the times. George employs a “performance-related” approach that combines traditional literary analysis with readings of the performance on stage (p. xi). He defines *performance* as stagecraft or the acting, costuming, lighting, and directing developed by the companies. Thus the *stage* referred to in his title locates performance within the walls of a theatre, on the platform of a defined stage, and by the cast and crew of an organized company.

The chapters of *The Modern Brazilian Stage* are organized according to the company, the city, and the historical and social events that characterized the times. The first two chapters place the reader in Rio de Janeiro, the traditional theatrical capital of Brazil, in the 1940s in an examination of the evolution of Brazil’s first modern theatrical company, Os Comediantes, and its performance of Nelson Rodrigues’s *Vestido de Noiva* in 1943. The remaining four chapters focus on São Paulo, which became the major site of theatrical innovation from the 1950s through the 1980s. The Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia (TBC), the Teatro Arena, the Teatro Oficina, and the Grupo Macunaíma are all products of the industrialization and affluence that made São Paulo equal to if not greater than Rio de Janeiro as a producer and consumer of the arts.

The four chapters on São Paulo’s theatre companies and their performances constitute the largest part of the study. The chapters demonstrate what each group contributed to the practice of stagecraft and how those contributions were intimately linked to the issues of the times. For example, the chapters outline how organizational styles of theatre companies became more egalitarian over time, evolving into collectives that shared responsibilities among members. New stages were introduced that led to the formation of new relationships of intimacy with the audience and even their participation. Finally, attitudes toward Brazilian culture and its people, which were generated by the companies to challenge affluent and intellectual audiences, changed from consciousness-raising regarding the working class with Arena (p. 54), to the “aesthetic terrorism against official culture” of Oficina (p. 86), to a newfound appreciation of popular sources and Amerindian and Afro-Brazilian ritual with Grupo Macunaíma (p. 122). The two performances examined are Oswald de Andrade’s *O rei da vela* (written in the 1930s) as performed by Oficina Theatre Company in 1967 and Nelson 2 Rodrigues based on *Album de Família* (1945) and *Toda nudez será castigada* (1965), as performed by the Macunaíma Group in 1984.

The strengths of *The Modern Brazilian Stage* are that its complementary approach to examining literary texts and their performances evokes

fully the relationship between words on the page and the creative imagination of a director and a cast. George's detailed descriptions of stage productions bring to life texts whose potential for performance is not obvious. In addition, George demonstrates the powerful impact that theatre can have on culture when he documents how the staging of *O rei da vela* led to the birth of the Tropicalia cultural movement, and also when he implies that the current unparalleled popularity of Nelson Rodrigues arose from the remarkable ability of Grupo Macunaíma to bring out the best of Rodrigues in their performances.

Religious and political power are brought into the history of theatre performances in Adam Versényi's *Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortés to the 1980s* and in *Latin American Popular Theatre: The First Five Centuries*, by Judith Weiss, Leslie Damasceno, Donald Frischman, Claudia Kaiser-Lenoir, Marina Pianca, and Beatriz Risk. The historical perspective presented in both works covers a longer time frame and includes as theatre an array of subcategories: songs, dances, and processions or festivals as well as staged plays performed in public places before heterogeneous audiences for varying purposes that include religious conversion and celebration, social and moral indoctrination, and (in more contemporary times) social criticism and revolution. It is the relationship between the theatrical event and its audience, or better yet, the power of the theatrical event to transform its audience that Versényi and Weiss et al. trace in their syntheses of five hundred years of Latin American theatre. In their titles, the term *theatre* means a social spectacle that acts on its audiences for a purpose, either to promote dominant values or to reaffirm popular ones (for Weiss) or to promote conformity or encourage rebellion (for Versényi). Unlike George's *Modern Brazilian Stage*, which concentrates on the development of a national aesthetic, Versényi's and Weiss's studies attend to how theatre—staged plays and public performances—communicates national identity.

Versényi and Weiss and her colleagues have compiled their panoramic studies to establish a historical background that each uses to explain a recent theatrical movement. In Versényi's *Theatre in Latin America*, the first four chapters trace the mixture of politics, religion, and theatre in the colonies and later in the developing independent nations. Versényi demonstrates how in colonial times, theatre was a powerful tool used to dominate the masses, but as populations changed through immigration and urbanization, theatre's power was employed to seek liberation. The phenomenon of "liberation theatre" (p. xi) treated in Chapter Five seems to combine the best features from the past: theology at the service of the downtrodden and drama at the service of social reform.

Weiss and her collaborators follow a similar pattern in assigning the first three chapters to the roots of popular theatre in the colonies and later in urban centers. Theatre in the New World is defined as a synthesis

of Old World forms, religious forms, Native American, and African-American forms. Weiss and her team argue that while this combination of elements is dynamic, its function traditionally has been to support dominant cultural values. The fourth and fifth chapters offer an antidote to this hegemonic stance with the development of "New Popular Theatre," a liberating practice directed toward recovering indigenous popular forms, re-designing theatre group organization, and redressing the social injustices of the disenfranchised.

Versényi's study (which does not include Brazil) emphasizes two lines of development: theatre at the service of church and authorities versus popular theatre that challenges religious and political authority. He begins *Theatre in Latin America* with a memorable analysis of Cortés greeting the twelve Franciscans. Versényi then explains how Cortés and the mendicant orders in the New World became particularly adept at exploiting the Native American appreciation of spectacle. Thus acting and staging became the first political tools of conversion and control in the New World. Using this model, Versényi compares and contrasts the oppressive and liberating roles of theatre in Latin America. His study includes colonial theatre, theatre during the movements for independence, popular theatre of the early twentieth century, and finally liberation theatre.

Versényi's analyses draw on an eclectic body of literary, historical, and anthropological sources that make *Theatre in Latin America* engaging reading and his bibliography a rich resource for Latin Americanists. One strength of the work is that at each step, Versényi provides an orientation and then an explanation of the significance of his points. Because his analyses move around Latin America in search of the best examples to illustrate his points, he provides readers with examples that show relationships between disparate geographies and cultures. In addition, Versényi foregrounds the names of many dramatists who deserve further attention. Their names and dates of birth and death are listed in an appendix arranged by country. Finally, Versényi's approach of linking religion and politics to the history of Latin American theatre constitutes an important step toward a more comprehensive grasp of how theatre has functioned since Europeans arrived in the Americas.

Weiss and her contributors combine their resources to speak with one voice about the complex sources that influenced the formats, organization, and subject matter of popular theatre. Their task is to identify, define, and label the elements that characterize popular theatre. To explain these elements, the authors employ a dialectic approach based on opposites, such as dominant versus marginal, European versus Other, and written versus oral (p. 14). In tracing how these categories have interacted throughout history, they examine a conflict between the powerful forces at the center of culture and the weaker ones on the margin, or as the authors note in the preface, "a theatre that serves existing hegemonic interests and

one that could pave the way for the formation of a counter-hegemonic culture" (p. ix).

While the three chapters on the history of popular theatre are interesting, they cover much the same territory studied by Versényi, although this work does include Brazil. The real strength of *Latin American Popular Theatre* is found in the final two chapters dedicated to the subject of "New Popular Theater." This treatment breaks new ground, and Weiss et al. are careful to mark it out carefully, providing a rationale, the historical developments that favored its formation, and extensive explanation and examples. The fifth chapter provides five case studies, exemplary theatrical movements that demonstrate both the variety and the common ground that these socially conscious transformational projects pursued. Some Latin Americanists may share the authors' nostalgia for the years following the Cuban Revolution until 1975, an era when theatre groups were engaged in campaigns reflecting national movements for social, economic, and political justice. Much of the information provided in the book is presented in synthetic form. Consequently, the bibliography and notes are particularly helpful in providing explanations for ideas that only are mentioned in the body of the book.

Unlike the other three works under review, *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America* does not present a historical panorama of theatre in Latin America. Rather, it offers a geographical panorama of the most recent developments in performance or theatricality, depending on whose definition one accepts. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas's collection of essays makes several bold moves on behalf of theatre scholarship. First, it stretches both the subject matter and the terminology commonly understood to make up Latin American theatre. Second, the collection expands the geographical horizons of Latin America by including topics pertaining to Hispanics or Latinos in the United States. Third, it challenges the significance of national identity as a defining characteristic in the study of Latin America. Taylor argues that national identity is a notion that in the very act of defining erases gender and sexual orientation. The justification for the collection and its contents rests on placing marginal social and artistic positions (also known as identity politics) at the center of critical attention. Unlike a traditional collection of essays solicited by the editors, this book resulted from a group inquiry conducted in residence at the Humanities Research Institute of the University of California, Irvine, augmented by several essays solicited after the residence ended.

Negotiating Performance addresses two concepts already presented: the power of theatre or spectacle to engage its audience in its own transformation and the regenerative, even subversive role of the popular to counter the dominant. The reader finds no subdivisions among the fifteen essays and the opening and closing remarks. One way of describing the

contents is to list the specific identities (or marginal positions in society) whose performances are analyzed: Chicanos, Chicanas, lesbians, AIDS victims, Mayans (men and women), Cuban women in carnival, women in Mexico, men in drag, the Argentine mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and Nuyorican popular culture. The analysis of each of these identities offers the authors of the essays the opportunity to question the meaning and function of gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality—that is, the borders that clarify and separate individuals while synthesizing them. The word *negotiating* in the title makes manifest that performing identities is a process of maneuvering, engaging, and always challenging cultural dominance.

The contributors to *Negotiating Performance* examine all modes of performance, stretching to the limit the ability of the word *theatre* to encompass them. Most of the events studied are not plays or popular spectacles like those covered in the first three books under review here. Rather, they are art installations, political demonstrations, folk representations, and cultural manifestos. They are, according to Taylor, forms that reflect an oppositional attitude demonstrated in an anti-theatrical spectacle. They are events in which the person or product displayed contests dominant social, racial, or gender power and challenges the stability of theatrical notions such as actor, plot, and conflict. Thus Taylor defines performance as no longer tied to the theatre and the idea of representation. Villegas, on the other hand, does not abandon the ties between the topics examined in the essays and the term *theatre*. He prefers to view all the different modes as forms of theatrical discourse or theatricality in that they retain the components of theatre that he believes are essential: verbal, visual, auditory, body, and gestural signs performed in front of an audience (p. 316).

The strength of *Negotiating Performance* is the challenging stance it takes with regard to traditional theatre scholarship. In providing provocative essays that borrow concepts from postmodernism, feminism, and cultural studies, the essayists and the editors offer alternative views and paths for researchers to consider. The collection covers U.S. Hispanic cultures, Mexico, and Cuba in a range of topics stimulating to the mind and the imagination. Moreover, the presentations of the arguments are thoughtful and straightforward, possibly a result of the mutual influence of the contributors during their period of shared residence or perhaps of the editors' efforts to produce a volume that would appeal to an audience beyond specialists. The bibliography compiles sources from all the essays, which gives it a broad but possibly overwhelming scope.

All four books reviewed here work toward exploring the nether regions of what has traditionally been understood as the study of Latin American theatre, that is, the study of published plays. The various focuses on performance, religion and politics, popular theatre, and stagecraft demonstrate that theatre scholarship constitutes a rich area of in-

quiry. The questions asked—what is theatrical, who performs theatrical works, for what audience, and for what purpose—apply to the past and the present. What remains constant in these four works covering more than five hundred years of theatre is the belief in the power of the theatre to change society. It is a utopian goal, mentioned by Villegas in terms of current efforts to move society toward true multiculturalism (p. 310). But it is also a belief that affirms the place of theatre, in whatever form, in the lives of Latin Americans. Weiss, Versényi, and George end their studies with examples of moribund or defunct utopian theatre movements. But if they doubt the existence of future performances, they need only turn to Taylor and Villegas's *Negotiating Performance* for vibrant examples of a living, adaptable tradition of theatre and performance.