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Theatricality ed. by Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait
(review)

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Reviews

TRACY C. DAVIS and THOMAS POSTLEWAIT, eds. *Theatricality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. 256. \$23.00 (Pb).

Reviewed by Marvin Carlson, City University of New York

In the rush to expand and apply the concepts of performance and performativity in the last decade or so, theatricality – which Christopher Balme has aptly designated the “close cousin” of performativity – has been relatively neglected, or worse yet, relegated to the domain of somewhat outdated and overly restrictive terminology. Fortunately, two of America’s most distinguished theatre scholars, Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, have provided a major volume to redress the situation, with an outstanding collection of essays that provide solid evidence of the historical and continuing importance of theatricality within modern performance theory. The editors offer an extended introduction to the concept of theatricality, suggesting how artists and theorists in different eras have utilized (and sometimes denigrated) this term, and also suggesting ways the term has been treated with such suspicion in more recent theory and some strategies for correcting this negative image.

The concluding essay by Shannon Jackson is perhaps the most useful in pursuing the grand scheme of placing theatricality within contemporary critical thought, and her thoughtful and nuanced genealogies of performance, theatricality, and gender studies throw important light on all three fields of investigation. Both performance and gender studies, Jackson argues, share with theatricality a “flexible essentialism,” which has itself been developed and conditioned by a variety of cultural concerns and selective utilization, memory, and forgetting – a process that this essay traces in convincing detail. Tracy Davis and Jon Erikson provide important explorations of the civil and political dimensions of theatricality, Davis with a thick reading of the initiation of the term *theatrical* in the speculations of Thomas Carlyle on the French

Revolution, and Erikson with a stimulating exploration of the relationship between theatricality and rhetoricity, drama, and political action though a consideration of Habermas and Foucault.

The remaining three essays utilize the concept of theatricality to examine performative activity in three theatrical cultures widely separated in time and location, thus developing the wide view of the concept laid out in the introduction. The aim is by no means to develop any kind of general or universal idea of what "theatricality" is, but rather, and properly, to provide thoughtful "case studies" of how theatricality has operated within specific historical and cultural situations. This is surely the best way to develop some idea of both the genealogy and the theoretical and esthetic potential of this fascinating and protean concept. In the first of these essays, Jody Enders considers the operations of mimesis in the medieval passion drama of Valenciennes, focusing particularly upon the stage presentation of biblical miracles. Here the concept of theatricality allows her to explore some of the most basic questions about the nature of theatrical illusion, reception, and belief. The theory and practice of illusion and reception is explored in a totally different historical and geographical situation by Haiping Jan, who looks at the dialectics of theatricality in classical Chinese music-drama. In addition to providing important light upon these concerns in a non-Western context, Jan's essay offers the further attraction of a thoughtful study of the implications of Bertolt Brecht's appropriation of and misunderstanding of certain operating techniques of this rich theatrical tradition. Thomas Postlewait casts important new light on an area that will be more familiar to most of the book's readers – the complex terrain of theatricality and anti-theatricality in Renaissance London. Postlewait is one of our best writers on the subject of theatre historiography and the implications of different approaches to the process of remembering and writing about theatre, and this subject provides him with an excellent opportunity not only to discuss the complicated relationship of these competing terms within the Elizabethan context, but even more useful and more intriguing, the way this relationship has been articulated and remembered by modern historians, whose idea of what constitutes theatricality has of course also been strongly conditioned by their own cultural context.

There is not a weak essay in this excellent collection, and anyone interested in sampling some of the best work in contemporary theatre and performance history and theory will want to own a copy of it.



JENNIFER JONES. *Medea's Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who Kills*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003. Pp. 123. \$23.95 (Pb).

Reviewed by Penny Farfan, University of Calgary

According to Aristotle, the best subjects for tragedy are to be found in a "few