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The Theatre of David Henry Hwang by Esther Kim Lee (review)

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pursuit of existential freedom hit home here. Commenting on the existential irony of William Wells Brown's *The Escape* in his final chapter, Jones asks poignantly, "But what were the *communal, familial, and institutional* consequences of his leap to freedom? That is, how did the attainment of individual freedom hamper the attainment of collective freedom? In what ways did those remaining in bondage have to suffer the consequences of their counterpart's fugitivity?" (156; emphasis in original).

If, as Jones finds, black existence confounds white essentialism at every turn, evading each and every occasion that romantic racialists gave of black genesis, then what might theatre and performance studies have to contribute to present-day debates on the afterlives of slavery and the question of recovery? *The Captive Stage* renews these questions with a precision and rigour that will engage debates in the field for a good while to come.



ESTHER KIM LEE. *The Theatre of David Henry Hwang*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015. Pp. 207. \$94.00 (Hb); \$29.95 (Pb).

Reviewed by Miseong Woo, Yonsei University

Most theatre scholars would agree that if one Asian-American playwright deserved a monograph or an anthology, it would be David Henry Hwang. As Esther Kim Lee writes in *A History of Asian American Theatre*, "the single event that put Asian American theater on the national and international cultural map was the Broadway production of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*" (1). Hwang's status as a much-discussed and highly successful contemporary Asian-American playwright makes it challenging for any writer to add new analysis to existing critiques of Hwang's plays. Lee's *The Theatre of David Henry Hwang* is, in fact, not the first book covering the life and works of the playwright. William C. Boles's *Understanding David Henry Hwang*, published two years earlier, provides a thorough analysis of Hwang's plays and their scholarly and journalistic receptions. By contrast, Lee's book pays closer attention to the autobiographical elements in Hwang's plays and to the playwright's theatrical aesthetics and production histories.

Lee's exploration of the dominant form and style of Hwang's plays is indeed the most valuable contribution of this volume. She insightfully points out that Hwang is "a dialectical thinker who can hold contradictory thoughts in his mind simultaneously" (3). As an example, she notes that *M. Butterfly* has spawned multiple, equally plausible interpretations, including readings of

it as an intellectual debate about the opposition between the east and the west and as a tragic love story.

The opening chapter, titled "The Trilogy of Chinese America," considers the profound influence on Hwang of María Irene Fornés and Sam Shepard, especially their emphasis on accessing the subconscious. Lee effectively describes how Hwang's intuitive ability to get "lost in the woods" (9) permeated his theatrical style in *FOB*, *The Dance and the Railroad*, and *Family Devotions*. She also defines Hwang's dramatic dialogue as "Californian cool," arguing that his decision to have Chinese characters speak in a casual southern Californian dialect was a politically motivated act to differentiate his Asian characters from the stereotypical characters that appeared in 1970s television shows. Lee's interpretation of Hwang's "Californian cool" aesthetic stems from her illuminating argument that Hwang's characters are, like those of Shepard, haunted by the American mythology of the west. She therefore locates Hwang's characters' fluency in "colloquial American dialogue, complete with witty sarcasm" (26), in the playwright's vision of Chinese- or Asian-American immigrants' cultural allegiance to the American past.

In the second chapter's discussions of *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, *The Sound of a Voice*, *As the Crow Flies*, and *Rich Relations*, Lee highlights Hwang's dramatic tactic of blending Asian and western theatre, tracing the non-verbal, visual stage elements and movements that culminated in his later international success, *M. Butterfly*. However, starting with the third chapter on *M. Butterfly*, the most subdued of the six chapters, Lee's focus surprisingly shifts from theatrical form and style to historical contexts. She briefly mentions the metatheatricality of *M. Butterfly* and compares it to Jean Genet's and Luigi Pirandello's "self-conscious and self-referential theatre" (60), in which the distinction between actor and role is deliberately made ambiguous. Lee then examines the play's reception in the historical context of the late 1980s in the United States, when the country was experiencing its "culture wars." This approach effectively highlights how the play epitomizes the multiculturalism, identity politics, and international politics of the time.

The fourth chapter similarly considers identity politics and multiculturalism in the 1990s in its analysis of *Bondage*, *Face Value*, *Trying to Find Chinatown*, and *Golden Child*. In this chapter, Lee seems to have missed an opportunity to evaluate Hwang's post-*Butterfly* works, which have always been compared with and interpreted in the shadow of their more successful predecessor. Lee's examination of each play focuses a bit too much on narrative structure, and she treats all four plays under the same rubric. Political and cultural discussions of multiculturalism became much more complicated in the 1990s, and Hwang's plays during this time show a change in his understanding of identity politics. In *Trying to Find Chinatown*, for example,

Hwang explores the complexities of self-definition through the character of Ronnie, who resists any immediate categorization and seems to serve as a surrogate for the playwright. The play demonstrates Hwang's attempt to portray a new horizon of multiculturalism by moving toward more complicated hybrid identities and cultural fusions. Lee classifies Hwang as a second-wave playwright, and Hwang has defined himself in the same way. But I would argue that Hwang's work in this period tried to move away from the rigid boundaries of the second wave, building a bridge for the next generation of Asian-American writers.

Lee's fifth chapter focuses on *Yellow Face*, *Chinglish*, and *Kung Fu*, plays written between 2000 and 2014, when Hwang showed "a deeply satiric attitude towards race and identity politics" (106) and a desire to engage with his signature themes in intercultural and transnational settings. Lee sharply perceives how the contradiction between Hwang's utopian desire to see a post-racial society and his keen sense of the racism still pervasive in society is reflected in his global millennial plays.

The final chapter introduces the critical perspectives of Josephine Lee, Dan Bacalzo, and Daphne Lei. Josephine Lee's analysis of Hwang's revision of *Flower Drum Song* focuses on the differences between the storylines in the original version and Hwang's adaptation for the 2001 production, but an examination of the theatrical aspects of the productions and their receptions given their different historical contexts would have been useful. Bacalzo provides an engaging discussion of *Golden Child* based on the concept of reflective nostalgia, which uses "a cultural past to open up the possibilities for meaning in the present" (151). Lei's analysis of *Chinglish* as a transnational production, set in the fascinating cultural context of the new millennium, points to new possibilities for collaboration between Asian-American playwrights and Asian theatre practitioners and scholars as well as new directions for research on how the works of Hwang and other Asian-American playwrights have been produced and received in the Asia Pacific regions in an era of increased mobility, global communication, and transnational production and consumption. As Lei suggests, Asian-American theatre truly "has gone beyond the small ethnic community theatre [. . .], functioning as a global player on the international stage" (166).

Being both an intellectual thinker and a popular playwright for the mainstream stage is rare, particularly in present times. Hwang's use of clever and intellectually thought-provoking dramatic dialogue provides the best evidence of his dialectical thought process and the key to his success. He rightfully belongs next to Ibsen, Shaw, Stoppard, Shepard, and Mamet in the history of modern drama. Esther Kim Lee's *The Theatre of David Henry Hwang* proves how far Asian-American theatre has come, and this volume will be essential

reading for theatre practitioners and students and scholars in Asian-American and Asian-Pacific studies.

WORKS CITED

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 Lee, Esther Kim. *A History of Asian American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.



DOMINIKA LASTER. *Grotowski's Bridge Made of Memory: Embodied Memory, Witnessing and Transmission in the Grotowski Work*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2016. Pp. 221, illustrated. \$35.00 (Pb).

Reviewed by Kris Salata, Florida State University

Grotowski scholarship is a peculiar enterprise because, despite volumes of texts either by the man himself or by others about his work, to write on Grotowski ultimately means to write on the nuances of his practice, which few have witnessed. Yet without access to his practical work, one cannot fully comprehend and transcend Grotowski's own vast narrative, its shifting purpose, peculiar terminology, and references to other practices, often exotic and obscure. Perhaps that is why Grotowski has been mostly historicized as an icon of the 1960s avant-garde and filed away, despite the fact that, after quitting directing, he continued his practical research "off stage" until his death in 1999. Reversing this trend, some recent publications engage with Grotowski's life-work in its entirety, including the work continued after his death at his Workcenter.

Dominika Laster's book is an attempt at such scholarship. Educated in Poland and in the United States (with her doctorate from NYU), Laster developed a deep connection with Grotowski's legacy in her early years in Wrocław, where the Laboratory Theatre had resided. As a teenager, Laster was able to attend lectures, workshops, and screenings at the Grotowski Center, which took over the theatre after its dissolution. She prefaces her book with a fascinating personal story of her one-way journey from Poland to Italy in hopes of finding Grotowski and asking him to let her join his Workcenter. She confesses, "Being an extremist, I burnt all my bridges. I did not cautiously take a leave of absence from my university. I did not sublet my apartment. I liquidated everything and left without giving myself the option of being able to return to Poland" (xii).