THE THEATRICAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The concept of the public sphere, as first outlined by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, refers to the right of all citizens to engage in debate on public issues on equal terms. In this book, Christopher Balme explores theatre’s role in this crucial political and social function. He traces its origins and argues that the theatrical public sphere invariably focuses attention on theatre as an institution between the shifting borders of the private and public, reasoned debate and agonistic intervention. Chapters explore this concept in a variety of contexts, including the debates that led to the closure of English theatres in 1642; theatre’s use of media; controversies surrounding race, religion and blasphemy; and theatre’s place in a new age of globalized aesthetics. Balme concludes by addressing the relationship of theatre today with the public sphere and whether theatre’s transformation into an art form has made it increasingly irrelevant for contemporary society.

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1. Mapping Democracy, November 2012, Munich Kammerspiele. Photo credit: Judith Buss


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4. Playbill of the New Theatre Royal, Glasgow, 1840. By permission of University of Glasgow Library, Department of Special Collections


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12 DV8 Physical Theatre: Can We Talk about This? Photo credit: Matt Nettheim/ DV8
This book deals with the public sphere, a concept that has regained urgency in recent years as the people, first in Eastern Europe, then Africa and now the Middle East, have shaken off dictatorial regimes and begun to build democratic societies. As a cornerstone of any democracy a functioning public sphere is normally understood as the possibility for private citizens to engage in debate on issues of public interest without regard to sex, race, creed or caste. The public sphere hinges in turn on wide-ranging rights to freedom of speech and by extension artistic expression. The theatrical public sphere should theoretically concern itself with theatre’s role in this democratic process, and it does make use of this potential on occasions, but there is no causal nexus between the two. Even recent history tells us that theatre can flourish artistically under repressive regimes with a highly regulated or practically non-existent political public sphere: the Berliner Ensemble in the GDR or Jerzy Grotowski’s theatre in Poland in the 1960s are just two cases in point. Theatres also engage with and contribute to the public sphere under highly restrictive political conditions past and present. By means of allusion, allegory and sometimes downright subterfuge theatre has often provided a collective echo chamber for social and political concerns. This is the reason why it has been and in many countries continues to be highly regulated. Ironically, where theatre is no longer censored, its function in the wider public sphere often becomes attenuated. The theatrical public sphere becomes increasingly self-contained: a closed circuit of subscriber audiences, professional reviewers and theatrical unions.

It is the aim of this book to delineate theoretically and historically how the concept of the theatrical public sphere can be used heuristically. It operates with a fairly restrictive definition to prevent almost inevitable (con) fusion with cognate concepts such as ‘the public’ and ‘public space’. The public sphere is almost never a real space but rather a set of rules enabling debate and discussion to occur. The question to be investigated historically is then: under what conditions do such rules pertain to the theatre and with
what results? The theatre’s role in the public sphere is threefold: as an interlocutor via its plays and productions; as an institution where it may be the subject of debate; and as a communicator where it harnesses various media channels to broadcast itself and its messages. These three, often interlocking functions combine to form the theatrical public sphere. Scholarly investigation can focus on any of these roles or combinations of them. One can speak perhaps of an open and closed theatrical public sphere. The latter pertains to the above-mentioned closed circuit of theatrical reception in a primary aesthetic mode and is not the subject of this book. The former refers to those situations where the closed circuit is broken open and engagement with other public spheres takes place.

This book’s focus is broadly European because it studies the theatrical public sphere against the background of how the concept has been applied within some selected Western traditions. That these traditions have been exported around the world and adapted and altered to suit local conditions is one of the defining characteristics of theatre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although the aesthetic adaptation processes are now beginning to be intensively studied, the institutional implications for the theatrical sphere have received far less attention. It can only be hoped that these perspectives will move into focus in the future.

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Preface


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