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0521630541 - Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage

Edited by Richard Boon and Jane Plastow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction

JANE PLASTOW

Theatre Matters is an assertive title, but it embodies an idea that the editors and contributors to this book all, in very different ways, see as central to our engagement with the theatrical form. If I were writing this in parts of the South¹ I might not feel the need to make the assertion so emphatically because it would be more self-evident. In countries such as Nigeria and South Africa, and in some parts of India, theatre productions, companies and playwrights have engaged, often head-on, with the ruling classes in debates about government and social and political reform. The impact of such interventions can be seen most clearly in the level of state response. Banning orders, censorship, imprisonment and, in the most extreme cases, murder, as in the 1996 state killing of the Nigerian writer Ken Saro Wiwa, have often been the lot of those who have used theatre to take on the state, and it should be noted that several of those featured in this book have lived with the knowledge that their work may at any moment cost them their freedom, or possibly their lives. If theatre did not matter, as in such immediate ways it palpably does not matter in most of the western world, state responses would not be so extreme.

In other instances the theatres we are debating here are not dealing with political embattlement but, as in the Caribbean pieces, the essay by Jatinder Verma and the plays of the native American playwright Tomson Highway, as discussed by Christopher Innes, with the creation of identities and a sense of self-worth. Here the notion that is being interrogated is that a people without some sense of communal identity become fundamentally disempowered and negated at a profound level of their personal sense of being. In all the cases examined that negation has arisen because of the process of colonisation which

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

JANE PLASTOW

has uprooted or disenfranchised communities. The theatre not only examines the resultant sense of loss of self-worth but also attempts to take part in the healing process of asserting culture and identity, so that the people involved can begin to re-value or even to re-invent themselves in the context of their contemporary post- or neo-colonial situation. What both approaches to making theatre have in common is a belief in function. This does not in any sense crudely privilege message over aesthetic sensibility, but rather posits a theatre where function and aesthetic importantly cohabit in the same performance arena.

The impact of cultural interventions can never be neatly measured and this, I think, is one reason why politicians, economists and various types of development agencies, who usually have control of the purse-strings, are so often reluctant, world-wide, to fund cultural expression. Paradoxically, those same agencies may at times fear the uncontrollable nature of creative expression and so, again, be reluctant to support the arts. This book examines a diverse range of theatrical engagements with the state and society in order not to prescribe, but to examine how committed theatres of various kinds work and the kinds of impact they make on the people exposed to that work. The style and content of each practitioner involved is unique, responding to particular realities in specific times and places. What this book seeks to do is to further debate both on how and why theatre might 'matter', and about the range of ways in which theatre which might loosely be described as 'committed' has sought to express itself.

The people who have contributed to this book come to their subject from a range of different perspectives which quite obviously colour their approach to the subject. Those who are primarily playwrights, like Soyinka and Osofisan, are able to give us a very personal, immediate argument for why they work as they do and what impact they seek to make. Others – Srampickal, Verma, Heritage, Tsehaye and myself – all have a degree of academic interest, but are also practically engaged in making theatre in the societies we examine, and we bring to our arguments, I think, an interpreter's eye as well as in some cases a creator's vision. The third category of writers are the 'straight' academics; here there is, I think, a different flavour to the writing, with a greater sense of objective overview than is present in the essays by the practitioners.

Cambridge University Press

0521630541 - Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

I think this variety of overlapping perspectives in itself sets up various arguments about how judgements might be made about theatres which seek to 'matter'. It seems quite obvious in the writings of Soyinka, Heritage and Srampickal that some of those most profoundly affected by the theatres they discuss are the people who are actually drawn into the creative process. For participants this theatre quite incontrovertibly matters and has had a revolutionary effect often on both their lives and their thinking. It is much more difficult for more distanced writers to make those kinds of first-hand judgement. It is also easier for the practitioners to make statements about the kinds of audience they wish to reach and the impact they are at least trying to make than it is for outside observers. What the academy is perhaps best placed to do is to give the overview, to compare and contrast away from the hurly-burly of actual practice, so that writers such as Innes can give us examples from two very different places which yet have powerful linkages of situation and intent, Steadman surveys the South African scene in a crucial period of flux while Upton and Woodyard examine how the work of individual playwrights, over the course of an entire career, shifts, adapts and re-positions itself in response to changing national contexts.

However, it is surely significant that it is often quite difficult to find the material which demonstrates the impact of theatre in a particular time and place. The artefact, the play itself, is usually not difficult to unearth, but – with the exception of South Africa where so much theatre until recently was declaring itself as primarily aimed at effecting political change that the issue of impact could not be ignored – how much a production actually affects participants, audiences or society more widely has not usually been seen as being of primary interest to those who study theatre. Academic study of theatre has too often perhaps been dominated by a literary approach which views the text in isolation from the conditions of its creation and performance. For the academics who have contributed to this book it has sometimes proved very difficult to find evidence of the impact of particular theatrical events on those involved in, or witnessing, a production. However subjective such material may be it is surely significant to know how an audience might react to a play by Osofisan in Nigeria or Halac in

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

JANE PLASTOW

Argentina. Theatre's best chance of having an impact is not, I would argue, in the literary text, but in the live performance which is, after all, what makes theatre different and not simply a form of literary aberration. If my argument has any strength it then follows that those of us who wish to understand the contemporary significance of theatre need not only to read texts and interview authors, but also to see plays, ask questions of audiences and take notice of reactions appearing in local media. Theatre that 'matters' must be theatre in interaction with society, and the text-based study to which the academy has so often limited itself is surely as partial a basis for making judgements as a deaf man watching an orchestra.

Contributors not only see the theatre they are involved in from different perspectives of engagement, they also work from very different imperatives and in radically varying modes. None of these are inherently contradictory. To quote from Soyinka's foreword to this book: 'Repression takes many forms, some quite subtle, and the tools of resistance must adapt to its every manifestation, which is nearly always unique.' A playwright will always bring not only his or her own sensibility to their work but is also bound to be affected by the conditions and kinds of repression and oppression against which they work. I have already mentioned the two obvious divisions of psychological and overtly political theatre which are very clear in this book. But even within such broad areas each writer brings a very different perspective to bear.

At one extreme the work of the Eritrean and South African playwrights during their countries' liberation struggles had obvious propaganda objectives, both political and social. Halac, Boukman, Osofisan and Soyinka might all be called political propagandists in various of their plays. Even the work Srampickal records in India could be seen to fall under the umbrella of social propaganda. Propaganda has become something of a dirty word in the west, where it is too often equated with coercion and the excesses of either fascism or eastern European state communism. From discussions with many southern practitioners and playwrights I do not think the word propaganda has the same pejorative connotations in relation to much of their work. Neither Femi Osofisan nor Alemseged Tesfai has any problem with seeing himself as a propagandist – they see political and social evils and wish to use theatre to

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

help rectify these – therefore they make propaganda. They do not see this as brainwashing but rather as bringing ‘obvious’ truths into the clear light of day in opposition to states which wish to obscure the truth about oppression in order to continue their domination of the people. The idea that propaganda may be a tool of empowerment is one which several writers featured here might see as relevant.

Where Osofisan differs from Alemseged and from many other playwrights considered here is that he believes that the way to make propaganda effective and to effect change is to target the middle and upper – and especially the student – classes in his plays. Osofisan argues – of course from a primarily Nigerian perspective – that peasant and workers’ revolts are inevitably crushed by the ruling classes, and that therefore it is that latter class which must be brought to see the injustice of its behaviour and effect reform. This argument can be seen clearly in plays such as Osofisan’s *Morountodun*² where hope lies in the conversion of a rich bourgeois woman to the cause of the oppressed peasantry, although ironically in a play which draws on actual Nigerian history, even with such a conversion, peasant revolt is still crushed. Still Osofisan seeks to hold up a mirror to his bourgeois audiences so that *à la* Brecht they will see their world from a startling new perspective. Soyinka too is most famous for his complex stage productions which reach predominantly bourgeois audiences, and he has often been criticised for being elitist. Yet Soyinka has another side. He was instrumental in setting up guerrilla theatre groups in Nigeria in the 1970s, and his work in Jamaica interestingly combines the populist and bourgeois strands of his theatre practice, both of which he sees as being equally important in working towards democratic revolution.

Paul Heritage’s contribution continues the debate when he discusses a Brazilian theatre group which puts on populist and classical theatre, both in the open air and in a laboriously constructed theatre, dug out of the underworld of the *favela*. Heritage makes a powerful argument for the rejection of an either/or position in relation to the conventional/classical or developmental/populist debate about how to make theatre that ‘matters’. For the Brazilian group both are instruments – in different but related ways – of liberation and the creation of a culture of self-valuing for the disempowered people of the margins.

Cambridge University Press

0521630541 - Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

JANE PLASTOW

This more embracing consciousness of how theatre can matter relates to the psychological theatres of the Caribbean, of Jatinder Verma and of Tomson Highway. Here it is the very act of making theatre which is perhaps more important. For here we are dealing with people who have been so displaced or denigrated that the world, and to some extent they themselves, may have come to see them as invisible, culture-less and without identity. To explore identities – and not in any kind of eulogistic manner – is central to this theatre. For one of the greatest evils of colonialism was to strip people of their belief in themselves and their very being. As the Kenyan novelist and playwright, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, argues:

The biggest weapon yielded and daily unleashed by imperialism against . . . collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity and ultimately in themselves.³

The theatres of Walcott, and even more strikingly perhaps of Highway, speak to a people struggling to re-identify themselves against a history of loss, defeat and denigration which at its most extreme, as among some of the Canadian Native Americans, threatens to drive a people into acts of self-annihilation; surely the ultimate triumph for a colonial power.

Interestingly here the Francophone Caribbean experience is different again. Boukman proves a playwright very difficult to pigeon-hole with an *œuvre* ranging from plays advocating international revolution to the more recent *Délivrans!*, which seems to come from a place nearer to the work of such as Walcott in its more internalised debate over identity. Influenced by French assimilationist philosophies, by Césaire's negritudism – which arguably is a by-product of and reaction to assimilationism – and most strikingly by Frantz Fanon (it is surely extraordinary that the tiny island of Martinique has produced these two hugely influential figures, and almost inevitable that Boukman writes to some extent in response to them), Boukman's theatre is possibly the most obviously internationalist of any of those examined here. Identity is asserted in relation to other struggles which are seen as parallel

Cambridge University Press

0521630541 - Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage

Edited by Richard Boon and Jane Plastow

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

to, and in some ways even the same as, those of the Martiniquans. The French imperialists thought they could create an international body of essentially similar French people throughout their empire, as opposed to the British who often sought to emphasise difference in order to perpetuate a policy of divide-and-rule. Possibly this has a bearing on Anglophone writers' often more culturally specific work, whereas Boukman continually seeks to put the Martiniquan situation into a series of international perspectives covering not only the Antilles but also Africa and the Middle East.

The status of Africa in this text which deals with so many peoples who come from, relate to, or have had experience of that continent, is fascinating. For the undisplaced Africans of Nigeria and Eritrea, Africa is the site of struggles for freedom from colonial and post-colonial oppression, but it is a reality in a way that Steadman seems to argue it is not even for South Africans. Steadman refers to the *myth* of Africa, and of course most South Africans – largely due to embargoes on travel resulting from apartheid – effectively know less of other Africas than they do of pervasive American culture which is continually beamed into the country via various forms of media and economic linkage.

In South Africa there is also the debate as to who can claim to be African in that country whose people result from a history of centuries of invasion and migration. And then Verma brings another perspective to bear when he talks of Kenyan Asians who have chosen largely a kind of collective amnesia in relation to their African roots, and who, in England, generally choose to fillet a sixty-year sojourn in Kenya from the group memory and instead look back to another kind of myth of Asia as the source of community identity.

Finally, the Caribbean people have yet another perception of history and identity, torn between awareness and myth of Africa and America seen through the prism of either British or French colonialism. For many playwrights in this book, whether their work is overtly political or more concerned with the forging of communal identities, myth, memory and history are continually invoked in an endeavour to find who a people might be and how they can identify themselves in relation to contemporary realities after the trauma of the period of colonial adventurism. What strikes the reader is that in this endeavour myth is

Cambridge University Press

0521630541 - Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

JANE PLASTOW

often as important as, if not more important than, more conventional history in articulating states of consciousness, possibly because myth, as in the work of Osofisan and Highway, can often be invoked dynamically, re-imagined and re-worked to create a bridge between past and future.

Issues of identity in the neo- and post-colonial eras relate closely to the issue of nation, which is another theme that recurs in many different guises in this book. At its most extreme in Alemseged Tesfai's *The Other War*, and more obliquely in the work of Highway, theatre is used to protest against forms of actual genocide. But in almost every other practitioner's work, with the possible exception of Srampickal, the interrogation and assertion of identity either implicitly or explicitly involves an examination of the notion of nation. The questions of to whom the nation does or should belong are continually raised in both ethnic and class terms. Verma examines not only Kenyan-Asian identity but also that identity in relation to the place of Kenyan-Asians as British citizens who relate in different ways to their Asian, African and European experiences and memories. Walcott looks at the heterodox identity of the people of Trinidad and at how that affects their sense of community, and implicitly, by extension, their sense of nation. In South Africa and Nigeria the discussion is more about who owns and therefore essentially constitutes the nation. Race is crucially part of this debate in South Africa, but in Nigeria ethnicity also plays a part, along with class and (an often-present issue in the political South) the relative place of urban and rural peoples. In some cases theatre is invoked literally to write the nation into being, but in others it is used to question what is the nation, who is the nation and to whom will it belong?

Ultimately it seems necessary to explain why some areas of the world and some kinds of theatre are not represented in this book. The editors are not unaware that there is minimal representation in this work of white or 'First World' playwrights or practitioners. This is largely because of the post/neo-colonial positioning of the text. We have chosen to focus on work which 'matters' predominantly in relation to the very difficult construct of nationhood, conceived either geographically or ethnically, and work which aims in some way to speak to and/

Cambridge University Press

0521630541 - Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage

Edited by Richard Boon and Jane Plastow

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

or for that whole 'nation'. A sense of urgency in writing or playing the nation into being or into a sense of where it should be going seems to lie at the present time mainly with the post- and neo-colonial peoples. In contrast most contemporary western political theatre is not only already exhaustively analysed by academics, but actually makes, I would argue, precious little impact on either audiences or the state. (I would exclude here various Eastern European theatres which have been omitted mainly because they had a different kind of history in relation to colonialism rather than because they have not made an impact.) The theatre that might claim to 'matter' by this book's criteria in the west is possibly more issue- or locality-based theatre focusing on single issues, minority rights, local community identity, etc. We in no way seek to devalue this work: it is simply beyond the remit of this book.

A coda to this introduction – which possibly resonates interestingly with Wole Soyinka's final paragraphs. There are no women playwrights or theatre impresarios included here, and only two (western) women contributors. This does not mean women are invisible in creating theatre that matters. It does mean that it is still often hard for women, particularly in the South, to command the resources needed to bring theatre into being. In many of the cultures under consideration, to be a woman performer is still likely to bring accusations of immorality, and even those women who do perform are usually forced to give up the profession when they marry, or as the price of marrying in order to carry out a 'proper' role as wife, mother and home-maker. Moreover, in many places women commonly have less access to education than men, and it is noticeable that often only highly educated women, who thereby command a measure of economic independence, are enabled to transgress societal mores sufficiently radically to become writers and makers of theatre. Many women playwrights like the Nigerian Tess Oumwene and the Ghanaians Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland have been able to write largely because they were protected by the respectability of an academic career. In other cases women can often only continue to work in theatre if they marry someone else in the profession. It is to be earnestly hoped that any future book dealing with this area of theatre will be able to include women speaking to the nation just as vociferously as their men.

Cambridge University Press

0521630541 - Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

JANE PLASTOW

NOTES

- 1 In the body of the text we have usually used the term 'Third World'. Such terms are notoriously difficult because they can often be seen as patronising or pejorative. In this book 'Third World' is broadly used to describe the poorer countries which came into being during the colonial period. 'South', as used in this Introduction, refers in a more political sense to those nations which have suffered under-development at the hands of the rich, capitalist, political 'North'. These categories are broadly, though not exclusively, geographically based.
- 2 Femi Osofisan, *Morountodun and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Longman, 1982).
- 3 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (London: James Currey, 1986), p. 3.