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978-1-107-00683-6 - The Theatrical Public Sphere
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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.

CHRISTOPHER BALME holds the Chair in Theatre Studies at the University of Munich. He was born and educated in New Zealand where he graduated from the University of Otago. He has lived and worked in Germany since 1985 with positions at the universities of Würzburg, Munich and Mainz. From 2004 to 2006, he held the Chair in Theatre Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He has published widely on German theatre, intercultural theatre, and theatre and other media, and is currently president of the International Federation for Theatre Research. He is also a former senior editor of *Theatre Research International*. Recent publications include *Decolonizing the Stage* (1999), *Pacific Performances* (2007) and *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* (2008). He directs the research project 'Global Theatre Histories' at the University of Munich.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107006836

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First published 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Balme, Christopher B.

The theatrical public sphere / Christopher B. Balme.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-00683-6

1. Theater and society. I. Title.

PN2051.B295 2014

792.01-dc23

2013048913

ISBN 978-1-107-00683-6 Hardback

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Preface

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.

Finally some words of acknowledgement. This project has been years in gestation and its author's cogitations have been tested in many different contexts. I would like to thank particularly Kati Röttger at the University of Amsterdam; Stefan Hulfeld, University of Vienna; Erika Fischer-Lichte at the Centre for Interweaving Performance Cultures in Berlin; Brian Singleton, Moray McGowan and colleagues at Trinity College Dublin; Jerzy Limon, Danzig; Tobias Döring and Mark Stein for an invitation to speak at the Edward Said conference, Wannsee, Berlin; to Freddie Rokem and Eran Neumann for inviting me to the memorable 'Expertise: Media Specificity and Interdisciplinarity' conference in Tel Aviv; to Patrick Ebewo, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa (Arts and Sustainable Development conference); Khalid Amine, Tangier (Performing Transformations conference); Meewon Lee, President of Korean Association for Theatre Research; Peter Boenisch, Iain Mackenzie and the Ph.D. students of the European Theatre Research Network and the Political and Social Thought Group at the University of Kent. A special mention to Amy Bartholomew (Ottawa) who provided crucial insights in the final stages.

Some of the material in this book has appeared previously in earlier versions:

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- ‘Distributed Aesthetics: Performance, Media, and the Public Sphere’, in Jerzy Limon and Agnieszka Zukowska (eds.), *Theatrical Blends: Art in the Theatre/Theatre in the Arts* (Danzig: *slowo/obraz terytoria*, 2010), 138–48.
- ‘Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere’, in Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait (eds.), *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* (Iowa, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 37–62.
- ‘Orientalism, Opera, and the Public Sphere’, in Tobias Döring and Mark Stein (eds.), *Edward Said’s Translocations: Essays in Secular Criticism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 171–86.
- ‘Thresholds of Tolerance: Censorship, Artistic Freedom, and the Theatrical Public Sphere’, in Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz (eds.), *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 100–13.

A special thanks to my colleagues and students at the Department for Theatre Studies, University of Munich who each in their own way have been working on this topic and have provided valuable feedback: in particular Meike Wagner, Berenika Szymanski-Düll, Nic Leonhardt as well as Wolf-Dieter Ernst (Bayreuth) and Julia Stenzel (Mainz).