



American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century



Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of “dramaturgy” as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright’s viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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FOREWORD

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If [...] it is the contemporary who has broken the vertebrae of his time (or, at any rate, who has perceived in it a fault line or a breaking point), then he also makes of this fracture a meeting place or an encounter between times and generations.

Agamben, "What is the contemporary?"¹

This book is an exploration of contemporary American theater, in some of its remarkable trends and striking phenomena. The 21st century being now of age, the following chapters broadly propose to examine the tangle of formal innovation, socio-political debates and aesthetic introspection that has emerged along the years to its majority, in the way plays, performances and musical works are devised, produced and received in the United States. If the stage is a shifting echo of the world it performs for, how has it chosen to engage with the new millennium's shattering events, global crises and technological turns? In what directions have drama and performance evolved to reaffirm their mission in a neoliberal age of insecure funding, ever-present screens and urgent calls for collective reevaluations of memory, grief and identity? And how are dramaturgy and spectatorship repositioned by the "constant oscillation" of what has been termed our "metamodern" era?²

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?", in *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik & Stefan Pedatella, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011, p. 18.
- 2 Van den Akker and Vermeulen have proposed the concept of metamodernism "as a heuristic label and a periodising term," "characterized by oscillation rather than synthesis," in order to describe a general structure of feeling emerging from postmodernism and reacting to it. See chapter 8 of the present volume where Emma Willis in particular references this theory and applies it to contemporary performances. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism", in Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (eds), *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, p. 39 & p. 41.

In the last decades of the 20th century, dominant critical trends associated theater with the distinct sense of an ending, in turns postulating the “death of character” in favor of auto-representational bents (Elinor Fuchs), the relegation of theater as a genre to “an historical rather than a contemporary art” (Richard Schechner),³ or altogether speculating on the doomed nature of live performance in times of pervading mediatization (Philip Auslander). Since the start of the millennium, a wealth of artistic productions has eloquently demonstrated the vivid endurance of theater practice, while bearing out the necessity, suggested in those earlier and more pessimistic assessments, for dramaturgies to periodically undergo reconfiguration. The stage always was the site of a perpetual starting-over, but the end of the 20th century particularly thematized certain growing antinomies between art and context which required theater to rethink itself or, as Jean-Pierre Sarrazac proposes, to rise out of its own ashes: “The last paradox of theatricality may very well consist of the (Beckettian) task of being done (again) with theater while constantly dreaming of beginning theater all over again. For theater can only be achieved outside itself [...]”⁴ The dynamic Sarrazac sketches out, whereby theater can only be reborn by letting go of itself in cyclical rhythms, appears symptomatic of contemporary developments, and begs for renewed enquiry into current ways of writing, enacting and experiencing theater.

Giorgio Agamben deftly articulates that the contemporary moment cannot be seized strictly from within, but becomes visible in relation to other times, projecting the shadow of the present onto the past, so that the past “acquire[s] the ability to respond to the darkness of the now.”⁵ From terrorism, wars and the circulation of migrant populations to financial, health and climate crises or social upheavals regarding gender and race, the young 21st century has been rife with fractures and fault lines shifting the paradigm of our everyday circumstances and testing our capacity to make sense of “now” through contextualization, analysis, policy and artistic creation. The present volume does not attempt to map out all of the meaningful developments of the American stage, and lays no claim to exhaustiveness; the picture it draws in thirteen chapters is necessarily incomplete and fragmented. The aim of its essays and interviews is, more modestly, to delve into a range of current theatrical works and practices, placing them against the manifold backgrounds of dramatic tradition, cultural history and

3 Richard Schechner, “Toward the 21st Century”, *TDR*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1993, p. 7.

4 Jean Pierre Sarrazac, “The Invention of ‘Theatricality’”, trans. Virginie Magnat, *SubStance*, vol. 31, nos 2 & 3, 2002, p.70.

5 Giorgio Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 18 & p. 19.

contemporary criticism, in order to investigate telling evolutions in dramaturgical language, to probe tendencies in casting, staging and spectatorship, and to reignite conversations about the place and function of theater in the community. Rather than a comprehensive account, it offers in-depth forays into, and close readings of, the aesthetics of a number of plays, productions, companies and institutions, placing them in a dialogue with the past to anticipate future prospects.

The plural notion of “dramaturgies” in the volume’s title was chosen in full awareness of its Greek etymology—which has traveled through French and German—as well as its contemporary ambivalence. In its earliest definition, dramaturgy refers to the art, or science, of dramatic composition—originally, as Magda Romanska states, “*dramatourgos* simply meant someone who was able to arrange various dramatic actions in a meaningful and comprehensive order.”⁶ The French language, in which “*dramaturge*” is still used for “dramatist,” even as a second meaning pointing to the role of theoretical collaborator derived from Bertolt Brecht’s practice⁷ increasingly asserts itself,⁸ compellingly illustrates the intersection of creative input and critical distance, authorship and analysis, which circulates within the notion. In the words of Katalin Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochrane, dramaturgy, freed from a strict association with Aristotelian poetics or a definition limited to textual analysis, has “gradually reconfigured itself by the late twentieth century, and has become synonymous with the totality of the performance-making process.”⁹ In light of this broadening scope, the productive polysemy of the phrase “American dramaturgies” seems the most fitting choice to encompass the range of objects examined here, and the methodologies deployed to explore them. Whether they rely on stylistic analysis, on interviews with playwrights and dramaturgs, or on the tracing of dramaturgical devices in the collective space of the city or the collective time of memory, the chapters of this volume are concerned with theater-making as a dynamic process, the ramifications of which extend

6 Magda Romanska (ed.), “Introduction”, *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 1.

7 On the development of the role of the dramaturg and its Brechtian origins, see Mary Davies’ essay in chapter 6.

8 While some French institutions continue to prefer the phrase “*conseiller littéraire et théâtral*” (literary and dramatic advisor), theater departments and schools like the Théâtre National de Strasbourg have been training “*dramaturges*” for over a decade. The German spelling “*dramaturg*” or the parent noun “*dramaturgie*” are sometimes found on playbills, in an attempt to prevent confusing the audience about the roles of author and dramaturg.

9 Katalin Trencsényi & Bernadette Cochrane (eds), “Foreword”, *New Dramaturgy*, London/ New York, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014, p. xi.

from the playwriting classroom to the frenzied discussion of shows on social media. The choice of the phrase “American dramaturgies” does not imply the embrace of one distinctly categorized definition of the term (as old or new, as either composition, or analysis, or creative support), but underpins the view that its labile and growing meaning is not only an asset but also a reflection of the diversity of contemporary artistic modalities and critical angles.

8 Since this volume was edited in France, with essays written by scholars from across Europe and from New Zealand as well as from the US, it also speaks to the international resonance of the American stage, and queries what is perceived as “American” aesthetics at home and abroad. A hundred years ago, Paris was just beginning to pay attention to US theater: popular comedies were being translated, leading to the introduction of more innovative writing with *The Emperor Jones* at the Odéon in 1923, and later to a very active and prestigious phase of importing American plays until the end of the 1960s.¹⁰ The picture offered by the first decades of the 21st century is radically different: while it is fairly rare for new US playwrights to be translated and produced in Paris today, it is very common for festivals and institutions to invite downtown theater companies—the Wooster Group, New York City Players, Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company and Andrew Schneider have, among many others, all been featured. In France, the definition of American contemporary dramaturgies seems to have narrowed around the notion of experimental theater as represented by identifiable troupes, to the detriment of new writing in a strictly text-based vein or playwrights unattached to a company. Not so in England, where new American playwriting continues to invite sustained attention, as evidenced by the National Theatre or Young Vic productions of the works of, say, Sarah Ruhl, Annie Baker, Lindsey Ferrentino or Jackie Sibblies Drury. An enquiry into the reasons for such disparity in the international reception of US theater would provide the subject for a different volume, but its mere acknowledgement makes an investigation into the definers of an “American” stage all the richer.

In their introduction to *21st Century Drama: What Happens Now*, Siân Adiseshiah and Louise Lepage point out that, although the perspective of their volume is decidedly British, they prefer to omit any adjective of nationality from the title, in deference to the essential globalization of theater in the 21st century and to the international

10 On the history of American theater in France; see Lewis Falb, *American Drama in Paris 1945-70*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina Press, 1973; as well as chapter X of Bernard Banoun, Isabelle Poulin & Yves Chevrel (eds), *L’Histoire des traductions en langue française*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2019.

range of many of the works discussed. While this is a compelling critical choice for the examination of trends within Europe, it seems that, even in our global context, American theater is still very much defined by its distinction from, and relationship to, European practice, warranting the preservation of the national epithet in the title of the present collection. The performances under scrutiny here are easily categorized as American by the nationality of their authors and the original contexts in which they are analyzed, but the volume's collective critical perspective aims to interrogate that identity beyond the birthplace of the works of art, hypothesizing about the possibility of outlining specific trends and tropes, national moods and modes, and distinct ways to engage with the weight of theatrical heritage.

Foremost among the legacies of the American stage is the supposedly transparent but persistently elusive notion of realism, which the contemporary stage now revisits after the rise of non-traditional performance, and which the first section of this volume seeks to probe and challenge through the texture of new plays. Marc Robinson's exploration of radical experiments in realist performance reevaluates the ambivalence of the genre in a contemporary context, and brings to light the ultimate unreliability of seemingly stable paradigms and objects. Through the stylistically diverging works of Jackie Sibblies Drury, Richard Nelson, Richard Maxwell and David Levine, Robinson subtly traces a disorienting commitment to the realist form which exposes its underpinnings across broken narratives, moving away from the traditional constraints of mimesis to question the intrusion, awareness, or compassion of the spectator's gaze. Narrowing the focus from the overall composition of recent works to the specific orality of their experimental voices, Avra Sidiropoulou next looks into the restoration of a playful textual primacy in the plays of Charles Mee, Mac Wellman and Maxwell. Filtered through the demands of body and space, the fabric of dramatic language asserts its physicality in a gesture which, as Siridopoulou points out, is reminiscent of the landscape aesthetics of Gertrude Stein, infusing the script with the incantatory echoes of poems and the cerebral overflow of novels. The primacy of space and set in the creative process is then confirmed by Maxwell himself, in conversation with Emeline Jouve. The playwright reveals his conception of dramaturgy as three-dimensional sculpture, and discusses his fascination with the rhythmical capacity of words to move things along in an art which is necessarily "a response to the present". In the final essay of the section, Ana Fernández-Caparrós turns to the airy sets and minimalist lyricism of Sarah Ruhl's plays in order to outline a poetics of theater as transformational space, both spatially and epistemologically. Relying on Italo Calvino's defense of "lightness", Fernández-Caparrós sharpens the concept into a critical tool which reasserts the contemporary stage as a place not to escape our humanity, but to engage with our mortality.

The second section of the volume takes a closer look at recent reconfigurations in play development, audience positioning and casting debates, reassessing the journey of creative work from page to stage and to spectator's gaze in light of 21st-century methods and technologies. An interview with Young Jean Lee thus sheds light on her own aesthetics as a playwright-director (downtown, abroad and on Broadway), as well as on her approach to teaching playwriting. She describes how the classroom approximates the pressures of the professional world, molding apprenticeship through commitment and feedback, and stresses the necessity for resilience and survival in a playwright's career. Moving from writing to development, Mary Davies next examines the place and role of dramaturgs at the National Playwrights Conference held annually by the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. Looking back at the history of the O'Neill and investigating its current practices, Davies uses the concepts of "macro" and "micro" dramaturgy derived from Marianne Van Kerkhoven's analysis to highlight the virtues of a dramaturg's creative freedom. After these enquiries into the craft of textual composition, three chapters turn to specific works and performances, studying them in direct relation to context. The spatial context of the city of Los Angeles is, as Antonia Rigaud demonstrates, the inspiration for a radical rethinking of the dramaturgy of opera outside the opera house by The Industry. Commenting on some of their site-specific productions, Rigaud elucidates the influence of Guy Debord's psychogeography, John Cage's fragmentation and Jacques Rancière's civic aesthetics on the young company's proposal to decenter, desacralize and ultimately reinvigorate the genre. In the following chapter, the decisive context becomes temporal rather than spatial, as the pressures of technoculture and the ambivalent sensibilities of metamodernism inform an oscillating presentation of the self, which Emma Willis explores in Clare Barron's and Andrew Schneider's experiments with solo dramatic storytelling. As Willis clearly argues, the influence of selfie culture and surveillance paradigms is reflected through the mediatized, doubled or disaggregated treatment of identity, in these contemporary pieces where artists are "looking for a self without expecting to find it." Lastly, Valentine Vasak concludes the section by addressing the non-traditional re-casting of classic works, and pointing out its ambiguous power to re-semanticize them. Taking the example of a refusal by the Edward Albee Estate to authorize the casting of a black actor as Nick in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and the ensuing controversy on social media, Vasak questions the power and the limits of authorial intent, and opens up the debate to a topical discussion of race politics on the American stage, referencing August Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand" as well as a statement from the "We see you White American Theatre" collective.

The third section of the volume shifts the focus to the role of theater in the community, querying its democratic function and examining the way dramaturgies can seek to reflect, shape, produce or fracture the collective. In an original take on a little-discussed play, Pierre-Héli Monot questions the democratic philosophy of Howard Zinn's *Marx in Soho*, a staple of the American college circuit, and pinpoints the paradox of Zinn's authoritarian attitude to his Sophoclean inspirations. Building on Plato's argument in *Laws* about the dilemmas of democracy, and on the idea (or ideal) of the theater as a place for deliberation and autonomy, Monot identifies the conceptual contradictions of much post-financial crisis political theater. Turning away from a dramaturgy of political discourse and towards a dramaturgy of communal reflection based on oral history and the interweaving of personal narratives, Diana Benea then seeks to define the aesthetics of Ping Chong + Company's *Generation NYZ*. Relying on the study of interviews, archives, audience questionnaires and talkbacks, Benea delineates the collaborative processes of community-based theater, from conception to reception, as a civil act of recollecting, voicing, and speaking *with*. Another kind of collaboration, this time between two artists, is explored by Sarah Sigal as she dissects the interlacing of text, dance, music and design in Paula Vogel and Rebecca Taichman's *Indecent*, which foregrounds the staging of queer stories even as it foreshadows worrying parallels between past tragedies and present policies. Sigal analyzes the play's fragmented aesthetics as a dramaturgy of memory meant to affectively engage the audience, in a gesture that is "at once an act of commemoration, wounding and remembrance." The final essay of the section is also an invitation to further important reflection, as Mary Anderson, Billicia Hines and Richard Haley examine the reverberations of Dominique Morisseau's *Detroit '67* on stage, both at the time of its site-specific anniversary performance in 2017, and in the time that has passed since, bringing tragically renewed attention to violence against black bodies. Digging into the apparently conventional form of Morisseau's play, the authors use theories of performativity, acoustic space and embodied philosophy to show that the experience of the performance questions the location of shame, disrupts our expectations of history, and in the end, opens up a space for liberation.

The chapters of this volume collectively work to offer a prismatic view of a number of arresting tendencies and currents in American theater throughout the opening decades of the 21st century. They also seek to participate in a broader conversation about contemporary dramaturgies, entering into dialogue with publications on other ongoing developments—such as the digital "survival" of the stage during the coronavirus pandemic—, thus continuing the vigorous and necessary exploration of

an art which “traffics in presence”¹¹ (in the words of Sarah Ruhl), while being rooted in a movable present, as Hallie Flanagan reminds us:

New theaters
American theaters
Theaters in the making
Theaters from the past
Of the present
Pointing to the future.¹²

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12 Hallie Flanagan, “The Florida Wheel” [first published in 1940], reproduced in Todd London (ed.), *An Ideal Theatre*, New York, TCG, 2013, p. 529.

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