

***The Grammar of Politics and Performance* edited by Shirin M Rai and Janelle Reinelt**

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On the seventeenth floor of The Shard, I meditated on how the celebratory book launch of *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* might square with the environs of one the most emblematically corporatized and security-ridden places in the UK. Emblazoned on a central wall of the University of Warwick's newly acquired London satellite campus was an iconic image of Shakespeare communicating the site's relationship to theatre, but to what extent, I was unsure. The launch of Shirin M. Rai and Janelle Reinelt's edited volume is part of Routledge's Interventions series, and accordingly featured an interdisciplinary panel of commentators who posed critical questions about the book's central provocation: how can the interrelatedness of politics and performance be expanded on in academic scholarship? Written by scholars from politics and performance, the volume points readers to what Rai and Reinelt argue are interdisciplinary methods that could better ground and unite critical discourse.

In the introduction, Rai and Reinelt highlight 'the backdrop of contemporary disillusionment with political processes' and critique 'those scholars who are inclined to give up on some major categories of political struggles such as interests, representation, identity and redistribution' (p. 1). They cast doubt on scholarship of the last two decades that over privilege 'post-political' neoliberal subjectivities at risk of forsaking material conditions and collective identities. Citing Nancy Fraser's sceptical attacks on feminism, Rai and Reinelt accuse this school of thought of 'thow[ing] the baby out with the bathwater' (p. 9). This shot across the bows (aimed at work by several scholars, including Alan Read, Mathew Causey, and Fintan Walsh) is a phrase Reinelt used as early as 2008 about the abandonment of the term *political* in theatre discourse championed by the likes of Read and Baz Kershaw.<sup>1</sup>

In this volume, however, Rai and Reinelt develop a debate not on terminology but on how political argumentation and analytic praxis could be reappraised and reimagined. Noting the importance of identitarian collectives in civil rights movements, Rai and Reinelt claim their project aims to 'bring practical political processes back into theatre and performance studies' (p. 1). They underline the need to establish a set of durable but flexible principles, or a grammar, that 'can anchor interdisciplinary investigations' (p. 4). In doing so, Reinelt

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<sup>1</sup> Janelle G. Reinelt, 'What Is Political Theatre Today?', Society for Theatre Research, Wickham Lecture, Bristol University, 2008.

writes, a pluralistic space of both aesthetics and politics can help 'exercise the common grammar that allows the theatre and politics to mutually articulate democratic possibilities' (p. 45). Whether or not Rai and Reinelt's project will succeed in achieving the 'ambition to bring about a paradigm change' (p. i), the volume (nurtured within Warwick's Performance and Politics Network) will surely attract the interests of scholars across many fields. Rai and Reinelt identify three dominant sets of grammar that emerge in the volume and that can be briefly summarized here as: (1) representational dynamics between individuals, institutions, and audiences; (2) regimes of appearance in relation to power; and, (3) legibility of (il)legitimate identities. The following chapters trace and elaborate on these grammars, some in clearer ways than others. Exceptional examples where performance frameworks are elucidated as part and parcel of political systems include John Parkinson's 'Performing democracy: roles, stages, scripts', Rai's 'Performance and politics: ceremony and ritual in Parliament', and Reinelt's 'At the crossroads of citizenship'. These three chapters tie together well in how they articulate conditions of democratic communication as sets of performative processes located within particular platforms of action and reaction, or 'worksites of citizenship', to use Reinelt's phrase (45).

As editors, Rai and Reinelt give strong attention to outdoor performance practices by featuring still walkers on the book cover and including excellent chapters on street theatre (Susan Haedicke), the occupy movement (Sophie Nield), and everyday forms of public resistance in Sarajevo (Silvija Jestrovic). Exploring the potential impacts of public performance, these chapters critically address issues in line with recent debates about the 'public sphere', handy compliments to books such as Christopher Balme's (2014) *The Theatrical Public Sphere*. Perhaps most evocative are Lisa Fitzpatrick's and James Harding's chapters incisively addressing forms of state violence and control through compelling performance accounts and historical investigations. Fitzpatrick offers a powerful inquiry into how Anu Productions' *Laundry*, an 'archaeological performance' about widespread incarceration of Irish pregnant women, inculcated audiences into 'the complicity of the general population and the attitudes to women and sexuality that motivated this violence' (p. 77). Harding's essay draws upon John Osborne's *A Patriot for Me* (1966) to illuminate connections between performance grammars, governmental secrecy, and lying to "those who have no right to know" (p. 199). A few chapters, however, do not demonstrate the same level of excellence when combining theory and performance. These include chapters with political or rhetorical frameworks that seem disjointed from the disciplinary dialogues evoked so eloquently elsewhere.

Achieving a clear coherence among chapters from scholars across fields and institutions may not have been the goal of this project, but rather to set the challenge to building more disciplinary bridges. In this and many other respects, the volume represents a

remarkable resource for theatre and performance scholars, and I imagine for political scholars interested in, as Rai and Reinelt suggest, performance beyond the level of metaphor and as a 'set of behavioural practices' intrinsic to political transactions (p. 1). As conditions of increased precarity and cycles of popular unrest continue as hallmarks of the early twenty-first century, ideas about politics and performance are necessarily being reformulated. Where Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013) provides a reflective dialogue about systems of sovereignty, subjectivity, and recognition, Rai and Reinelt offer a refreshingly grounded set of essays that tie these issues back to the bodies, communities, and actions from which they arise. The grammars of performance and politics developed in the volume provide helpful models worthy of further application and testing, perhaps even to an analysis of the cultural politics of Shakespeare in the Shard.

This significant contribution will be of interest to scholars and practitioners across disciplines; Rai and Reinelt propose a new paradigm and deliver several superb chapters that stand on their own but that also work collectively as a notable interdisciplinary project investigating the value and legibility of politics in performance and vice versa.