Women in Asian Performance: Aesthetics and Politics

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this chapter recognises that since the 2000s Indigenous artists increasingly create performance work aimed at Aboriginal audiences without attempting to translate Indigenous culture or language to non-Indigenous audiences. These works significantly ‘resist the notion that Indigenous performance should advance “authentic” or “positive” depictions of Aboriginal people and culture’ (87). As Constantina Bush, King ‘refuses to assimilate to dominant culture by behaving as a “Good Indigenous Citizen”’ and at the same time rejects the idea that Indigenous people should act as social activists’ (102). This influential work opens up a space within which Australian Aboriginal identity can usefully be re-thought in relation to the context of queer feminism.

The book contributes significantly to the existing fields of theatre, performance studies, and queer and feminist theory by bringing together a rich theoretical context and a detailed and impassioned account of performances that audiences outside of Australia may not have had a chance to experience. This discussion is framed by contemporary politics in Australia, which persistently brings to the foreground sexism, homophobia, racism, and inequality. In this particularly troubled moment in time, after Donald Trump’s victory and the Brexit vote, this book brings a renewed faith in the ways in which theatre and performance studies can contribute towards change.

Although French clearly articulates how this work has been significant in rethinking the current moment in Australia, it would be helpful if the author had explained more robustly what new strategies this work may propose for the field beyond Australia. According to Elisabeth Grosz,

> a feminist text must not only be critical of or a challenge to the patriarchal norms governing it; it must also help, in whatever way, to facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces – new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms – that contest the limits of and constraints currently at work in the regulation of textual production and reception.\(^1\)

**Staging Queer Feminisms** achieves this to an extent, but it could move even further to suggest more explicitly what strategies and forms the performances discussed make possible for the rest of the world. This is a rich, thoughtful, and concise consideration of the significance of queer feminisms in Australia, which is both enjoyable and urgent: it is an important book about and for difficult times.

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### Women in Asian Performance: Aesthetics and Politics edited by Arya Madhavan


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In her introduction, Arya Madhavan makes a case for the value of cultural specificity in studying the position of women in Asian performance, as a counter to broadly sweeping views that often hinge on Western feminism as something universally applicable. She argues against Sue-Ellen Case’s assertion that ‘initial observations about the history of theatre noted the absence of women within the tradition’, noting that this claim can be countered by an examination of various Asian performance practices (2). Women have not, she states, been absent from theatrical and performance traditions in Asia. The essays that Madhavan has gathered here make it clear that female bodies and voices have long been present in many Asian performances, in one way or another. However, the story of presence versus absence does not lead to any triumphal upholding of Asian performance as an empowering, representative space for women. Rather, Madhavan points to the erasure of women from the performance space as a deliberate, political act that ensures male dominance of the theatre, and that also reflects male dominance in society.

The 13 chapters in this book each approach a specific Asian performance mode: from ancient forms such as Noh or _kutiyattam_, to contemporary forms such as tango classes in Singapore and theatre by British Asian women. There is no attempt necessarily to draw connections between these various forms, although sometimes connections and parallels do appear. Rather, the authors are careful to root their discussions in a high level of cultural specificity, examining how the cultural and religious frameworks of the societies addressed have given rise to particular responses to (and from) female performers and producers. Madhavan has divided the book into three sections: ‘Erasure’, which examines ways in which women have been erased from performances; ‘Intervention’, which looks at

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examples of how female practitioners attempt to intervene in this very male narrative; and ‘Reconstruction’, which gives examples of how the female presence on stage might be recast or renegotiated.

A valuable aspect of the essays in this volume is that they are written with a strong ethnographic bent, which supports the project of examining the performance modes in a culturally specific, non-homogenising way. Certainly at the most basic level, the book provides a great deal of information on how particular performances are created, what the performance training involves, and so on. We do, however, still notice certain resonances between the various performance modes, which hint at overarchingly similar ways of viewing and treating women. One of the most compelling issues that several of the authors refer to is the female body itself. Kathy Foley, in her chapter on women in Sundanese performance, notes that ‘[f]emale forms link to fertility/the fun of the Sundanese rice harvest and courtship. Male forms relate to power and exorcistic potential’ (16). The male body, then, has a sacred function that the female body lacks; instead, the female body is tied to reproduction as its ultimate purpose. Madhavan’s essay on female kathakali notes that a leading teacher of the form feels that ‘[t]raining women is not worth the investment because of their brief performing careers’, the implication being that female performers will fall back into their natural domestic roles as wives and mothers (84). Foley notes that the only female dalang (puppeteer) she knew of was considered a lesbian and was therefore ‘not considered […] a normative woman’ by the majority of Sundanese society, including other (male) dalang (16). The normativity of women whose bodies do what they are supposed to do is ironically what prohibits them from many performance modes: Margaret Coldiron notes that ‘in north Bali, gambuh is performed only by men because it is regarded as immensely sacred. Women are considered impure because of their capacity for menstruation’ (129).

Some of the essays refer to the erasure of women’s portrayals of male bodies: as Xing Fan points out, jingju actresses in early twentieth-century Shanghai were known as excellent performers in both female and ‘larger-than-life male roles, martial male roles, and even as the Monkey King’ (68). Madhavan describes female kathakali practitioner Parvathy Menon, noting that it is hard to tell if it is a male or female performer under the costume. Yet a continuing theme in most of these essays is the strongly held belief that women just cannot play men.

The essays in this volume show a strong awareness of the complexities of the body, male or female. In parts of Asia, the female body is often considered impure, particularly because of menstruation. In Hinduism, for example, menstruating women can be ritually barred from many places and occasions; some Buddhists believe that menstrual blood can attract ghosts. Therefore a man who performs the female body without the attendant impurity is, apparently, better. A woman is considered too weak to properly reproduce male movements and voices, yet when a man successfully reproduces the female body, he is not seen as correspondingly weak. Siyuan Liu states that for those who are against women taking on female roles, the ‘final argument […] is that through a combination of close observation and artistic transformation a man can be more capable of performing ideal womanhood’ (104). The important point to note here is that they are required to perform ‘ideal’ womanhood, in itself a patriarchal construct, in this case supported by cultural elements such as performance.

What this volume does successfully is to counter the narrative of weak, impure female bodies by first exposing the roots of that narrative in patriarchal social structures, and then offering a different narrative that highlights women’s long-established presence in the world of performance, as well as their more contemporary interventions into the patriarchal structures. It offers a view of Asian theatre that, importantly, does not essentialise Asian-ness.

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