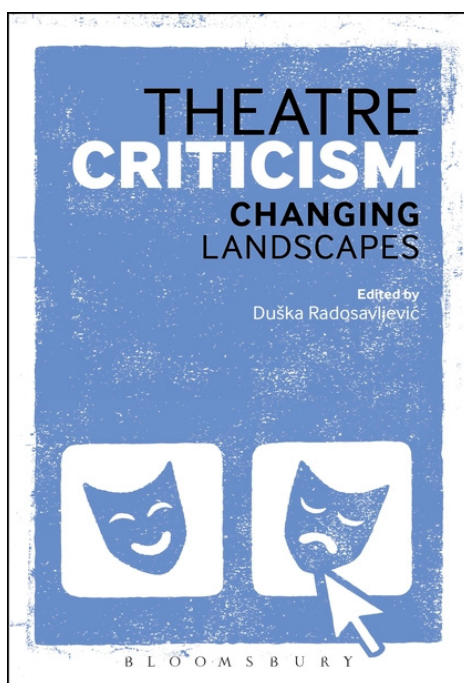


Surviving Change. On the Metamorphoses of Theatre Criticism

Book review: Duška Radosavljević (Ed.) *Theatre Criticism. Changing Landscapes*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016



Nowadays, when thinking about the practice of theatre criticism, one tends to unknowingly equate it with the ownership of an inherited title, like that of a crown prince in a newly proclaimed republic. Both the unfortunate former future monarch and the critic hold a certain distinction, seeming unapproachable by the commoners, but not quite finding their place in the modern world. A regular theatregoer finds it just as hard to clearly define the role of the professional reviewer as any republican would to yield to the authority of a crownless king. Thus, is a shift of paradigm likely to occur? Can theatre criticism adjust to the ever-changing landscapes of theatre and, even more importantly, journalism? As it happens, the change is already taking place, right before our

eyes, and it already constitutes a full-blown phenomenon, thoroughly examined in a comprehensive new book edited by Duška Radosavljević: *Theatre Criticism. Changing Landscapes*, published by Bloomsbury in 2016.

Even though the topic might seem impossible to tackle outside the academic realm, this volume manages remarkably well to balance a scientific, well-documented approach with a laid-back attitude from its contributors, making it easy to read even by those completely uninvolved in the theatre industry. One of its many strengths lays in the fact that all authors aim to pose questions about their profession, expressing their own curiosity and offering not only solid bits of research for answers, but also part of their life-long experiences as critics. Moreover, none of the essays are pedantic and none claim to hold the definitive truth. In a laudable collective effort, professionals from varied cultural backgrounds have gathered (or have been gathered by the editor) in order to better understand their own craft. This, in itself, is proof enough that theatre criticism has not yet died.

At a first glance, one can't help but notice how well-thought-out the book's structure is, adding clarity and unity to otherwise (apparently) thematically disparate texts, and thus making it an enjoyable read for anyone interested not only in theatre criticism per se, but also in media history or, more precisely, in history of ideas at large. Therefore, the four parts are, in order: „Contexts and Histories of Theatre Criticism“, „Critics' Voices“, „Changing Forms and Functions of Criticism“ and, last but not least, „Samples of Critical Practice“.

Duška Radosavljević's introduction serves as more than a simple justification of the decisions she had to make as an editor, regarding, of course, the articles that were eligible for publishing, the necessary final cuts, and the choice of a title. In her deep-laid foreword, the author proceeds to draw a very elaborate picture of the evolution of theatre criticism in the last decades, also underlining a series of questions, or more accurately, personal/professional curiosities regarding the state of the aforementioned profession in our digitalized world. Her analysis encompasses various forms of criticism, adapted, of course, to just as many platforms, from academic publications to blogs, the main objective being that of stirring the public's interest in this overlooked field and, also, inciting the actual critics to start a real debate about their status in the contemporary theatre world. Actually, if we take a look at the passionate essays sent to her by professionals from different sides of the globe (Great Britain, Western and Eastern Europe, the United States, Canada and so on), we are entitled to conclude that a first crucial step was made in establishing the long-awaited dialogue.

The first part of the volume deals with the historical evolution of theatre criticism, both in content and form, set against various cultural and geographical backgrounds. As a matter of fact, it is quite fascinating how different, yet remarkably similar the texts included in this section are.

While George Hunka remarks, in the first chapter, the lack of substance (or, the way he puts it, the „triumph of style over substance”) in American drama reviews, from 1945 until today, Latvian critic Valda Čakare analyzes the way critical discourse is highly altered by the socio-political and personal context in which the critic/reviewer was brought up. What makes her demonstration especially interesting is the way she manages to find striking connections between Soviet drama reviews, heavily politicized, and contemporary critical texts, more subtly influenced by the current state of affairs in Latvia. Unknowingly, Savas Patsalidis has an identical starting point for his study of Greek criticism in the light of the economic crisis. Kristina Matvienko’s conclusions about the Russian school of theatre criticism, likewise viewed in its historical evolution, reflect a polarized guild, oftentimes in the disservice of contemporary and experimental theatre itself.

Margherita Laera, on the other hand, presents the „get-your-hands-dirty” form of criticism, patented in Italy, which involves a militant approach and even engaging in the making of the production; the author questions, and rightly so, the deontology of the movement nowadays, enunciating another one of the profession’s current dilemmas: how involved should a critic actually get?

Vasco Boenisch has quite a different approach when discussing German criticism, specifically taking into account the public’s expectations and what the readers wish to find in a review. His survey of German theatregoers is, from this point of view, quite compelling. Andrew Haydon concludes the section with a paper on online criticism in Great Britain, showing how, in different stages, the displacement of critical discourse from the printed media to the Internet has affected critical thinking itself, changing established hierarchies and challenging authority.

The second part of the book is based on an imagological endeavor, namely that of showing snapshots of today’s theatre critic, as seen through the eyes of artists, art lovers, other critics etc. This section also attempts to define the various roles of criticism in the modern society. Mark Fisher’s essay is quite exemplary, as the author makes an inventory of various artistic representations of theatre critics, delivering a study that is both irresistibly funny and infuriating for those in the profession. Mark Brown tries to establish the state and mission of criticism nowadays, referring to the apparently never-ending dispute between print and online mediums, and arguing that, at its core, professional criticism serves the same purpose as always, albeit in an ever-changing context. Jill Dolan’s text focuses on the author’s experience with the feminist approach in writing about theatre, but also with keeping a blog (www.feministspectator.princeton.edu).

Maddy Costa contributes with a valuable piece about „embedded criticism“, which, like the „get-your-hands-dirty“ method, entails being present for the making of a production and writing about the process, not just the final result.

The third section concentrates on new and unconventional forms of criticism, that challenge traditional views of the profession. Diana Damian Martin makes her case for criticism as a political event, offering a more philosophical approach towards the embedding (or the submergence) of the reviewer in the performance he/she witnesses. In the next chapter, Matthew Reason presents a new form of critical discourse: that which is carried on forums, by critics, spectators and theatre-makers, in a completely non-hierarchic medium and often (when it comes to the non-professionals) in a very unstructured and unfinished manner. Funnily enough, Michelle MacArthur’s piece complements the aforementioned one, also tackling criticism that comes into being on forum threads and social media. Nataša Govedić and William McEvoy both advocate for a form of criticism that transcends the conventionality of the written, purely theoretical, text, transgressing into the artistic realm.

The final section of the book offers four brilliantly selected examples of unconventional critical discourse, most of them from the internet and all illustrating how art and theory can actually merge into a new and innovative form of creative criticism. On a final note, one might say that Duška Radosavljević’s attempt to redefine the place theatre criticism holds in this day and age is successful not because of the answers the book offers, not even thanks to the variety of research it comprises, but because it challenges readers to ask new questions and start new polemics, to come to an agreement or to violently disagree with their peers. And this is, after all, what critical thinking is all about.

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