

***Transfigured Stages: Major Practitioners and Theatre Aesthetics in Australia,*  
by Margaret Hamilton (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2011)**

By Denise Varney

This book, which is Volume 14 in Rodopi's Australian Playwrights Series, offers an account of the performative turn in Australia, or to be more precise, Sydney, in the 1980s and 90s. Turning away from playwrights, the book argues that the stage was in that moment 'transfigured' by radical new aesthetic practices. With chapters devoted to Open City, The Sydney Front and The Aboriginal Actors Company, whose work at the Performance Space and other venues intrigued, confronted and confused audiences, author Margaret Hamilton makes the case that the performative turn is best articulated through Hans-Thiess Lehmann's concept of postdramatic theatre, adapted to the circumstances and intentions of local artists, but connected to international movements as well. Outside Sydney, Hamilton finds Melbourne-based writer-director Jenny Kemp exemplifying the new performance-oriented artist whose explorations of the visual-textual nexus are highly suggestive of Lehmann's 'landscape play' (115). Also in Melbourne, Anthill Theatre's 1982 presentation of Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* is the occasion for a discussion of Müller's postdramatic theatre and its influence on the local scene.

Hamilton has successfully turned her PhD thesis, which she completed at the University of Wollongong, into an important contribution to Australian scholarship on what in retrospect was a short but intensive period of innovation and change in Australian theatre and performance. She was mentored as a graduate student by Lehmann, and his intellectual influence is evident throughout.

The discussion of local performance is enriched by Hamilton's access to primary materials, manuscripts and videos held by key artists from Open City and The Sydney Front. Andrea Aloise, John Baylis, Virginia Baxter, Keith Gallasch, Clare Grant, Nigel Kellaway and Chris Ryan have also talked to Hamilton about the work and the period. Their reflections offer critical insights into the artistic influences on the work, its reception and the material conditions of radicalising performance in the Australian cultural context of the 1980s and 90s.

The commitment of the artists to the work ought not to be undervalued. Readers will squirm at the thought of The Sydney Front performing at London's Riverside Studios instead of the ICA where they would have evaded the shock horror of the tabloid press. With no Federal or State funding, Baylis is quoted as claiming he earned a mere \$30,000 for seven years work with the Sydney Front. These financial pressures are cited as a contributing factor in the premature demise of the companies and leads Hamilton to the question of arts policy and the parlous state of funding for artists who, in opening up new areas of practice, fall outside the funding frameworks.

Text-based theatre inevitably becomes something of a scapegoat throughout the book, consuming subsidies, monopolising critical attention and dominating the

repertoire of theatre companies like an over-fed aristocracy. In this light, Hamilton's examination of the ways in which the conventions of dramatic theatre – its preference for the singular, complete text over textual fragments, its efforts to realise a fictional stage world and the emphasis on the actor/character over performer – are deconstructed by energies that range from the intellectual and political to the visceral, libidinal and the unconscious. The book gives a clear preference for the artistic and philosophical integrity of the postdramatic movement.

Chapters on *Open City* and *The Sydney Front* draw brilliantly on primary sources to offer readers detailed descriptions of works that few have seen and that appeared and disappeared in the space of a few short years. These chapters are the highlight of the book and show Hamilton's careful and considered analytical approach in its best light. Contrasting aesthetics that are characterized as 'the politics of the everyday' for *Open City* and 'grotesque realism' for the *Sydney Front* are shown to tear away the artifice of dramatic theatre and its exhausted aesthetics. Both chapters index performance analysis to artists' commentaries from the 1980s and their recent reflections offering fascinating updates on the changing significance of the work. Gallasch, for instance, notes *Open City's* preoccupation with implicating the audience in performance in a way that foreshadows the growth of interactivity across the media today. On the other hand, Baylis's 1986 quip that 'the balls had gone of Avant Garde theatre' does not stand the test of time and sits at odds with the radical contribution of the female members of the company.

*Open City's* pieces, including *Photoplay* and *Tokyo Two*, are shown to be hospitable to Hamilton's use of poststructuralist discourses (Benjamin, Kristeva) to flesh out the role of constitutive elements such as authenticity, presence, the materiality of language and the deconstruction of the stability of the signifier. Yet her representation of *Open City* suggests, without ever stating it, that even as they operated within the postdramatic paradigm, which is aligned with postmodern culture, they also functioned within a modernist framework of aesthetic innovation that relies on a sophisticated theoretical framework. This aspect of *Open City* suggests a further discussion that might productively follow about modernity and modernism. The *Sydney Front*, on the other hand, engages with the archaic and the postmodern. Hamilton locates their extreme aesthetics in Bakhtinian carnival, in Artaudian cruelty and more recently, Chiara Guidi's account of Romeo Castellucci's *Tragedia Endogonida* series.

The great value of these two opening chapters is the detailed descriptions of performances including *Open City's Photoplay*, an experimental slide show, that coincided with the rise of memory studies on the one hand and fluid, contingent identity on the other. The description of *The Pornography of Performance* manages to remediate the performance for readers and theorise its place in recent history leaving many opportunities for further critical evaluation and research. One wonders, for example, about the warnings that our contemporary risk averse culture would demand of these performances and, further, whether spectators would be either as docile or intrigued in the era of mass popular pornography.

At the Performance Space, the grotesquery with which the Sydney Front confronted its audiences was in the final analysis an all white affair. Chapter Four offers an account of the arrival of an Indigenous Avant Garde led by writer and activist Mudrooroo whose adaptation of Heiner Müller's East German political allegory, *The Commission*, which deals with themes of betrayal and treason in an 18<sup>th</sup> century British colony, resonated with the Australian context. The adaptation titled, *The Aboriginal Protestors Confront the Declaration of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with the Production of 'The Commission' by Heiner Müller*, and directed by Noel Tovey, was, as Hamilton notes 'an extraordinary, if not improbable, project' (199) that drew on European and local influences and source material. Resident German academic Gerhard Fischer was an instigator of the Mudrooroo-Müller project and has also produced a casebook from which Hamilton draws material. Conceived in 1987 and given a full production at the Performance Space in 1996, Hamilton's account delves into the ways in which the performance also brought local cultural and artistic differences to the surface especially among the writers and directors Mudrooroo, the late Bryon Styron and Noel Tovey.

Chapter Five begins with a reference to the first Australian production of *Hamletmachine* but sadly does not provide the detailed account of the performance that we enjoyed in earlier chapters. The discussion hinges on Müller's contribution to the postdramatic form and his local influence. This includes the chapter on Jenny Kemp whose play texts offer a model of how the fictional text might endure in the level playing field of postdramatic theatre. This chapter, which includes a discussion of *Kitten*, Kemp's latest piece at the time of book's writing, incorporates her work into the postdramatic paradigm. In doing so, Hamilton shores up Kemp's position as a major reference point for scholarly work and one of the most important and enduring artists in Australian theatre.

Having used the term 'theatre' in this context, the final chapter deals with the problem of the lexicon and the vacillating preferences between 'theatre' and 'performance' while the question of new media performance hovers in the background. Having suggested the strength of the book is embedded in its discussion of Open City and The Sydney Front, there is a sense in which the book provides a platform for a deeper investigation into the socio-cultural and political moment that the works mark out for us. The reverberations of postdramatic form in the Australian context gesture towards the greater fluidity of the culture and expose reactionary forces. Hamilton's argument that the term postdramatic helps give visibility to an under-resourced experimental sector is spot on, but it is also the case that radical performance has an ambivalent relationship to visibility and much to gain from its underground location. These points aside, Hamilton has written an engaging and intellectually important book about radical performance in Australia.

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