

Book Review*Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre*

By Joanne Tompkins (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006)

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Joanne Tompkins has an encyclopaedic knowledge of Australian playwriting of the last forty years or so and she is a subtle and attentive reader of play texts. Her book, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* provides illuminating analyses of a wide range of Australian plays written since the second world war, situating them in relation to issues concerned with space and place that have come to the fore in Australian political thinking over the same period. The book makes fascinating reading but performance specialists should be warned that, although the title refers to Australian theatre, its focus is in fact Australian playwriting, and Tompkins does not consider the plays in performance apart from an occasional remark concerning the set design for a particular production. This is slightly surprising given her reiterated argument that the spatial reality of performance enhances the productive impact of theatre, ensuring that theatre audiences are continually encouraged to compare the 'imagined worlds on stage [...] with the 'real' world outside the venue' (12). I found myself longing for information about the production history of these plays, about the ways audiences had in fact responded, about different political analyses that could be seen to emerge from different productions at different times or in different places. Longing, in a word, for evidence that the social and political efficacy she claims for theatre is anything other than wishful thinking.

The book begins with a brief rundown of spatial theories that have contributed to the conceptual framework she will apply to her corpus of play texts in subsequent chapters. These include Henri Lefebvre's three interrelated components (spatial practice, representations of space and representational space) that he sees as functioning in the social construction of space, Una Chaudhuri's concepts of geopathology and 'polytopianism', Gearóid O Tuathail's notion of geography as a contest between ways of envisioning the world, Elin Diamond's perception of the ways in which contemporary playwriting unmake mimesis, Gelder and Jacobs' adaptation of Freud's idea of the uncanny, and Paul Carter's theory of methexis which 'requires participation with, rather than representation of, the

land' (10). Her description of these theoretical concepts and positions is admirably clear and concise.

The next chapter, entitled 'Mapping Australian Space in Theatre', provides historical background information about European settlement/occupation of the continent, a discussion of the notion of 'terra nullius', and exploration of the ways in which place is represented in a wide range of Australian plays dating from the 1920s to the present day. The major point of the chapter is to demonstrate how anxieties concerning the dispossession of the Aboriginal people and the difficulties involved in settling in land so alien to the European experience function as recurring themes in Australian plays, creating absences in relation to the landscape that work to unsettle identity at both individual and national levels. Tompkins uses a number of generic categories ('beach' plays, 'bush' plays, 'urban' plays), in her attempt to demonstrate the ways in which 'the landscape—defined by its very unfamiliarity to early settlers and the meteorological challenges of fires, floods and droughts—has figured in Australian cultural representation' (28). The plays mentioned in this chapter (there are 18 in a chapter just over 20 pages long) are not subjected to detailed analysis but briefly described for the light they shed on her argument that the spatial anxieties present in 19th century cultural representations are still present, albeit in a slightly different form, in the contemporary period.

While cultural theorists may speak of the naïve spatial certainties that dominate the geographical imaginary of many Australians, Tompkins argues that it is 'the *uncertainties* of Australian spatiality that dominate on the stage' [her emphasis] (42). As she sees it, the focus of anxiety may have shifted from the difficulties of settling in an alien environment to the problems of disremembering what this settling process entailed for those who were thereby unsettled, but the structures of uncertainty persist. This is a provocative thesis and it calls for a deeper analysis of the works that have given rise to it than can be provided in such a brief chapter. To talk of theatre resisting the practice of disremembering (20) even when the selected works seem to prove the point raises questions about historicity: has theatre always resisted, has theatre not been part of the culture of forgetfulness that historians and cultural theorists are now criticising? And if not, why not?

In the following three chapters, which make up the bulk of the book, Tompkins provides a more detailed analysis of attitudes to space and place that emerge in a large number of Australian plays written since 1979. The plays are grouped around three significant spatial tropes, or *topoi*, to use her own term: monuments (and associated counter monuments), contamination, and borders. The plays selected for discussion in these chapters each make use of the trope in question as a more or less central element in the presentation of their characters' experience of place and, taken together, they constitute an illuminating cross-section of Australian spatial anxieties and enable her to discuss 'distinctive Freudian repressions in Australian spatial culture' (16).

The monuments chapter is the longest of the three and groups the plays being analysed into three categories, those dealing with war (Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age* and Duong Le Quy's *Meat Party*), responding to the Bicentennial (Michael Gow's *1841*, Sarah Cathcart

& Andrea Lemon's *The Serpent's Fall*, Jack Davis's *Barungin*, Nowra's *Capricornia* and Stephen Sewell's *Hate*), or providing Aboriginal perspectives (Bob Maza's *The Keepers*, Lawford, Chaplin & Archer's *Ningali*, and Enoch & Mailman's *The 7 Stages of Grieving*). This chapter also contains a discussion of Janis Balodis's *The Ghosts Trilogy*, a work that has played a central role in Tompkins' elaboration of the counter monumentalising functions theatre makes possible. She draws on European ideas of the counter monument, such as the disappearing Holocaust memorial designed by Jochen and Esther Gerz, or Rachel Whiteread's sculptures that empty 'meaning from a landscape or place, encouraging observers to replace it with different, more relevant meanings that force them to view the landscape differently' (48). In her analysis of her chosen plays, Tompkins interprets the term monument broadly, including literal monuments (statues, graves, the trees 'marked' by Ludwig Leichhardt during his doomed journeys to the interior), as well as more metaphorical ways of marking place such as the Bicentennial itself, and even a work such as *Homeland* performed by physical theatre group Legs on the Wall on a monument (the 26-storey AMP building in Sydney). What she is interested in is the ways in which the monuments that mark the official history of the nation can be undone, bringing to the fore the 'unsettlement and anxiety that pervade Australia's cultural memory' (85).

Chapter 3 takes the trope of contamination both literally and metaphorically. The first section discusses recent plays dealing with the nuclear tests at Maralinga that have literally contaminated the land: Nowra's *Sunrise*, Balodis's *Heart for the Future*, Cathcart & Lemon's *Tiger Country*, and Rankin & Jamieson's *Career Highlights of the Mamu*. The second section discusses plays written in response to the government orchestrated panic about invasion and control of the national territory that has seen asylum seekers cast as potential contaminants from which the legitimate population needs to be quarantined. Plays dealt with in this section include Sidetrack Theatre's *Citizen X*, Linda Jaivin's *Halal-el-Mashakel*, Melbourne Workers' Theatre's *The Waiting Room*, Michael Gurr's *Something to Declare*, Al-Quady's *Nothing but Nothing*, Ben Ellis's *These People* and Christine Evans's *Slow Falling Bird*. She uses Kevin Hetherington's elaboration of Foucault's notion of heterotopia and the gulf that has been opened between eu-topia (good place) and ou-topia (non place), in order to illuminate 'Australian response[s] to spatiality, to unsettlement, and to the nation's inability to easily accommodate polytopic layering of spaces' (126) and its concomitant susceptibility to scare mongering of the sort seen in the 2002 election campaign.

Chapters 2 and 3 are named simply for the trope through which she has chosen to discuss the selected corpus of plays, 'Monuments' and 'Contamination'. In the final chapter, the trope is glossed as 'The Borders of Identity' which indicates that her focus here is not with borders as such but with the ways in which borders figure in the construction of national and individual identity. She uses metaphorical rather than geographical space to organise her chosen material in this chapter and justifies this choice with the observation that metaphoric places are 'as mappable on stage as any geographical coordinates' (128) since in the theatre they must occupy literal space. Under the sub-heading of 'Psychic Places' she discusses Jenny Kemp's *Still Angela* and Richard Frankland's *Conversations with the Dead*, and under 'Mythic Places' she deals with Bea Christian's *Blue Murder* and Stephen

Sewell's *Myth Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*. The chapter also includes a section entitled 'Staging the Geographies of Identity' discussing theatre works that deal with the migrant experience and the ways in which location impinges on the construction of individual subjectivities. Works discussed here include Hazimanolis & Cornelius's *Home of a Stranger*, William Yang's *Sadness* and Noelle Janaczewska's *Songket*.

It is evident from this account that Joanne Tompkins has dealt with an impressive range of material. Equally impressive is the lucidity and concision with which she perceives and describes key features of the chosen works in order to present a coherent argument about the spatial anxieties that haunt present day Australia and the positive role she thinks can be played by theatre works in providing 'a polytopic reinterpretation of history, spatiality, and subjectivity,' thus contributing 'to a more productive future' (165). The range of works and the concision do, however, have a downside in that Tompkins does not always manage to avoid the suggestion of reductionism in her treatment of certain plays and of the theories she deploys to discuss them. This is perhaps because the book is so short: 167 pages excluding notes and bibliography. I would have liked it to be at least a hundred pages longer as this seems to me more what would be required in order to do justice to the topic. Not only do individual plays require more extensive analysis but much more information is needed concerning staging and reception over the thirty-year period to justify the optimistic claims made in the conclusion.

Notwithstanding this criticism, it must be said that the book provides a fascinating snapshot of the work of Australian playwrights over the last thirty years as well as shining a powerful light on the unsettled and unsettling terrain occupied by autochtones and incomers alike in contemporary Australia. If Palgrave Macmillan bring out a second edition, however, I hope that they will do something about the careless proof reading (e.g. 'timelines' instead of 'timeliness' on p.127 and many other errors) which must cause acute distress to an author who is renowned for her editorial precision and attention to detail.

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Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:

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