

Book Review

Performance Histories

by Bonnie Marranca (New York: PAJ Publications, 2008)

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In early 2000, a gallery in New York City exhibited photographs of lynchings that occurred in America's South and Midwest in the first half of the twentieth century. They not only depicted the deaths themselves, but also the crowds who watched these 'spectacles' and later bought postcards of the events to send home and keep as souvenirs. Several years earlier, a different NYC gallery displayed photos taken by the feminist artist Hannah Wilke documenting her own terminal cancer. She had died the year before. Photos exposed her body ravaged by chemotherapy.

Over several pages in her latest book, *Performance Histories*, writer and scholar Bonnie Marranca describes these shows – as well as the 'performance' documenting the assisted suicide of an artist, and a video created with the participation of terminally ill people – and she points out that ethics surrounding so-called 'victim art' might be clear-cut in some cases but not others. She asks: 'When does a performance become unwatchable? What will we refuse to look at? [...] Performance has gone to places I never could have imagined when I started thinking about it as a graduate student' (10-11). Marranca's writing style and approach often involves a stitching together of fine observation with questions about the past and ponderings about the direction in which artists – and society – are headed. It is one that has earned her a reputation as one of America's best essayists on performance and the arts.

Performance Histories is a collection of essays, lectures and interviews written by Marranca mostly since her 1996 publication *Ecologies of Theatre*. Many of them are drawn from *Performing Arts Journal* (renamed *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* in 1998) of which she is co-founder and publisher. The collection is divided into four sections and includes 17 pieces. In 'Performance, A Personal History', Marranca considers the relationship between art and life; in 'Hymns of Repetition' she reviews Robert Wilson's production of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, concluding that 'The American sublime is a vernacular marvellous' (79); 'The Solace of Chocolate Squares' is a meditation on the work of playwright Wallace Shawn ('What is so fascinating about Shawn is the way in which he develops an ethics of performance as a throughline in the works' [95]); in 'Performance

and Ethics' Marranca chats to Peter Sellers, and in 'The Universal' she speaks with Romeo Castellucci; in 'Berlin 2000' Marranca – at the time a Fulbright scholar teaching at the Free University – attempts to 'unravel the complexities' (209) of that city, and in 'The Crossways of Istanbul' she reflects on cultural struggles she encounters upon visiting Turkey for the International Istanbul Theatre Festival and the International Theatre Olympics. Her concluding piece, 'Art and Consciousness' – an interview with Susan Sontag, to whom the book is dedicated – is especially affecting, not only for Sontag's wonderfully intelligent responses, but for the context also. This conversation took place in 1977 when Sontag was 44 years old and had just returned from a chemotherapy appointment. She did not know then that cancer would eventually take her 27 years later.

The essays, reviews and interviews in *Performance Histories* are not only united by virtue of their subject matter – art, theatre, performance – but they are also pulled together by Marranca's distinct voice. For example, she has the rare talent of writing out from a place of expertise to reach a broader audience. In 'The Theatre of Food', she sets about 'chewing on sentences encrusted in memory' (110), writing:

For me, the world of food – its politics, customs, and aesthetics – started to unfold in a wider narrative as I began my travels through Europe. My first experience was as a college student living with a Danish family, in 1969 [...]. Here I was exposed to an entirely different cuisine – one based on butter, meat, cream, beer – that, historically, was set in opposition to the preference for olive oil, vegetables, bread, and wine in the Mediterranean diet, beginning with the defeat of the Romans by 'barbaric' tribes of the North in the medieval era (110).

And then later:

American affluence and global tourism, accompanying the travels of food across borders, offer to our tables a luxuriant way of dining. The return to the bourgeois idea of the comfortable 'home' is reinforced in the culture by a growing emphasis on design, though the leisurely family meal itself is largely out of fashion. And what of the idea of the 'natural'? (111)

Hers is the essayist's skill of beginning with a small thing, something prosaic, and elegantly stretching out into larger, more encompassing ideas. As she herself puts it: 'For a writer any subject can be the starting point for imaginative reflection on simple human acts that has a way of becoming the most profound commentary on culture, history or art' (109). Her approach is 'genealogical and associative' (xi), writes Claire MacDonald in her erudite preface to *Performance Histories*, and this is often manifest in Marranca's persistent questions, for there is a questioning that pervades her work. At the same time, these questions firmly set Marranca's voice in the here-and-now. 'Is that not why we love the essay', asks Australian writer Drusilla Modjeska, 'because it is a kind of thinking aloud that loops back to the past and nudges us forward to the future, but depends for its life on its aliveness as a voice in the present?' (2007: xii-xiii)

The pieces in *Performance Histories* are simultaneously united by virtue of Marranca's recurring themes, from the role of spirituality in art (and life), to questions of ethics, to the place of theory in thinking about performance. Of the latter, she is critical of those scholars who use 'performance events themselves as a springboard for overarching theories or cultural commentaries [that] has often led to distortions of performance history as well as diminished critical thought' (19). While we may have learnt a lot from this 'new scholarship', she calls for an end to 'hyperactive theorization and lumpy prose' (19). (Indeed, in 1997 Marranca's criticism of such scholarship made its way into Mark Fortier's *Theory/Theatre* when he wrote in his introduction that Marranca 'condemns what she sees as the knee-jerk and formulaic application of theory, a "dogmatic corruption" of the openness that theory should entail. [...] I have not, I hope, written a dogmatic work' [1997:6].)

Another theme in the collection, perhaps not so transparent to Marranca, is that of nostalgia. While she sometimes catches herself painting a utopian picture of 1960s and 1970s performance – and the culture in which it was produced – she is none-the-less continually pulled towards it. 'Entertainment', writes Marranca in 'Performance, A Personal History', 'has long begun to take the place of art, confusing the terms of audience engagement' (7). The downtown New York arts community, she suggests, previously functioned as a subculture, 'opposed to the exigencies of the marketplace and populist demands, and reveling in its own intellectual rigor, advanced forms, and vocabularies' (7), and she wonders if nowadays many of those terms of contention have become irrelevant for younger generations. Set against this so-called golden period of the arts three decades ago is the somewhat dystopian art culture today. For a reader, this positioning of artists and art-making feels oversimplified. Interestingly, Sontag points this out to her. In a phone conversation with Sontag soon before she died, Marranca suggested to her that some older artists she knew were producing good work and yet it was a struggle for them 'in this culture'. Sontag refused to buy into the debate. Marranca writes: 'Sontag wasn't interested in such complaints. Did I think Goya didn't struggle?' (244).

Nostalgia, however, sometimes has its place. In the book's preface, Claire MacDonald deftly sums up Marranca's collection:

[It is] focused on the *idea* of performance history as well as the history of performance [...]. It is history as *storia* or *histoire*, a form of narration, as well as a description of events, that tells us about who we are and where we might go, through instances that show us the way that we have come (xii).

One of the directions Marranca urges us in concerns respect for performance history. In 'Performance, a Personal History', she laments the absence of the systematic archiving of the personal historical materials owned by so many artists and theatres, and she calls for graduate programs to train more students as archivists (19). Of the many themes working their way through Marranca's writing, this is perhaps among the most poignant: that the work of performance-makers might be forgotten. She not only raises this explicitly and

implicitly in her essays and interviews, but the book itself functions as an artefact. *Performance Histories* is a curation; it is its own archive and the archive of others. 'The Wooster Group: A Dictionary of Ideas', for example, is a 23-page piece divided into 26 sections with such titles as 'Figures of Speech', 'Medicine/Mania' and 'Conversation Between Elizabeth LeCompte and Richard Foreman'. 'Image' reads as a brief list of brief notes on different ideas of 'image'. This presentation of material not only speaks to The Wooster Group's work of bringing together, what Marranca calls, 'the intertextual, the intercultural, and the intermedial' (39), but for the reader it simultaneously conjures the experience of sifting through an archive. We are given a series of tiny pieces to connect, fragmentary insights into the group's working practice.

And then there is the explicit archaeological nature of Marranca's writing. Each essay, lecture and interview in *Performance Histories* includes an endnote citing the various incarnations the piece has taken. For example, we learn that 'Performance, A Personal History' originated as a keynote address for a Berlin conference, and was then revised for another keynote address for a conference in Wales. There were several modified lectures based on the essay, and various versions of it were published (23). In a note at the start of the book, Marranca explains that the collection includes a revision and expansion of a few of the original pieces 'as I have lived with the ideas over a long period of time' (ix). Those pieces that have been continually worked and re-worked stand out because of it. For a reader, they feel especially rich and nuanced, as if Marranca's 'living with' them has somehow made the observations in them more intimate while at the same time giving weight and depth to the arguments. As MacDonald writes, 'Bonnie Marranca's strength as a writer lies [...] in her clear eye for detail, in seeing what is *really* going on, and in her ability to write [...] "descriptive poetics"' (xiv).

While reading the various essays, reviews and conversations, I continually made connections between the pieces, sometimes forcing associations, and, to me, this did not always feel comfortable. MacDonald's preface is much needed because we require a map of sorts, a guide to Marranca's collection. MacDonald offers this to an extent, however I found myself longing for an introduction by Marranca herself. Her one-page Author's Note was by no means sufficient. From her I wanted sustained reflexivity about her thinking and writing practice, and what she understood as the particular logic behind this curation of her material. Why *this* essay? Why *that* review? In a sense the first essay sets up some of the persistent themes of the collection, and yet I longed for the sort of perspective and shift in register that an introduction brings. It might also have allowed her an opportunity to properly position herself and her subject matter – for, as MacDonald points out: 'Historically, her writing emerges from a specific American locale' (xii). Much of *Performance Histories* feels American-centred, even New York-centred, because it is. As MacDonald writes: 'Hers is the viewpoint of an East coast girl brought up just outside New York in New Jersey [...] and who has lived just over the Hudson for almost all her adult life, in that most vibrant of cities, New York' (xii). Marranca is a beautiful writer and an interesting thinker, and, to my mind, it is a great shame she did not pause in an introduction to reflect with depth on her own practice – and that we in turn did not have the pleasure of savouring it.

References

- Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).
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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:
http://web.archive.org/web/*/performanceparadigm.net

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