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*Institutional Theatrics: Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall Berlin* by Brandon Woolf, and: *Theatre of Anger: Radical Transnational Performance in Contemporary Berlin* by Olivia Landry (review)

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financial pressure, these artists have pressed for changes in legislations, both at the municipal and national levels (86).

The term artist-citizen coalesces aesthetic and quotidian performance, allowing new opportunities of social expression for artists while suggesting performance-based approaches to social resistance. Embracing this merger, Sarah Woods and Andrew Simms present an account of their performance *Neoliberalism: The Break-up Tour* (2017), moving between conversation and excerpts from their performance text. Gathering together the pioneering neoliberal thinkers as an itinerant band, the performance attempts to demystify neoliberalism's "Theory of Perfect Markets under Perfect Competition" (94) by debunking its absurd assumptions about market self-regulation and unlimited economic growth. Although reductive in its simplicity, the piece remains engaging and informative by using different modes of performance: double-act repartee, puppet performance, audience interaction, and game scenarios. In their conversation, Woods and Simms provide fruitful insight into their creative process, bridging the realms of sociopolitical activism and theatre-making by articulating the urgency of creating a counter-narrative to neoliberalism that "takes you outside the system and forces you to see it whole" (98). By situating theatre in the broad project of understanding and contesting neoliberalism, the final chapter embodies the core premise of the first three chapters.

*Neoliberalism, Theatre and Performance* provides its reader with a comprehensive account of neoliberalism's presence as a governing socioeconomic structure but lacks sufficient explanation of its historical roots. By disconnecting neoliberalism from the "serious crisis of capital accumulation during the 1970s" (Harvey 2005:57), the book risks abstracting its subject from a wider capitalist rationality in which neoliberalism has flourished. Nevertheless, the book allows theatre scholars and practitioners to gain valuable insight into the ideological background of neoliberalism while suggesting new ways of resisting its far-reaching implications.

—Hamid Karimian

## References

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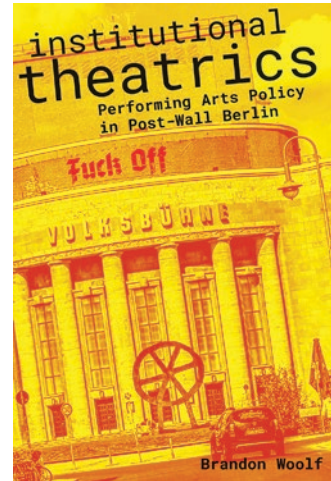
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***Institutional Theatrics: Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall Berlin.*** By Brandon Woolf. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021; 268 pp.; illustrations. \$99.95 cloth, \$34.95 paper, e-book available.

***Theatre of Anger: Radical Transnational Performance in Contemporary Berlin.*** By Olivia Landry. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021; 236 pp.; illustrations. \$56.25 cloth, e-book available.

Since the reunification of Germany, Berlin has become an even more clamorously contested cultural arena than it was before the Wall came down. And that's saying something. Long the theatre

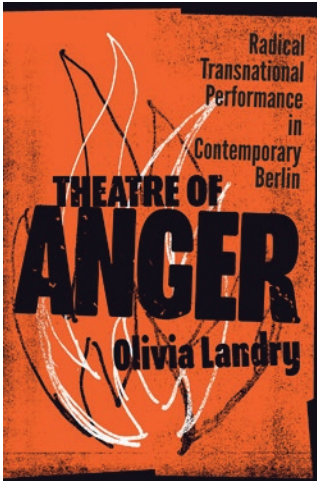
capital of the German-speaking world, with the largest number of state-supported theatres, its cheap rent and dynamic mix of post-Wall subcultures attracted a newly diverse population of creative young people in the 1990s who spurred the growth of an unprecedentedly vibrant and transnational independent-theatre scene (*freie Szene*). Adherents of this scene are today themselves a resilient and tight-knit subculture. Brashly vocal, audaciously activist, they've made provocative theatre that challenges longstanding norms of casting, canon, and heroic *Regie*, and also questioned longstanding norms of government cultural policy and subsidy for state-supported theatres regarded as exclusionary and privileged. Both books under review are by ardent *freie Szene* sympathizers who expound on important and fascinating artists, artworks, and public policy disputes with tremendous potential resonance beyond Berlin. It's a shame, then, that, with their dense fogs of impenetrable language, neither study has a prayer of reaching the general audience its subject matter deserves.



The focus of Brandon Woolf's *Institutional Theatrics* is three major protest-and-resistance campaigns ranging from 1993 to 2017 and two theatrical productions seen in 2012 and 2013 that he analyzes for public-policy reverberations. The book's overall purpose, says Woolf, is "to investigate theater's changing role in a changing society by examining intersections of performance and policy" (2) and to "argue that cultural policy must be thought of as a performative practice of infrastructural imagining, not just as an administrative agenda for divvying and delegating funds" (8).

Woolf opens with a discussion of the 2017 occupation of the state-funded Berlin Volksbühne by crowds protesting the appointment of Chris Dercon as director after the 25-year leadership of Frank Castorf. This protest is seen as paradigmatic because it lifted a veil off the usually hidden, insidious connection between state support for institutional theatres and neoliberal government planning. Originally a theatre that sought meaningful connections with workers, under Castorf the post-GDR Volksbühne ("people's theatre") became a beloved, raucous, social gathering place for young people, its hulking, battleship-esque house reimaged as a cool Gen Y club of the '90s and '00s whose side hustle happened to be cool deconstructive theatre. Dercon, a British Tate Modern curator with no theatrical experience, shocked loyalists by announcing plans to steer the Volksbühne away from public subsidy entirely, deemphasizing *Regie* and repertory and adopting instead a British/American reliance on private sponsorship, high-profile international "events," and centralized, tourist-oriented city-branding. The resulting protests—ultimately successful as Dercon was fired after seven months—were carefully planned, politically savvy performances well worth studying by anyone confronted with a comparable crisis.

If only Woolf had been satisfied with clearly describing their purpose, background, tactics, competing interests, trajectory, and outcome. Instead, he steers his book into a murk of abstractions from Theodor Adorno, Judith Butler, Toby Miller, George Yúdice, and others, positioning it as a contribution to the academic-niche discussion of "cultural policy [...] conceived in terms of performativity" (16). "The performativity of policy," he says, "becomes an enabling paradigm, one that takes hold institutionally and—at least potentially—performs a negative mode of dis/avowal" (18). The fruits of this strategy are decidedly meager, when they aren't downright incoherent. The obfuscatory, Adorno-derived term "dis/avowal" accompanies all Woolf's conclusions, such as they are, reappearing at the climax of every interpretive passage as if it were in itself revelatory. It doesn't seem to mean anything other than ambivalence and ambiguity—the decidedly common experience of standing on two sides of something. So much for "infrastructural imagining."



*Institutional Theatrics* is best when plainly describing its three selected protest campaigns: the Volksbühne occupation, the 1993 theatre-closure crisis (sparked by a cutoff of federal subsidies as Berlin was confronting its post-Wall superfluity of theatres), and the long-running controversy over rebuilding a Prussian Imperial Palace on the site of the GDR's much-maligned modernist parliament building, Palast der Republik. These lucid and well-informed sections build on fine books by Andreas Huyssen and Claire Colomb—*Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003) and *Staging the New Berlin: Place Marketing and the Politics of Urban Reinvention Post-1989* (2012)—and Woolf might have benefited greatly from emulating them to a greater extent. Huyssen and Colomb's books use incisive comparisons of Berlin with other cities like Baltimore, Buenos Aires, and Washington, DC, to open their discussions to a wide range of potential readers, splendidly clarifying what many different outsiders have to learn from Berlin.

One of Woolf's chapters, it should be said, does have a fruitful theoretical frame. His discussion of temporary installation and performance art mounted in the gutted Palast der Republik as it awaited final demolition makes excellent use of Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price's utopian Fun Palace proposal from the 1960s as well as 1992 remarks by Jacques Derrida on the Greek concept of *chora* (place). Woolf's two chapters focusing on individual theatre productions, in contrast, are digressive, abstruse, and baffling. Both alternate between long descriptive passages of the shows so minutely detailed and insufficiently contextualized that only a specialist could possibly follow them; and critical discussions that bog down in digressive minutiae. These chapters also end up feeling uncritical, with far too many gratuitous quotations idolizing the directors Castorf and Alexander Karschnia (cofounder of andcompany&Co.).

Olivia Landry's focus in *Theatre of Anger* is a group of plays produced in Berlin between 2006 and 2017 "in which minoritized subjects perform anger, and perform in anger, to speak out against social injustice that is the result of racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia" (4). Seven plays are analyzed, which share certain emphases and techniques such as extensive monologue, extreme emotion, deliberate offensiveness, and direct audience address. All seven are powerful, richly provocative, and certainly worth documenting. Landry seeks to categorize these works as a distinct genre ("theatre of anger") within the larger category of "post-migrant theatre"—a common term for German theatre since 2000 that has sought to open the art to new, culturally diverse voices. Among this movement's leaders are Shermin Langhoff, a German of Greek-Turkish heritage who became leader of the Maxim Gorki Theater in 2013; and Sasha Marianna Salzmann, a Russian-born, German-Jewish writer who is Landry's guiding spirit. A long, valuable interview with Salzmann is included in the book.

There is no question that the established German theatre—miraculous as its massive public subsidy is—has an infuriating track record of excluding or marginalizing certain classes of people, notably the progeny of immigrants from half a century ago whom most Americans would regard as German, full stop. A good book on the *freie Szene* response to this unhappy reality is long overdue, and for that reason alone it is heartbreaking that Landry's book—which aims to spotlight inarguably vital and pathbreaking artists such as Langhoff, Salzmann, Necati Öziri, Feridun Zaimoğlu, Günter Senkel, Nurkan Erpulat, Jens Hillje, Anestis Azas, Prodromos Tsinikoris, and Mely Kiyak—has such crippling problems. To wit:

1) *Theatre of Anger* is rife with theatre historical inaccuracy. Within three pages of chapter 1 alone, we read that Aristotle's catharsis unequivocally means having "a good fright and a good cry" (35)—no mention of the perennial debate over what it means; that G.E. Lessing was "the first

figure to formalize emotions in relation to theatre and the plastic arts” (35)—no evident awareness of any prior emotion-based theatre, let alone the noisy debate about emotion in acting that flared in Lessing’s time involving Aaron Hill, John Hill, Denis Diderot, David Garrick, and many others; and that Antonin Artaud’s “call for a theatre that disturbs and provokes revolt [...] remained on the level of the virtual” (38)—no mention that Artaud actually made theatre and founded two theatres. The text abounds with other examples.

2) Landry’s naive zeal for categorization is worrisome. Time was, a scholar could expect to win power, prestige, and notoriety by coining a label for a dramatic movement that became widely used, but that era is long over. Martin Esslin was the last true winner of the drama-branding game, and even some reviews of his 1961 book *The Theatre of the Absurd* criticized him for homogenizing the extraordinarily various innovativeness of the plays he examined. Hans-Thies Lehmann was so concerned about this problem when he published *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999) that he peppered the book with warnings against misusing his title phrase reductively as a fixed category. Landry, for her part, eagerly plants flags, defending and refining the boundaries of her territorial label at every turn. She evidently sees no contradiction in declaring herself allied with Berlin’s most precarious, disenfranchised, and undervalued theatre artists while simultaneously seeking academic prestige and security by affixing a catchy label to them. In the unlikely event her title phrase ever did catch on among journalists, it would likely do more harm than good. Could they be expected to understand her special definition of “anger” (drawing on feminist theorists of color Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Sara Ahmed) as a potentially productive force of “affirmation” rather than the negative, destructive, and deprecatory force it’s commonly presumed to be? Without that knowledge, they’d judge the plays by whatever snap associations with “anger” they brought with them.

3) Landry’s writing is a veritable clinic on the afflictions and absurdities of German-style academe. Her prose is so stiff, halting, and clotted with pointless overqualification, overcomplication, prolixity, awkward usages, and gassy abstractions treated as concrete nouns, that she has trouble even making her enthusiasms clear. One typical sentence: “Without being impositional or hegemonic, and subscribing to some extent to Edward Said’s notion of ‘traveling theory,’ a paired reading with contemporary US theorists and activists proffers a means of working through the less discursively undertaken realities of racialization and racism in Germany” (30). What’s more, she writes in terror of saying things on her own authority, reluctant to describe even the simplest matters without citing others. She needs Erika Fischer-Lichte, for instance, to affirm that “theatre performance emerges through an encounter, a confrontation, an interaction” and Janelle Reinelt to state that “the spectator’s experience of performance [is] determined to large degree by cultural positioning” (115). Even the basic features of a thrust stage require the authority of Richard Schechner (141). This is deadening prose.

4) *Theatre of Anger* is unfair to anyone not clearly aligned with the freie Szene’s leftist, anti-institutional bias (a fault it shares with *Institutional Theatrics*). Landry astutely connects her “theatre of anger” playwrights with the British “in yer face” playwrights of the 1990s (e.g., Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Martin Crimp), for instance, but she never mentions the Berlin theatre that introduced those Brits to Germany: the Baracke, under the leadership of young Thomas Ostermeier. It’s unimaginable that Landry is unaware of this history, so one can only guess that her omission stems from her general reluctance throughout the book to credit venerable state theatres or Regie stars with any critical viewpoints or progressive achievements.

My advice to anyone approaching *Theatre of Anger* is to start with the penetrating and eloquent Salzmann interview at the end—which lucidly explains much that Landry beclouds—then flip through the discussions of the seven plays for a general sense of why they are remarkable and use the footnotes to seek out better descriptions. We should all hope that another, better, more readable study will soon appear that does due critical justice to these plays.

—Jonathan Kalb

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## More Books

***Queer Nightlife.*** Edited by Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021; 297 pp.; illustrations. \$95.00 cloth, \$39.95 paper, e-book available.

From expansive glittering dance halls to the ways cramped bathrooms and dressing rooms become undeniably intimate gatherings, *Queer Nightlife* journeys through spaces and social landscapes constructed ephemerally and under the cover of night—sites of pleasure, performance, and collective labor by and for LGBTQIA+ individuals navigating systemic marginalization and ongoing social pressure. This anthology explores the myriad ways queer communities emerge in daily life and endure frequently violent social and political economies that surround them. Contributions from 25 authors and artists in various disciplines examine nightlife as performance—a method of inquiry to establish how bodies “hold and repurpose history” (3). The collection is thoughtfully organized by tracing pathways through the night, including themes of “Before,” “Inside,” “Show,” and “After,” to temporally situate the diverse array of essays that are otherwise unbound by geographic location or a moment in history. Collectively, *Queer Nightlife* intentionally centers the voices of queer and trans people of color whose perspectives and labor have been historically underrepresented in academic literature.

***At the Intersection of Disability and Drama: A Critical Anthology of New Plays.*** Edited by John Michael Sefel, Amanda Slamcik Lassetter, and Jill Summerville. Foreword by Calvin Arium. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2021; 404 pp.; illustrations. \$45.00 paper, e-book available.

*At the Intersection of Disability and Drama* offers an expansive collection of deeply personal perspectives within the disability community—21 new plays by 21 playwrights who grapple with the complexities of navigating a society that assumes a narrow representation of the true human experience. From Amy Oestreicher’s *An Open Letter to the Usher at the Theatre Who Asked Me if I Was “the Sick Girl”* (52) to Bradley Cherna’s profound account of being immunocompromised during a pandemic in *The Plague Plays* (347), each work unapologetically dismantles stereotypes about the experiences and appearances of those in the disability community. The text is arranged into three sections. The first includes autobiographical plays in first-person perspective, and others that bring in external voices surrounding a solo performer. The second section, “Past Is Present,” features four plays in which the writers mine their memories or recount another subject’s voice to call back the stories of those who are no longer with us. Each play is accompanied by a short essay from one of the editors—providing context and bringing into conversation additional relevant scholarship. A welcoming preface and an introduction by John Michael Sefel offer guiding notes on “Disability Aesthetics,” the diversity of language, and how both have been shaped over time by members of the community. This anthology is rigorously crafted, intersectional, and intentionally accessible for students, casual readers, and scholars alike.