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(review)

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EMBODIED TEXTS: SYMBOLIST PLAYWRIGHT-DANCER COLLABORATIONS

by Mary Fleischer. 2007. *Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi*. xxi + 346 pp., notes, illustrations, index. \$107.00 paper.

At the height of the modernist theatrical revolution, theater artists and early modern dancers joined forces in creating a genre of dance-theater that would offer an immediate, subjective, and nonrealistic onstage rendering of human experience. Mary Fleischer dedicates *Embodied Texts: Symbolist Playwright-Dancer Collaborations* to a body of these works, the fruits of a shared rebellion against contemporary dance and theater conventions. While for modern dancers such experiments were part and parcel of a distancing from classical ballet vocabulary and the confines of show and variety dance, for many playwrights working within the symbolist tradition dance was a terrifically complex medium that functioned as an alternative to realist, word-dominated dramatic presentation. Fleischer tells the stories of the playwrights who sought out dancers to help them not simply refurbish their style but much more radically reconceive “their dramaturgy to find theatrical expression in movement and dance, as well as the visual arts of the stage” (xix). It is in highlighting this point that the author chooses the term “dance-theatre” rather than “dance-drama” or “dance-play” to categorize the works she discusses. Her study is impressive in its breadth and variety, covering a pan-European phenomenon represented herein by Gabriele d’Annunzio and Ida Rubinstein’s collaborations on the French-language pieces *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* (1911) and *La Pisanelle, ou la mort parfumée* (1913), Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Grete Wiesenthal’s partnering on the pantomimes *Amor und Psyche*, *Das fremde Mädchen* (1911) and *Die Biene*

(1916), W. B. Yeats’ work with both Michio Ito (*At the Hawk’s Well*, 1916) and Ninette de Valois (*On Baile’s Strand*, 1927; *Fighting the Waves*, 1929; *The Dreaming of the Bones*, 1921; *At the Hawk’s Well*, 1933 revival; *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, 1934), and *L’Homme et son désir* (1921) mounted by Paul Claudel, Jean Börlin, and the Ballets Suédois.

For Fleischer, these early twentieth-century dance-theater experiments were born of the symbolists’ belief in communication among the arts. Put side by side, the works become significant for how they differently envision “the interrelationship among text, movement, and the component arts of performance,” a task fraught with tension (5). If on one hand dance seemed an ideal alternative to the word (for recourse to language could impede the immediate spiritual expression symbolism desired), on the other hand the very materiality of the dancer’s body could pose an obstacle to purely symbolic communication. Fleischer uses her first chapter to outline this conflict, framing the case studies within the long history of symbolism’s fascination with dance—often as image or metaphor rather than as practice—and within the broader discourse concerning the presence, potential, and limits of the onstage body that so preoccupied that generation of theater artists. Explaining how the collaborations fit into the development of the dancers’ and playwrights’ careers and creative visions, the author demonstrates that the performances, even when met with little critical or popular success (which was typically the case), were important contributions to the redefinition of a symbolic theatrical aesthetic.

The five central chapters provide the case studies. Fleischer follows the artists’ paths to the moment of collaboration and urges the reader to consider the pieces, which are too often sidelined as minor works in the authors’ oeuvres, not simply as attempts to

placate creative restlessness but as the building blocks of a new symbolist poetic. Small details in her accounts, however, also show how important these collaborations were beyond the narrow confines of symbolism as a genre, or either theater or dance as a single art form: how, indeed, they were part of the broader twentieth-century performance revolution that continuously saw such boundaries blur. A few examples suffice. When we discover that each collaborating dancer had some relationship with the Ballets Russes, the sense of the company's definitive impact on modernist performance—from Diaghilev's Europe to Balanchine's America—is revealed to be as crucial to theater history as to that of dance. Reinhardt's productions of Hofmannsthal's and Wiesenthal's pantomimes are briefly considered in light of their connection to the silent cinema. The chapter on Ito and Yeats offers a cogent reminder that the current prevalence of Asian forms in Western performance is not a product of a globalized postmodernism but instead the legacy of a tradition spearheaded early in the last century by the likes of Pound (who introduced Yeats to Noh) and that found beautiful expression in Michio Ito's dancing in *At the Hawk's Well*. Together, then, the case studies paint a picture of a lively exchange across the vast variety of borders—of medium, nation, language, genre—that often, and often detrimentally, organize current performance scholarship. One of the great strengths of Fleischer's study is its impulse to work across such divisions. This is an absolute must for coming to terms with the performance revolution carried out in the first half of the twentieth century.

At the same time, Fleischer's book is so chock-full of details revealing how diffuse the web of rebellion was, it begs us to question what would change if she had also abandoned the confines of movement, had her backdrop not been symbolism but in-

stead the entire fin-de-siècle culture of time and space that produced the revolution of which symbolism was, in the end, just a part. I do not contest Fleischer's argument that symbolism's internal poetic was conducive to such experimentation, but I do think that the fact emerging from her careful research—that the symbolists were far from alone in such experimentation—requires further attention and internalization. On a strictly chronological level, we must remember that symbolism is essentially a late-nineteenth-century movement born long before the discussed collaborations (which date from 1911 to 1934). Likewise, d'Annunzio, Yeats, Hofmannsthal, and Claudel were all born in the 1860s and 1870s and came to these experiments relatively late in their careers (if somewhat less so in the case of the youngest, Hofmannsthal, who tried such experiments in the first decade of the new century). How much they had seen the face of theater and dance change; and in their experiments they did not only turn to dancers but to artists working in other movements with other intuitions and aesthetics. Meyerhold and Fokine, who directed and choreographed for Rubinstein and d'Annunzio; George Athel, the American working in a futurist vein who composed for Yeats and de Valois; and the Ballet Suédois (as evidenced by the photos of *L'Homme et son désir* that Fleischer includes in an excellent, comprehensive chapter) were all dedicated to a modernism that postdated—and often reacted against—the symbolist tradition that was by the 1920s and 1930s many decades old.

That is to say, symbolism may have come along first, but the majority of the symbolist dance-theater experiments were undertaken only when more radical movements and artists, in particular the Italian futurists, had turned everything on its head and begun to do similar things. While we can agree that

the dance-theater collaborations were natural outgrowths of the individual artists' interests, we must also ask how the artists as symbolists and how symbolism itself were impacted at this rather late stage in the movement's lifespan, when expressionism, constructivism, futurism, dada, and the cinema had forever altered what would be seen onstage. What does it mean that the rebellious sons turned rivals, the futurists, who vehemently attacked symbolism, also dedicated themselves to dance-theater in the teens and 1920s? Had the author integrated such questions into her study, we would not only have a better grasp on the ways dance-theater allowed a symbolist artistic philosophy to flower, but we would have in our possession a broader picture of the ways in which dance-theater of the epoch worked to embody an entire range of the metaphysics of modernist performance.

That said, Mary Fleischer's book sets us squarely on the right path, eloquently demonstrating how dance-theater functioned within the symbolist system, allowing dancers and playwrights to test new uses of body and voice, of word and image. She describes collaborative processes that gave dancers new agency and playwrights new means for sharpening their own creative convictions not through stubborn repetition but through daring exploration. *Embodied Texts* is to be lauded for its attention to performance that has been cast as marginal, for evidencing that we will only comprehend the richness of the modernist moment by working across traditional disciplinary boundaries as Fleischer has done, in the footsteps of the artists to whom she dedicates her book. Only by continuing down this road can we hope to truly discover the brilliant, dynamic core of modernist performance.

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CHOREOGRAPHIES OF AFRICAN IDENTITIES: NEGRITUDE, DANCE, AND THE NATIONAL BALLET OF SENEGAL

by Francesca Castaldi. 2006. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 264 pp., \$50.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Francesca Castaldi's *Choreographies of African Identities* is a study in writing—literary, choreographic, and historical. Castaldi's admirable goal is to offer a choreographic and theoretical approach to dance in Senegal. To do so, she takes aim at previous, post-colonial histories of dance that have situated Senegalese, and all African dance history, inside of a primitivist trope. "As a medium of indigenous resistance against European colonizers," Castaldi writes, the dancing body is, perhaps, the most powerful historical document, a "living memory" of Senegalese history whose movements are themselves a form of historical writing (1). In exploration, Castaldi weaves her own corporeality into this research journey: "My own body," she tells us, "the single body of a contemporary ethnographer, is inserted into a corporeal field—a *corpus of histories*—that reaches back to previous generations of ethnographers and to the historical cradle of ethnographic practice: colonialism" (5). Thus, she gives herself access to the power of knowing, kinesthetically, the writing of dance history through time. Inside of colonialism, Castaldi discovers the link between herself—dancing scholar—and the ecosystem of dance studies—ethnography, history, choreography, theory, dancing, which is flawed in her eyes, deeply political, and engaged with the histories of bodies peoples and bodies over time.

Castaldi commences her analysis with the National Ballet of Senegal. She explores the political and aesthetic significance of the company to the country of Senegal, to politi-