World Theories of Theatre by Glenn A. Odom (review)

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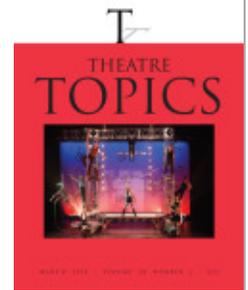
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Book Reviews

World Theories of Theatre. Glenn A. Odom. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017; pp. 302.

Contrary to his title's first impressions, Glenn Odom's *World Theories of Theatre* makes no claims of exhaustiveness. Odom specifies *world* as "that portion of the world which is not Europe, Russia, or the U.S.—which is to say, most of the world" (1). He thus contests the tendency of English-language theatre-theory anthologies to relegate "most of the world" to a few stray contributions tucked between works from Anglo-/ Eurosphere authors. As a corrective, Odom focuses on theatre as theorized by artists from Africa, the Middle East, South America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Oceania. As a teacher and scholar, I endorse Odom's lament about the hegemony of Western views and the tokenization of "everything else." Our field still struggles with presenting theatre theory without privileging Western assumptions or marginalizing world alternatives. How can we introduce the theatrical theories and practices of people as distinct as Femi Osofisan, Zeami, and Poile Sengupta together without creating a volume (or a class) either overstuffed or oversimplified? I commend Odom for offering one possible answer to these and other challenges.

He restricts his focus to theories of world *theatre,* a term he distinguishes from broader *performance practices.* Odom eschews a concrete definition in favor of defining *theatre* "locally," taking his cue from the practitioners themselves about whether they are doing theatre or some nontheatrical performance form (4–5). Yet, with some notable exceptions (such as Zeami or Bharata), the majority of Odom's world interlocutors are twentieth- and twenty-first-century playwrights influenced by and defining theatre within the broad conventions of Western drama (for instance, script-based productions in specialized theatrical spaces). Although these theorists' contributions expand the range of perspectives about theatre, such expansion remains mostly within tacit parameters about theatre's identity and potentials. To be sure, there is value in a study of how different world artists theorize "theatre" even within those parameters. But by sticking to more-or-less-recognizable theatre theory, Odom limits the potential of revelatory de-familiarizations— encounters with practices and theories that upset Western assumptions about theatricality. Such limits, however, represent a conscious choice on his part. He explicitly invokes and endorses an interconnectedness among global theatrical practices. "Maybe," he offers, "there is something to the idea of theatre as world phenomenon" (2). Odom takes care to mark the dangers of asserting a facile theatrical universality, stressing areas of divergence and variation among his subjects' views. His project assumes, however, that these diverse perspectives contemplate essentially the same object.

Readers will find this assumption appealing or questionable based on their own backgrounds, training, and convictions. In any case Odom does not set out to prove theatre's global interconnectedness, but simply proceeds from the possibility that the idea has merit.

Readers should know that this work is less an anthology than an introductory guide spiced with some primary source excerpts. It is a book *about* world theories of theatre rather than a book *of* theatre theories, such as Daniel Gerould's *Theatre/Theory/Theatre.* The first and longest section consists of chapters organized by "theoretical questions": aesthetics, politics, culture, identity, modernity, and gender. Odom begins each chapter with a case study describing a production that highlights the chapter's questions. He then provides a miniature overview of these issues, often calling on Western theories to provide a familiar reference point. His discussion of aesthetics, for example, brings in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and he grounds his introduction to politics in Louis Althusser's notion of ideology. Odom then proceeds to two-to-four selections from world theatre artists writing about the theoretical underpinnings of their practice.

He includes oft-reprinted works like Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, as well as excerpts from people whose theoretical work is less widely known in the West, such as Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous and Maori artist Roma Potiki. Such latter contributions are valuable, especially when (as with Wannous) the work in question has never been published in English. That said, the selections themselves make up only a small portion of the book. Most excerpts run for fewer than ten pages; Potiki, for instance, receives barely two. Occasionally, I wondered if the samples had enough historical and cultural contextualization. Would a student not already familiar with noh theatre understand Zeami's writings on the flower? The historian in me also arches an eyebrow at placing ancient works like the *Natyasastra* alongside writing by present-day playwrights like Wole Soyinka. Odom offers such samples in the hopes of whetting readers' appetites, prompting them to seek out the full works for themselves; he includes a "Further Reading" bibliography to assist in this endeavor.

In the second, shorter section, "Cultural and Literary Theory," Odom adopts a geographical schema, providing a series of region-based chapters summarizing the history and main theatrical traditions of the various parts of the world he studies. These introductions share the appetite-whetting aim of the primary-source selections. I could complain, perhaps, about the brutal simplifications involved here—most chapters are very brief. In truth, however, when preparing and updating my courses I have often sought out quick-though-reliable overviews to orient me as I delve into research about

areas of theatre for which my own training did not prepare me. A newcomer to these forms could do worse than Odom's précis, and I found his suggestion of key playwrights from these regions especially valuable. I would not (and nor would Odom) suggest that these chapters serve as anything more than a springboard to further, more substantive sources. His final section—three class exercises—seems like an afterthought. I would have liked to see such exercises fleshed out and perhaps incorporated more organically into the main chapters themselves.

Although I am more incredulous than Odom about theatre's global interconnectedness and would have liked a bit more historical range and specificity, I can recommend *World Theories of Theatre* for use in masters- and upper-level undergraduate courses. Additionally, I hope his work inspires teachers to incorporate more and more diverse theatrical perspectives from artists working in "most of the world."

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Digital Costume Design and Collaboration: Applications in Academia, Theatre, and Film. By Rafael Jaen. New York: Routledge/Focal Press, 2017; pp. 208.

Designing in an increasingly digital world with tech-savvy students presents a new set of challenges to an old art form. Students obtain and disseminate information and communicate primarily by digital means. Adapting theatre classes to a digital world is not difficult, but finding a text to suit the needs of a costume design course that still addresses some of the more elementary but critical skills needed of costume designers has not existed. Many costume-design faculty use Liz Covey and Rosemary Ingham's incredible resource, *The Costume Designers Handbook*, in their classes. Other foundational texts might be Rebecca Cunningham's *The Magic Garment* and Melissa Merz's *The Art and Practice of Costume Design.* However, none address the growing need to digitize research, paperwork, and designs not only for practical reasons, but as a way to attract and retain the interest of students. In *Digital Costume Design and Collaboration* Rafael Jaen addresses many of the same practical approaches to design as these textbooks, but he reveals how to use the digital world to organize, present, and share design basics.

Jaen organizes his book into three parts. In the first, "Foundations," he lays out design principles with the essential "nuts and bolts" of each story and character, as well as where to start researching and how to create a concept. He includes additional aids to young designers engaged in the process, such as how to talk to actors, the importance of a dramaturg, and how to have a conversation with a director. Jaen shifts from this traditional introduction to design by outlining how to compile the initial research, notes, and measurements, and how to show information digitally in Google (docs, slides, and sheets), Pinterest, and Dropbox. Importantly, he explains in detail how to use each format and share it with others. This form of communication may be the most important part

of the digitization of a costume designer's work, and Jaen is convincing in his argument to adopt it.

In chapter 2, "Preparing Your Digital Costume Bible and Design Studio," he discusses some of the most practical parts of design: the paperwork. Jaen thoroughly explains a costume plot, piece list, and how to budget for a production, but again argues in favor of creating, storing, and tracking all of this digitally. Especially impressive is the suggestion to take photos of each actor during fittings, and to organize these into a shareable file that is accessible to everyone on the production team from virtually anywhere. No more forgetting measurements when you are out shopping—it is right on your smartphone! Want to share how a fitting went with the director? Send her the file link! Google docs also updates immediately so there are no lost files, and files shared among multiple participants are always the most current. Jaen also discusses what equipment and software a designer would need to work digitally. This book successfully explains the ease of using such platforms for almost any designer, but particularly for those who may be nervous about changing old habits.

In part 2, "Applications," Jaen presents five chapters focused on the practical skills from researching to rendering to archiving. The primary tool he introduces here is Photoshop, and for designers new to the world of Photoshop, he presents an incredibly easy path for using this multifaceted tool. He sticks to the basics—layers, brushes, color swatching, and creating fabric, and then goes through them step by step. Jaen's instructions are very clear when discussing basic applications. This is particularly helpful for student and faculty designers who are not familiar with using digital rendering applications, or who are intimidated by the idea of using such a tool. He also provides links to his YouTube channel, which presents the same instructions visually—an important asset for many learners.

The final part of the book, "Digital Design Practice," presents testimonials from experts about using digital platforms for design. Jaen interviews theatrical directors, designers, and educators about their experiences working in the industry and their individual approaches to their art. The responses are varied and often much less complicated than expected; many stress listening and the value of being able to communicate—important lessons for student designers. Jaen's interview with costume designer Wendi Zea provides advice on how to use digital platforms for exploring new methods of communicating. I found one of her practices particularly useful: after obtaining the set designer's permission, she inserts digital renderings of her costumes into a digital rendition of the set so as to allow the director to obtain a complete view of the show.

Digital Costume Design and Collaboration is a valuable addition to the books used for teaching young designers. It takes the processes and functions of practical design into the digital world with easy-to-follow guides and instructions. It is particularly useful for programs with a limited offering of costume-design courses that have students who want to use digital platforms for storing and sharing information or who already do. It will not serve to accentuate courses specifically