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**Book Review**

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Arndt, Susan & Breitingner, Eckhard & von Brisinski, Marek Spitzczok (eds.) (2007) *Theatre, Performance and New Media in Africa*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 215pp, ISBN 978-3-939661-01, €19.95

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In the twenty-first century it is still pertinent, or rather, necessary to ask how it is that society still manages to impose a standard on those who view their existence in different terms and contexts to those of the dominant cultural structure. Culture, we are told, arises from a need to control and enlighten the masses through a series of social performances, specifically aimed at creating and upholding a world view, whether that view is economic, gendered or racially motivated. Whilst it might be argued that culture can be located in the charnels of shared experiences, which predate sophisticated, organised social structures, its continued growth and influence, through the advent of popular culture, requires examination. *Theatre, Performance and New Media in Africa* seeks to identify the points at which popular culture, whilst maintaining uniformity, inevitably creates spaces into which alternative perspectives can be located. Further, that whilst trends often reflect an appeasing form of social hegemony, counter-culture evolves to allow the voices of the dissident to challenge the signified.

A surreptitious glance through the pages of *Theatre, Performance and New Media in Africa* shows a faithful attempt to engage with the phenomena of globalisation within the context of African cultures and through the medium of performance. At once declaring, as Barthes did, 'the death of the author,' the contributors show how popular culture links in with traditional forms of representation, whilst at the same time, providing a polyphony of meaning, as Schipper says in regard of the

proverb, 'its concrete meaning [is only acquired] at the moment it is used and it is indeed true that new shades of meaning may develop in new situations' (p.15). Organised along a linear pathway which begins with the origins of orality and proverb, moves through visual and verbal performative techniques and concluding with film and print media, the book moves through a series of papers which assert a common theme. This theme challenges held assumptions that popular culture erodes traditional values. Instead, it argues that the traditional values of society are held up to the microscope of live performance and in so doing, a link with the past is maintained, rather than undermined. Live performance provides the guidance to the past, reconnecting both the performer and the viewer with a history, that in terms of imperialism, has been ignored, or in some cases, rewritten. It is the task of this book to consider how various forms of traditional African performance enable the marginalised voice to be heard once again.

Performativity provides a unifying aspect of this book. Echoing Butlerian theory, Matzke's point is that society can be experienced as a 'dress rehearsal' for new ways of thinking and being (p.65). The space of the act, which comes from a meld between long established forms of performance and urban theatre, takes on new meanings as the normative, socio-political register becomes subverted by the role reversal of transvestitism. Females who would normally have to take to the stage as men and 'dress up' to experience the power accorded to males in their society now can be seen, in post-liberation contexts, to be adopting less submissive roles and wearing more combative clothing. The point being that the space of the performance is fashioning new ideals which rub along side those of traditional expectations. The gaze of the spectator is then cast wide and attempts can be made to rationalize it.

Similarly, performance as an educator's tool can have liberating effect. Odhiambo provides a compelling argument centred upon the way the 'peripheral voice' can once again be heard in the community space by re-establishing their presence. In one example, Odhiambo, concentrates on the reluctance to implement an AIDS/HIV curriculum because teachers felt too shy to deal with searching and embarrassing questions by groups of students. In order to overcome this, the students received an allegory through drama. However, the play is written and performed by students and enables them to use their own voices to educate themselves and others. The sites of the periphery are exchanged between pupil and teacher and, as such, create a space for progress.

Progress is the natural bedfellow of social development. More than anything, this book evidences the resourcefulness of African performance to engage with progress and make it its own. We are provided with examples that evidence the ways in which the performer successfully re-connects with a past, written over by colonialism, presenting a meta-narrative which subverts the original text and produces a raft of whole new meanings for differing audiences of differing cultural backgrounds; thus liberating the original African voice from the imposition of occupation.