

## Book Review

*The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary South African Theatre*, 2015, Edited by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Greg Homann, London: Bloomsbury, P/b, 384 pp. ISBN 978-1-4081-7669-6, Price/£26.09

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In their 'Introduction' (pp. 1-14), editors Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Greg Homann outline their edited collection's structure, key issues and prominent and emerging theatre practitioners that the text explores. It extensively surveys theatre making in South Africa in the last twenty years post the first democratic national election which witnessed the end of the Apartheid regime. This is no easy task, as choices have to be made: what to include and what to leave out due to the multifarious quality of South African theatre. Much is staged – a quick glance at what is on offer at the annual National Arts Festival in the Eastern Cape gives an indication of the diversity and wealth of what is available – however, which productions become reparatory, what is repeatedly staged and produced, is often slim. Greg Homann's chapter 'Emerging Playwrights and Significant Plays' (pp. 321-339) introduces the reader to rising playwrights whose works are making significant impact on the theatre scene in South Africa, such as Neil Coppen and James Ngcobo. Hopefully, there will be the demand for a follow up version to this guide produced in less than the two decades that it took to write this one, and that will assess the impact that the aforementioned playwrights have had, much in the same vein that the current edition focuses on the work of Zakes Mda and Athol Fugard.

This is an essential text for a wide audience involved in or interested in contemporary South African theatre practice, from undergraduate students to fellow academics and theatre makers. From the onset and across

the various contributions to this guide, two main themes resonate across all the chapters and are common to and integral to South African theatre. The first is the use of the body in terms of physicality, body language and the form of physical theatre to explore various personas and cater for the multilingual nature of South African society. Veronica Baxter in 'The Theatre Makers in One-Person Format' (pp. 109-121) considers the work of Ronnie Govender, Rajesh Gopie, Greig Coetzee, Bheki Mkhwane, Omphile Molusi, Philip Dikotla, and Andrew Buckland, and stresses how 'solo, multi-character performances do require a physical dexterity or "athleticism" for which South African actors have earned a formidable reputation' (2015: p. 109). Baxter highlights how Andrew Buckland 'argues that the work of the theatre performer is not to present or represent someone on stage, but to embody them' (2015: p. 112) The important role the performer's body plays and its use in South African theatre is further documented in Robyn Sassen's essay on 'Physical Theatre' (77-92) in which she charts the development of this particular strand of South African theatre; a hybrid form that draws heavily on dance, music, clowning, and mime. In Muff Anderson's chapter on the work of Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom (pp. 241-257), Anderson calls attention to the fact that '[w]here Grootboom's work clearly excites, [...] is in the *movement* [original author's emphasis] of his actors, and here his use of professional choreographers has paid off' (2015: p. 252). Yvette Hutchison's 'Contemporary Collaborators II: Magnet Theater' (pp. 59-75) opens by referring to Magnet Theatre's co-founder Mark Fleishman's aim 'to strongly challenge western traditions of prioritizing text over embodied images and privilege somatic engagement with theatre' (2015: p. 59). These brief examples from *The Methuen Guide to Contemporary South African Theatre* illustrate how much of contemporary South African theatre further builds on what Sarah Roberts in 'The "Pioneers"' (pp. 17-41) refers to as 'heightened physicality' (2015: p. 18) that is found in the historical and foundational '[p]lays like *The Island*, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, *Woza Albert!* and *Asinamali!*' (2015: p. 18).

The exploration of identity politics such as how the discourses of gender and race shape the South African experience, both in sense of the individual and specific communities, is the second topic that reverberates across the guide. As Homann, Middeke and Schnierer write in the closing of their 'Introduction' (pp. 1-14): '[n]o matter whether of a more realistic and didactic or experimental and pluralistic bent, at the heart of South African drama remains the evaluation and delineation of identity' (2015: p. 12). This is clearly articulated in Loren Kruger's contribution on 'Lara Foot' (pp. 195-208) in which she offers critical overview of Foot's work and emphasises how her:

plays from *Tshepang* to *Fishers* deserve critical acclaim not merely because they tackle the troubling persistence of violence in South Africa, especially against women, but also because they treat these themes with restraint and grace and so capture the attention of audiences who might not be drawn by topical content alone (2015: pp. 206-207).

This theme of gender and sexual violence is likewise the topic at the heart of Yaël Farber's work which Marcia Blumberg focuses on in Chapter 18 (pp. 311-320). In *Mies Julie: Restitutions of Body and Soil Since the Bantu Land Act No 27 of 1913 & The Immorality Act No 5 of 1927* (2012), 'a re-visioning of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1899)' [2015: pp. 315], Blumberg notes that '[c]rucial to this re-visioning is the subtext of the play that focuses on land ownership, sexual relationships across race and issues of power' (2015: p. 316).

This is a timely volume that carefully surveys theatre work and theatre makers since the onset of democracy in South Africa, and successfully captures the heterogeneity of South African theatre practice. It is, of course, not able to offer itself as a decisive guide but does actively attempt to cover and critique the diversity at play. As stated earlier, it is sincerely hoped that it will take less than two decades for a follow-up to this guide to emerge, especially since the political, social, and theatrical South African landscape is in a constant state of flux. *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary South African Theatre* is a necessary addition to university libraries, student reading lists, academic bibliographies, and theatre makers' bookshelves, and through the South African theatrical material it examines, does 'reflect a nascent democracy that is striving to define and redefine a country against the backdrop of a very difficult history' (Homann, Middeke and Schnierer, 2015: p. 7).