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Edward Baron Turk, *French Theatre Today: The View from New York, Paris, and Avignon*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011. xxix + 367 pp. Figures, notes, select annotated bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-58729-992-6.

Review by Les Essif, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Edward Turk, an American scholar of French film and literature, has turned his critical eye toward French theatrical performance. He confesses from the outset that this book is largely the result of what seems to be an extremely passionate and highly concentrated fling with French-language performance for one full year (2005-2006), all of which took place in New York (for the ACT FRENCH festival), Paris, and finally in Avignon, for the summer theatre festival—hence the book’s division into three parts. Poring through this impeccably researched volume, it is, very honestly, hard to tell that it was not written by a long-time scholar of French theatre and performance—much more than the “enlightened amateur” Turk calls himself (p. xiii). The more reason for my great surprise when Turk reveals that, at the beginning of his expedition into theatre, he was unfamiliar with France’s most celebrated living playwright, Michel Vinaver (p. 204).

I endorse Turk’s claim that this book is the only English-language study that explores in depth the broad range of tendencies in French theatre since the turn of the century; and it does so with a unique blend of reference to text as well as performance. This is one of those books I wish I could have written, not only for its success at framing such an unwieldy subject, but also out of envy for Turk’s opportunity for such a concentrated, but comprehensive exploration of contemporary French theatrical performance. Turk’s quest begins with the ACT FRENCH festival, for which he describes an exceptional diversity of performances by many of France’s best directors and artists, some well- and long-established, like Ariane Mnouchkine and Patrice Chéreau. He also fills out this first part of the book with abundant reference to a wide variety of contemporary French dramatists to which he refers as representative of the “theatre of *la parole*,” which, “while reclaiming the word as theatre’s core component,” concentrates on “the design of the physical and acoustic space within which the actor operates and through which the actor exerts upon the audience the visceral, sensual, and cerebral impact called for by the text” (p. 62). He includes in this current not only Valère Novarina but, curiously, also such different writing styles as those of Bernard-Marie Koltès, Koffi Kwahulé, and Vinaver. But Turk is at his most enthusiastic, and the book at its most useful, when dealing with the increasing presence in contemporary “French” theatre of author-director-artists who create non-text-based theatre on the one hand, and with works by what I will call “French-language others,” such as the West African francophone (Turk prefers the term “French-language”) playwrights Koffi Kwahulé and José Pliya. In a brief, but to the point summary of the current cultural and artistic situations of these “other” French-language playwrights, Turk displays his prowess for bringing in the right depth of background information (chapter three). Readers will appreciate his technique of weaving abundant and relevant biographical, artistic, cultural, and political background information throughout his performance analyses, permitting even the most inexperienced reader to contextualize the discussions.

In “Part Two: Paris,” Turk effectively discusses with brio the continuing breadth and depth of the theatrical scene in Paris, the great diversity of French theatres and theatre audiences (from the Comédie

Française to boulevard and to stand-up comedy, and from nouveau opera to nouveau cirque), as well as the range of text-based performances (from “Great Classics Revisited” to Olivier Py’s and Valère Novarina’s theatre of the *parole*, a preferred object of Turk’s critical affection), and the multiform offerings of experimental, hybrid, and media theatre. Turk does an excellent job of explaining the current culture and politics surrounding the debate of the continuing importance of theatre to French culture; and the book testifies to the French population’s continuing belief in the civic, as well as artistic relevance of theatrical art—in rather stark contrast to its fading prominence in U.S. culture.

In “Part Three: Avignon,” Turk discusses the Avignon Theatre Festival from a variety of angles that attest to its uniqueness: its comprehensive nature and the quantity and quality of its offerings; the differences between the “overwhelming intimacy” and the “near-spiritual pull” of the historically preserved Avignon venue compared to the business-as-usual atmosphere of Edinburgh’s annual festival (p. 263); the differences between the “In” offerings and the “Off” (the increasingly prolific fringe theatre); and, despite the increasing internationalization of the festival, the marked absence of the United States. Throughout the book Turk frequently broaches, both implicitly and explicitly, a contrast between French and American theatre cultures: the French government’s subsidies of even the most experimental forms of performance; the “*esprit de famille*” that marks all ranks and natures of public theatre professionals (p. 173); the highly enviable subsidized system of France’s national network of theatres; the national, regional, and local networks of theatre companies, subsidized or not; the French embrace and sponsorship of “alternative” American theatrical visionaries like Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman. He even references a comparison of the “more cerebral” quality of performances by European actors versus what Turk judges to be the talent of American actors for “exerting their physical, bodily presence” (p. 280), a judgment with which I don’t quite agree.

I applaud Turk’s penetrating comparative-analytical approach to a survey which could have wound up more descriptive than analytical. He keenly examines the “edgy and cool” ways in which the “new media theatre” strives to “stake out fresh territories” by dismissing the “hoary distinctions between High Art and entertainment” (p. 77). In a quite stylish comparison between the “postmodern” “media hybridism” of Pascal Rambert and the “Victorian-leaning,” “corporeally based, imagistic” new circus of James Thiérée, he points critically and acutely to the complex similarities and figurative distinctions between the metonymic and grounded orientation of the former and the metaphoric and “free as the air” (p. 98) orientation of the other. While Rambert “requires us to exercise the mind vigorously,” Thiérée “largely relieves us of such labor,” yet both “reinstate the value of singular and unreproducible embodied creativity” (pp. 90, 92, 97-98). For the most part, Turk tends to be exceedingly receptive to a wide range of dramaturgical and directorial styles; but while defending the “poetic delirium” of Paul Claudel’s *Tête d’or* (directed by the talented Anne Delbée)—a box-office failure—he voices his perplexity at the huge success of the “old-fashioned and unexceptional” production of Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* (directed by Denis Podalydès). Turk explains this apparent lapse in artistic standards of French audiences as *Cyrano*’s appeal to “national solidarity” and the fact that it allows the audience “to feel highly cultured” (pp. 124-133). Turk’s judgments can be quite persuasive. Although I have never been a fan of Novarina’s “incantatory” theatre of the *parole*, his review of the Comédie-Française’s 2006 production of his *L’Espace furieux* (*The Furious Space*) as a “humanely moving and utterly entertaining” ontological exploration (pp. 182; 182-190) has convinced me to take another look.

To round out his survey of the great variety of scenic art to be had in Paris, one of the most interesting and instructive comparisons the book undertakes comes under the rubric of “Cultural Diversity II” (chapter ten), in which Turk compares what might seem like apples and oranges to many of us: operas and circuses, which Turk points out stand at opposite ends of the “‘Art versus Amusement’ spectrum,” the one being associated with a cultural elite, the other with a mass entertainment that “speaks to the unschooled sense of wonder within us all” (p. 238). Turk explains how opera in Paris is reaching out (down?) to larger audiences and a new-age *nouveau cirque* like the Collectif AOC is moving beyond the

conventional circus experience to “celebrate fluidity and uncertainty” and explore new forms of “empathetic space”: “a grand slam for cultural democratization” (p. 255).

In the relatively short “Part Three: Avignon,” Turk provides a brief, yet surprisingly comprehensive overview of the truly unique, tried-and-true, and ever-evolving summer festival, fleshing out both its Frenchness and its internationalizing trends. As part of its French character, Turk rightly stresses the importance of the festival’s educational goals, which reach well beyond the realms of theatrical art, with public lectures, presentations, and seminars with directors, producers, artists, and politicians. Turk also notes the involvement of social and cultural theorists and philosophers, like Edgar Morin, Richard Sennett—and, I would add, more recently, Slavoj Žižek, and Antonio Negri. This part of the book skillfully prepares the conclusion in which Turk will make a pitch for the future of French theatre—which he implies will shed itself of much of its continental Frenchness in its quest for intercultural hybridity and its interest in global migrations. Joseph Nadj’s “other” “mixed-media vision” (p. 273) comes alive in the production of *Paso doble*, which is “devoid of any narrative content other than the tools and acts of production,” and, according to Turk, it “backs up the venerable hypothesis that libidinal energy propels the greater part of human creativity” (p. 275). Turk seems particularly struck with the late Bernard-Marie Koltès’s “international vision” (p. 278) and most especially with this vision’s portrayal in his *Battle of Black and Dog*, a work that has a very interesting Paris-Avignon-U.S. connection (pp. 277-283).

It should be crystal clear that I heartily recommend this book and believe that it could and should be read not only by students and scholars of French drama and performance, but by anyone interested in the current state and trends of French theatre. The book is so broad in reach, however, so thorough and exacting in its analyses, that it begs critique. So let me say something about those moments at which I think Turk’s judgment and his conclusions need to be challenged. First, I believe that he casts much too broad a net with the designation of theatre of the *parole*. Calling it a “theatrical sensibility” that embraces such disparate (contemporary) authors as Novarina, Kwahulé, Vinaver, and the late Koltès (p. 62)—not to mention Turk’s remarks about the reach of its tentacles into theatrical history—would, it seems, allow us to apply it to a much too broad range of dramatists. What is more, Turk can appear to be overly charitable toward some fairly extreme experimentation of what he sees as theatre of the *parole*. In response to negative reviews by some New York critics of Wax Factory’s English-language take on Marguerite Duras’s *Destroy, She Said*, he provides an unconvincing defense of the work that rationalizes the viewers’ “bafflement” at the “failed narrative,” saying that the work “affirms its artistic complexity through strategies of indirection, flux, and ambiguity” (p. 89). If the bafflement is intentional, it seems, it is sheltered from criticism, and these strategies cannot possibly be flaws.

Second, although Turk does not at all disparage the Avignon Festival’s “Off” theatre and he does a good job of discussing its history, I am struck by his remark that, as opposed to the prolific and extraordinarily diverse offerings of Avignon Festival’s “Off” theatre, “for overall quality and complexity of artistic ambition, the ‘In’ simply cannot be beaten,” and that it is “a precious barometer of new creative trends in contemporary French and European theatre” (pp. 269-270). As an avid and longtime attendee of the festival, I have become increasingly enamored of my experiences with the “Off.” Without going into greater detail, there are a number of established “Off” theatres, like the Balcon, le Chêne Noir, and Alain Timar’s Théâtre des Halles that present a wide range of innovative and increasingly “internationalized” works and participate in the discovery of new creative trends as well as new dramatic authors; and they do this in a theatre setting (audience-stage relationship) that preserves the intimacy of the theatrical experience. On the other hand, I’ve become increasingly disenchanted with the “In” offerings: in part because of what seems to be a growing obsession to produce high budget, cutting edge, and increasingly high tech stuff; in part because of the increasing difficulty to score a good seat in some of the huge theatres. I assure you that most spectators seated high in the bleachers of the venerable Popes’ Palace Theatre—especially during an evening of the venerable high winds (called “*Le Mistral*”)—spend more time thinking about the waste of their ticket money than about the actors they

cannot hear and can hardly see. Considering Turk's fascination with the theatre of the *parole*, and the spatial intimacy between actor and spectator that this type of theatre would obviously require, why is he apparently unconcerned by the size of the venues where this type of theatre is presented?

Third, I do not share Turk's exuberance for the "edgy and cool" experiments with media theatre (for which, by the way, unsurprisingly, Turk finds an affinity with theatre of the *parole* [p. 77]). Though I do support the need to experiment in this field, I believe that theatrical art must remain on its guard against allowing itself to be fossilized by precipitous explorations into "fresh territory," especially when Turk can admit that "media theatre takes as a given that much literary writing for the stage and much theatre-going itself are fairly quaint, if not totally anachronistic, phenomena in a worldwide marketplace saturated with mass-mediated moving images" (p. 77). We must be wary of allowing consumerist pop-cultural forces to determine the rate, mode, and degree to which we incorporate new technologies into theatrical art. We must seriously consider the extent to which many theatrical forms deemed technologically innovative tend to reflect, reproduce, or simply reinvent the same screen reality that confronts viewers outside the theatre. I cling to the belief that, despite the enormous social impact of new digital technologies, with their social networks that move the balance of social relationship and interaction from the real and the physical to the virtual and ephemeral, most of us continue to yearn for the physical and real grounding of our social lives.

So perhaps the impact of the new technologies on our world and our theatre are not so fundamental or profound? Perhaps—at the risk of eliciting accusations of essentialism—there really are fundamental values (real bodies interacting in real intimate space) to which we still are obliged to turn for some essential quality of life—and theatre? Many of us still accept that the essence of the art of theatre, as opposed to the technologically-enhanced visual and aural arts (I do include the electronic reproduction of actors' voices here), is the living human body evolving, acting, and interacting in actual physical space. The further we stray from this profound simplicity, the more we weaken theatre's distinction from stories and events told by electronic reproduction on a screen. On another point, as for what Turk sees as the "hoary distinction between High Art and entertainment" (p. 77), why should there not be a place and a need for more analytically and critically sophisticated forms of theatre that require a certain level of intellectual aptitude and preparation? Maybe there's a place for "highbrow" art—a place to which spectators must journey—rather than the other way round?

The book's conclusion focuses on what Turk referred to in the book's introduction as the "renewed cosmopolitanism" of French theatre (p. xxiii): to its reach beyond French borders and French history; to the response of new French authors, directors, producers, and administrators to our globalizing and digitizing cultures; to the "conceptual grid" of "notions of migration and intercultural influence" (p. 296). This reminds me that we postmodern, postcolonial global citizens, who are quite content to promote and subsidize ethnic diversity, have come to question the qualities and diagnostic relevance of national cultures, even those that have been thousands of years in the making. We have learned to downplay cultural diversity attributed to national borders. This said, let me offer a caveat to Turk's endorsement of and pitch for the continued move toward the internationalization of French theatre, which seems to correspond to his enthusiasm for the "edgy and cool" expressive media: If we head too precipitously in either of these directions, we risk undercutting both theatre as an art and French theatre as a specific (national) cultural contribution to this art. Which could jeopardize future prospects for these terribly insightful books about "French theatre today"!

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