
H-France Review Vol. 19 (November 2019), No. 252

Mary Noonan and Joëlle Pagès-Pindon, *Marguerite Duras: Un théâtre de voix / A Theatre of Voices*. Leiden and Boston: Brill-Rodopi, 2018. xviii + 224 pp. Index. \$252.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-90-04-36096-9; \$119.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-90-04-36874-3.

Review by Anne Brancky, Vassar College.

Marguerite Duras: Un théâtre de voix / A Theatre of Voices is a wonderful, bilingual (French and English) new book that offers useful and innovative additions to scholarship on Marguerite Duras's extensive work for and with the theater. Though perhaps better known as a novelist and screenwriter, Duras wrote dozens of plays throughout her long career and had a very idiosyncratic, experimental, and avant-garde approach to writing for the stage. As Joëlle Pagès-Pindon and Mary Noonan point out, Duras herself even mounted several of her plays (*Le Shaga* and *Yes, peut-être* in 1968, *La Musica* and *Les Eaux et forêts* in 1976, *Savannah Bay* in 1983, and *La Musica Deuxième* in 1985), attesting to her commitment to the performative mode and to her genre-bending style.

This interdisciplinary collection, edited by two very accomplished leaders in the field of Duras studies, marshals the skills and expertise of groundbreaking scholars and practitioners in theater and performance studies to analyze the many contributions of Duras and her theater. As the editors argue in the concise preface to this volume, Duras's plays have been underestimated in regards to her own vast oeuvre but also in regards to twentieth-century French theater more broadly. Indeed, Pagès-Pindon and Noonan suggest that Duras's blurring of genre boundaries (for example, in 1973, *India Song* was published with the curious designation, "texte théâtre film") and the interpenetration of narrative and drama in her writing positioned her texts in "un rôle essentiel dans la profonde mutation qui marque la représentation théâtrale au cours de la seconde moitié du XXe siècle" (p. ix). As further examples of her lasting influence, they cite some of the very many later stage adaptations of various nontheatrical texts: screenplays, novels, essays, and even media interviews. Indeed, many of her works are still regularly staged in France and beyond.

Despite the myriad studies dedicated to Duras's oeuvre, there are relatively few monographs devoted solely to her theater.[1] As it adds to this critical bibliography, this volume's emphasis on the voice and sound provides a particularly novel angle from which to study Duras's work for the stage. At the same time, it inscribes her work within the emerging discipline of sound within theater studies, which emphasizes the often overlooked aural elements of the theater experience.[2] Because Duras's productions showcase language as they confound traditional distinctions between literary genres (play, essay, novel, autobiography, interview), they

represent a liminal mode between text and performance. In these works, she privileges reading, dialogue, the text, and the voice (on- and offstage—even in the form of recordings) over more emotive and gestural qualities of her actors. Through the careful study of a wide range of media—archival audio recordings, published literary texts, press reviews and articles, interviews, letters, and stage notes—the authors in this collection help us think about sound in Duras’s theater through the space of the stage and the relationship between the text and the *mise en scène*. Taken as a whole, this volume challenges the notion that her plays are “unperformable” while also interrogating the way she uses sound and space to push at the limits of representation and to usher in a new age of experimental theater.

The fourteen essays are divided into three parts. The first part, “Les Voix du texte,” focuses on voice and voicing within the text and on the stage. Joëlle Pagès-Pindon relies on the archival manuscripts of the text *Agatha*, as well as interviews Duras gave during the filming of *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*. Pagès-Pindon elaborates on what she calls “la voix adressée,” a term that characterizes Duras’s relationship to her lover and collaborator, Yann Andréa. The phrase is useful, first because it acknowledges Duras’s process of dictating to him, a technique which can sometimes be “heard” while reading her texts; second because it insists on the way that Yann Andréa’s presence begins to blur the boundaries between Duras’s personal life and her fiction during the 1980s, as he enters into her fiction as an interlocutor.

Mary Noonan studies how the late plays *India Song*, *Savannah Bay*, and *L’Éden Cinéma* “foreground the materiality of the spoken voice and the relationship between present voices and absent voices, between the inner ‘reading’ voice, connected to the auditory imagination, and the outer voice, connected to the physical environment and to interlocutors” (p. 22). For Noonan, Duras’s use of disembodied voices who read texts in these plays establishes a completely new way to think about theater by subverting the visual in favor of an emphasis on writing and the word, even on stage.

Julien Botella examines light and language in the staging of Duras’s plays in the 1980s: *L’Éden Cinéma*, *Savannah Bay*, and *La Musica Deuxième*. He shows that Duras disrupts the usual affiliation of light with knowledge or meaning to point instead to what lies beyond language—what is usually invisible or inapprehensible. Laurent Camerini analyses the rewritings of *La Musica* to see the text itself as a kind of ongoing performance as it is adapted and continuously “in progress.” Neil Malloy considers Duras’s stage directions and paratextual writing around *India Song* and *L’Éden Cinéma* to show how she very carefully and deliberately stages the marginal figures that preoccupy her work. He notes how she uses stage décor, voicing, and silence to represent figures who normally remain in the shadows.

The second part of the volume, entitled “Les Voix de la scène,” addresses the relationship of the voice (textual, paratextual, corporeal) to the stage and is primarily concerned with spatiality, embodiment, and representation. In the first essay here, Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux listens to recently discovered archival recordings of two performances of *L’Amante anglaise* in 1968. These recordings provide an especially interesting view of the audience reaction to the play (laughter!) and also remind the author of both the auditory and, importantly, the spatial dimensions of listening as a theater spectator. Sabine Quiriconi situates Duras’s work within modern European theater and suggests that, in its challenge to the very idea of representation, this work was fundamental to the revolutionary transformation of theater in the twentieth century, namely a move away from naturalism and a radical rethinking of the interplay between

text, actors and para-verbal functions on the stage. Duras worked with a number of important directors and actors (Claude Régy, Michaël Lonsdale, Bulle Ogier, Delphine Seyrig, and others), and her influence can be detected in their work as well.

Studying the texts alongside several stagings of *Savannah Bay* and *Le Théâtre de l'Amante anglaise*, Aurélie Coulon interrogates how the “off-stage” elements in the text and in the theater can elicit a reassessment of the visible and lead to a decentering of the spectator’s gaze. Lib Taylor challenges the common declaration that Duras’s plays are “unperformable” by discussing her own experience of staging *L'Éden Cinéma* and *Savannah Bay* in English. The material embodiment of the texts in these productions forced Taylor to encounter the limits of narrative and the confrontation of the textual and the body. Because Duras’s texts often collapse “several physical locations and temporal frames while also embodying the insubstantial, and provisional figures who inhabit the space no more than partially,” the stage has to accommodate this elasticity while complying to material realities (p. 118). She ultimately concludes that sound is what delimits theatrical space in these plays.

Duras’s partnerships and collaborations significantly influenced her writing and gave it new life in a new medium. Quentin Rioual writes about the significant creative relationship (four plays over twenty-six years) between Marguerite Duras and the director Claude Régy through their respective writing, as well as an analysis of press articles about the 1977 representation of *L'Éden Cinéma*, written by Duras and directed by Régy. Vincenzo Mazza examines archival materials from the Fonds Renaud-Barrault to study Duras’s association with Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud. Mazza argues that Duras’s work with the Renaud-Barrault theater company was critical and influential to her writing for the theater.

The third and final group of essays, “Témoignages Scéniques,” takes a broader approach to Duras’s writing for the theater and investigates the connections between language, silence, and the visual as she writes and rewrites her work. Isabelle Denhez moves away from the stage per se to analyze Duras’s rewriting and republication of the film *Nathalie Granger* the year after its release. This sort of “désadaptation,” which adds to and reorders the contents of the film, challenges the spectator’s memory of what s/he saw on screen (p. 159). As a playwright herself, Marie-Pierre Cattino reads some of Duras’s musings on writing (*Écrire* in particular) to reflect on how she approaches the text and the important role of silence therein. Cattino observes Duras’s attention to the life/text matrix and the way that this is manifest in her consideration of the characters in her plays.

Denise Aron-Schröpfer’s forward-thinking essay is a logical choice for last because the author sees Duras’s work as highly modern, anticipating all the major tendencies of twenty-first century theater: “le silence comme matière première de la création, le théâtre des voix, la forme hybride de l’écriture et le mixage des approches de différents arts, l’écriture du plateau ainsi que le décalage comme un nouvel outil de création, bref la remise en question des conventions qui président à la forme canonique du genre théâtre” (pp. 183-184). Focusing on *La Musica*, *La Musica deuxième*, and the film of the same name (plus the interval between them), Aron-Schröpfer identifies the development of some of these techniques, the figure of silence in the plays (emphasized heavily in the stage notes), the stress on language on stage, and the disruption of genres.

In the fourth part, the volume appropriately closes with Duras’s own “voice,” in the form

of a never-before-published interview by Helga Finter on May 9, 1985. Besides speaking briefly about her latest publication, *La Douleur*, Duras develops here a number of thoughts on the theater. This interview is particularly relevant to the volume because she talks about the idea of the “passage” between writing and the “parole adressée à un public” (p. 206), about theater as a “mise-en-paroles de l’écriture” (p. 209), and about the figure of Duras herself behind her plays. Duras learns about Artaud, and discusses what she calls a “théâtre de texte” and a “théâtre de voix,” which is described as a theater of passage, movement, a theater in progress (pp. 213-214, 216). This interview will appeal to those working on Duras’s theater, but will also be pertinent to those considering Duras’s political engagement, as she briefly addresses her support of Mitterrand and the difference between her engagement and that of Sartre.

In conclusion, while much of this volume will be of greatest interest to Duras scholars working in the details of the author’s oeuvre, it successfully argues that Duras’s plays were significant in the development of her style and in the exercise of her writerly preoccupations, and that they indeed contributed meaningfully to twentieth-century European theater and beyond. It also proves that there is still plenty to say about these plays and adaptations, since each essay provides a fresh take on her work and several of them make use of never-before-studied materials. The writing here is refreshingly technical, preoccupied as it is with the substance of some of the intermedial and genre-defying techniques that make the author so modern and that leave her work open to new and developing modes of interpretation. The footnotes and bibliographies of each essay will be of use to scholars hoping to do further research. *Marguerite Duras: Un théâtre de voix / A Theatre of Voices* will be a touchstone to anyone working on Duras’s theater in English or in French.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Première Partie: Les Voix du texte

Joëlle Pagès-Pindon, “Genèse de la voix adressée dans *Agatha*. Du dialogue au récitatif”

Mary Noonan, “Auditory Perception and Auditory Imagination in the Late Plays of Marguerite Duras”

Julien Botella, “Marguerite Duras et la ‘lumière théâtrale’: scène, sens et vision dans *L’Éden Cinéma*, *Savannah Bay* et *La Musica Deuxième*”

Laurent Camerini, “Marguerite Duras et les variations de *La Musica*: parier sur l’ex-sistence et sur la relance”

Neil Malloy, “Les ombres du jardin: la mise en scène des marginaux dans le théâtre de Marguerite Duras”

Deuxième partie: Les Voix de la scène

Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux, “Les archives sonores de *L’Amante anglaise* (Paris, TNP, 1969). L’enregistrement contre la mémoire?”

Sabine Quiriconi, "Perspectives dramaturgiques: l'écrit à l'épreuve de quelques mutations de la scène contemporaine"

Aurélié Coulon, "Enjeux dramaturgiques et scénographiques de la figuration de l'invisible dans *Le Théâtre de L'Amante anglaise* et *Savannah Bay*"

Lib Taylor, "Negotiating Theatrical Space in Performances of Marguerite Duras's Later Plays"

Quentin Rioual, "Marguerite Duras et Claude Régy: une rencontre dans l'histoire des représentations"

Vincenzo Mazza, "Marguerite Duras et la Compagnie Renaud-Barrault, une rencontre féconde. Le cas de *Des journées entières dans les arbres*"

Troisième Partie: Témoignages scéniques

Isabelle Denhez, "Comme un battement de la page sur l'écran: silence et parole dans *Nathalie Granger*"

Marie-Pierre Cattino, "Écrire pour la scène: le silence ou comment Marguerite Duras aborde le quotidien comme force poétique"

Denise Aron-Schröpfer, "Le Silence des *Musica(s)*"

Quatrième partie: Entretien avec Marguerite Duras, le 9 mai 1985

Helga Finter and Marguerite Duras, "'Le point de fuite du théâtre, c'est moi'. Entretien avec Helga Finter le 9 mai 1985."

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Christophe Pellet, *Le Théâtre de Marguerite Duras* (Lausanne: Indes et Calendes, 2018); Gabrielle H. Cody, *Impossible Performances: Duras as Dramatist* (New York: P. Lang, 2000); Liliane Papin, *L'Autre scène: le théâtre de Marguerite Duras* (Saratoga: Anma Libri, 1988). Many other chapters, essays, and articles deal with her plays and their stagings.

[2] See Laurence Le Pors, *Le théâtre des voix: À l'écoute du personnage et des écritures contemporaines* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011); Andrew Kimbrough, *Dramatic Theories of Voice in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2011).

Anne Brancky
Vassar College
anbrancky@vassar.edu

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the

date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172