

GENDER AND THEATRE

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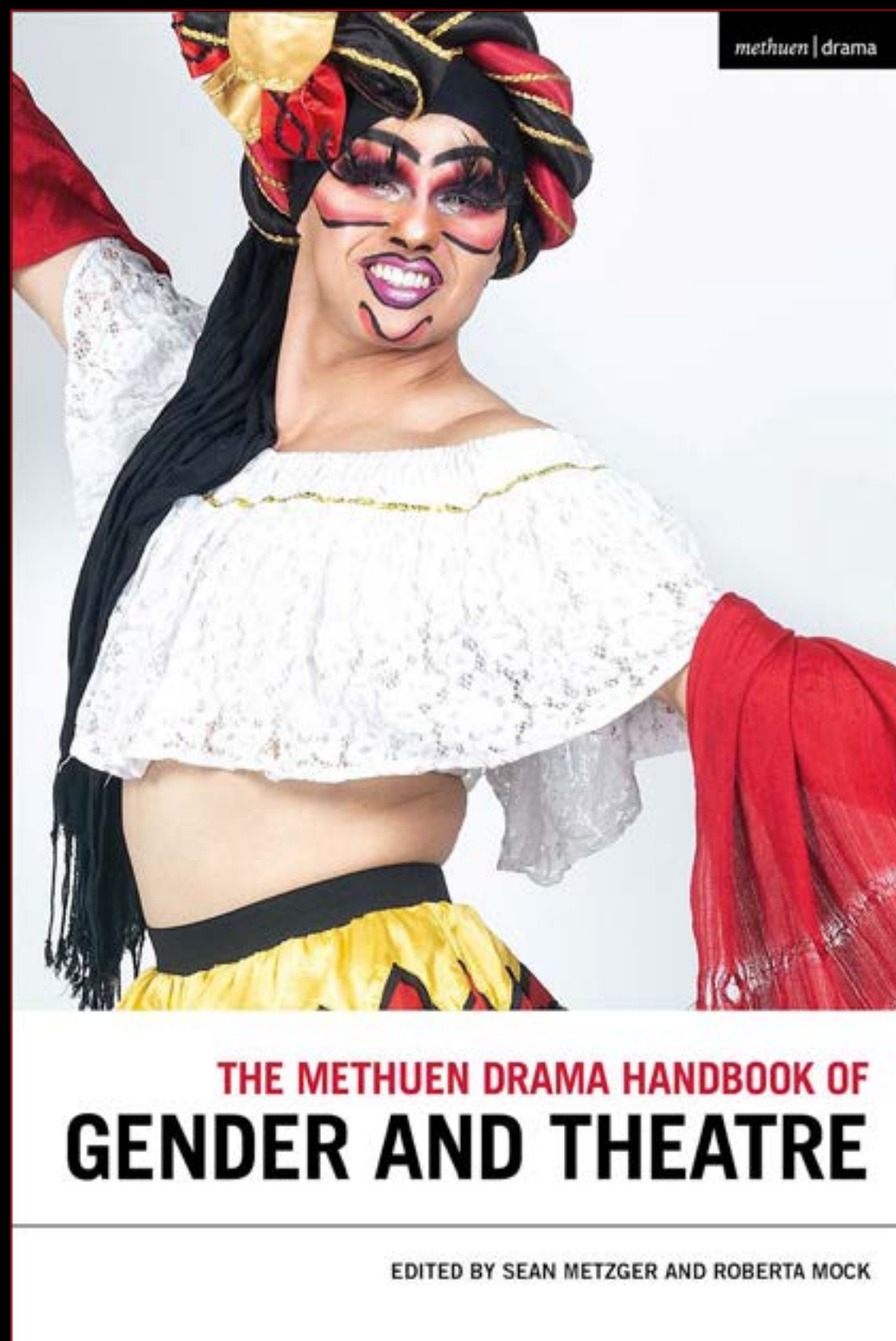
CENTRO DE ESTUDOS DE TEATRO DA FACULDADE DE LETRAS
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Presented as a guide for teatrologists, this book is a major work for all the scholars dealing with the operative concepts as theatre, drama, performance, becoming, on one hand, a funnel about gender issues and the geopolitics inherent to those paradigms and concepts and, on the other hand, as a statement on why they should be changed, through theatre across times and countries, which turns it into a very attractive process of reading.

Along the 526 pp., we get to travel through four parts divided by chapters. Each part has an introduction by the editors which are very rich in content. The titles of the parts are very catching: part 1 “Orientation and Reorientation”, part 2 “Geopolitics and Biopolitics”, part 3 “Transmedia”, part 4 “Genre and Theatrical Form”.

Albeit in each of the parts we can have a separated reading through, they also work as a whole since they prepare us towards the end which is precisely an announcement that we should get ready for the changes. “Towards a Trans Theatre” is the title of the last chapter (pp. 475-490).

Let us go from the top though. Following an introduction and two chapters in which the concepts of gender, transgender, intersectionality and crossing are presented, we are offered a roundtable of questions and statements which aims to frame Theatre and Gender



THE METHUEN DRAMA HANDBOOK OF GENDER AND THEATRE

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through indigenous performance in cases as Hawaii, Alaska and the American Indian Dance Theatre. The way the editors conduct the roundtable is very enthusiastic: “SM. That’s fantastic. Roberta and I thought we’d ask you whether or not theatre gives you the right language to describe what it is you’re doing: how it helps you, in what way it might limit you” (p. 60). The answers that follow are full of meaning “THB. It’s been a little bit of a challenge for people to understand that Hawaiians have practices that are similar – and I am speaking of the community in which I live. I should give a little bit of background about our Hawaiian Theatre program” (*Idem*). It is through this informal language that we get to know the dimension of the relation between theatre and society in the case studies. The chapter four compares the presentation of gender in Brecht and Mao Zedong. Chapter five opens the part 2 presenting the difference between geopolitics (world system) and biopolitics (human life grouped into categories) and it goes on (chapter six) presenting “disobedient” women in India, through Theatre History. Portraits of women who were not common and defied the system. We dive into (chapter seven) Jesusa Rodríguez and Astrid Hadad Cabaret Theatre (Mexico) and the politicisation of it, with commentaries “about the marginalisation and violent oppression of women in a country that wants to keep them ‘tied to forced motherhood, male sexuality and the exercise of power... through force... and subtlety’” (p. 113). We also get to know some of the historical precedents of Cabaret in Mexico, back in the 90’s. The afro-caribbean crossing actors have a spotlight (chapter eight) and we move on to intersectional politics in Australian colonial socio-political context (chapter nine). Canada is reserved for “monolithic, violent and oppressive category in its embodied complexity” (chapter ten, p. 179), with the disruption of white male privilege in two plays (*Prince Hamlet* by Ravi Jain and *Daughter* by Adam Lazarus) on intersectionality and official multiculturalism.

The editors also devote a chapter eleven to the early modern Chinese Theatre (XIXth e XXth centuries) in which we can relate gender and semiotics (stage props and face make up). We jump into early Roman comedies (chapter twelve) about “the body of the actor who plays a female role (p. 219)”, through which we can witness the differences of appearance between the range of actors in relation to the roles.

We get to part 3 entitled “Transmedia” with another exceptional introduction (chapter thirteen) by the editors where we change our point of view about its meaning and what hitherto meant a crossing of the *media* becomes also a crossing of genders and audiences, celebrity culture, costumes (cross-dressing), sets and other diverse elements which intersect theatre and its epiphenomena. Chapter fourteen tells us about *Heathers: the musical*, adaptation from screen to stage and the way it “unsettles the traditional idea of the happy ending” (p. 249).

When we start reading chapter fifteen we already have a very solid idea on how theatre can question the “presentation” of gender in everyday life through transing and virtuosism (as in circus performances) along with all the other elements a production provides to the audience if it aims to dismantle gender codes.

We dive again into the past. This time (chapter sixteen) goes back to early modern Japan (1600–1868), when Kabuki theatre combined actors and identity through feminine roles played by young actors. Furthermore, it relates the Kabuki actors with gender and sexuality in an endless perspective of culture studies. The idea that remains is that of the actor being “produced” as well as gender.

Chapter seventeen conducts us through early modern English drama and gender performance carried out by male actors who also could be using that same performance to disguise their deepest inner fantasies. Chapter eighteen is devoted to the spectralization of black women in theatre and in media which relates to the typicalization of black women bodies.

Chapter nineteen presents a very well written article on cyborg theatre (corporeal and technological intersections in multimedia performance) and the presentation of fembot (robots that look like what is conceived to be feminine) and the performance of womanised behaviour and happiness as well as the materialisation of race.

We are now at part 4, “Gender and Theatrical Form” where we are confronted (introduction, chapter twenty), once again by the pen of the editors, with quotations of Bey’s book *Black trans feminism* and the “parallel undoing of imposed racialized and gendered norms” (p. 365). Chapter twenty-one is on the Golden Age of the Hispanic classical theatre and the acting of women, who were allowed to act on plays in countries like Italy and France. It describes actresses as hypersexualized by the roles they played, whereas, nowadays, those same roles are played by men who are willing to rethink gender by diversifying the classics.

Chapter twenty-two refers a male dance company which performs the routine of the *El son de la negra* traditionally danced by the Ballet Folklórico de México de Amalia Hernández with mixed-sex couples. The company of male dancers, México de Colores, recreates “traditional dance numbers through gender crossing, deeply informed by their embodied experiences in and outside of the ballet folklórico as gay men” (p. 393).

Chapter twenty-three refers to the process of staging “femme excess” in the work of three directors who work on the “identification of femme as an embodied queer praxis” (p. 411).

“Performing vulnerable masculinity in Northern Ireland’s post-conflict documentary theatre” (chapter twenty-four) brings us the masculine figures that dominate the popular imagery in Northern Ireland through three productions: *Green & blue*, *Don’t shoot my wane, shoot me!* and *First response*. They “represent male experiences in Northern Ireland (...) mainly within a conventional mode of masculine identity and behaviour” (p. 442).

Chapter twenty-five explores how *Afriqueeer* jumped from the darkness to light through site specific performances where the prevalence goes to “conjuring alternative masculinities” in a “place of placelessness” (p. 459).

We finally get to the last chapter (twenty-six), which I referred to in the beginning of this article, “Towards a trans theatre” (p. 475). Here we get to know *Against a trans narrative*, a documentary signed by Jules Roskam; the procedures used by Agnes Borinsky when writing a play; a cast of trans visibility theatre productions in the US between 2015 and 2019. Here we can find several points of view on trans experiences in theatre, being the most polemic, the one that refers to the absence of trans actors playing trans roles (p. 479).

Each chapter is signed by a different author (except for the introductions which are signed by the editors) who imprint a very deep and solid perspective on the relation between theatre and society through gender.

The book ends with references to all the plays and productions mentioned across the chapters, which makes it also a major rich *compendium* of a golden selection of theatre texts.

All together and when compared to Jill Dolan's *Theatre and sexuality* (2010) or Philippe Maiden's *Érotisme et sexualité dans les arts du spectacle* (2015), this book is a major work that deserves to be read by the longest possible range of readers in the world, since it combines theatre, sociology and anthropology.

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