

BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by CHRYSTYNA DAIL

Performing the Queer Past: Public Possessions

By Fintan Walsh. *Methuen Drama Agitations: Text, Politics and Performances*. London: Methuen Drama, 2023, pp. xiv + 230, 17 illustrations. \$115.00 cloth, \$103.50 e-book.

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Contemporary theatre and performance are not merely haunted by the queer ghosts of their past; they are possessed. In his lucid and engaging book *Performing the Queer Past: Public Possessions*, Fintan Walsh conjures these specters—some historical (Oscar Wilde, Ian Charleson), some literary (Hamlet, Kushner’s Angel), some material (a sequined dress, a prison door)—to explore two interrelated questions: First, in what ways are contemporary theatre and performance possessed by a queer past? Second, how do they grapple with this possession? With acuity and generosity, Walsh compellingly explores these questions through a well-chosen archive, ultimately arguing that contemporary performance enacts complex strategies for refashioning its (often fraught) past in service of a better future.

As Walsh explains in the Introduction, possession “capaciously signifies how minds, bodies, sites, archives, objects and narratives in the present appear to be materially or structurally attached to or fixed in the past” (17). Possession names how the past occupies the present not only representationally, psychologically, or affectively but also materially, architecturally, and technologically. Walsh elaborates this idea through six chapters, each of which considers a specific mode of (grappling with) possession: haunting and channeling, working through and working out, recollection and replay, reproduction and transformation, occupation and commemoration, and intermedial recontextualization and dissemination.

In Chapter 1, Walsh analyzes Dickie Beau’s *Re-Member Me* (2017) and Karen Finley’s *Written in Sand* (2013) to consider the queer performance-as-séance. In his careful reading of *Re-Member Me*, Walsh builds on his work as the editor of *Theatres of Contagion: Transmitting Early Modern to Contemporary Performance* (2020), mobilizing a “dramaturgy of contagion” to understand better how canonical Western drama (in this case, *Hamlet*) is imbricated with histories of queerness and disease (42). Then, in his analysis of *Written in Sand*, Walsh turns to Finley’s

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“fragmented, layered, multi-vocal presentation” to consider how she “accommodate [s] and release[s] the memories and voices” of those who have been lost to AIDS (51). Through his reading of these performances, Walsh argues that channeling the past is a strategy for remembering, mourning, celebrating, and guarding the dead.

The following three chapters attend to the relationship between queerness and violence/trauma. In Chapter 2, Walsh analyzes Franko B’s *Milk & Blood* (2015) and Cassils’s *Becoming and Image* (2012), both of which literalize a history of queer struggle through performative combat (boxing and wrestling, respectively). Walsh explicates how Franko B and Cassils exorcise the psychic and material effects of queer trauma through exercise. Chapter 3 develops additional strategies for dealing with historical trauma by focusing on Milo Rau’s *La Reprise: Histoire(s) du théâtre (I)* (2018) and Travis Alabanza’s *Burgerz* (2018). Attending to the violence enacted against racialized sexual minorities, Walsh considers how “the audience is deliberately and strategically implicated in bearing witness to the stories recollected and re-enacted” (105). Through these two performances, Walsh demonstrates that the collective replaying of the past can inspire collaborative action in the present. Walsh sustains his attention to violence against queer people in Chapter 4, which focuses on Jeremy O. Harris’s play *Daddy: A Melodrama* (US premiere, 2019) and Rachel Mars’s durational performance piece *Forge* (2022). Here, Walsh explores the potential of performance to divest objects (in this case, life-size dolls and an iron gate) of their power to absorb and transmit violence.

In the last two chapters of *Performing the Queer Past*, Walsh expands the scope of his argument, connecting queer performances to a broad range of social issues and audiences. In Chapter 5, he turns to the legacies of Oscar Wilde as understood through Artangel’s *Inside – Artists and Writers in Reading Prison* (2016) and McDermott & McGough’s *The Oscar Wilde Temple* (2017). By reading the history of Wilde’s changing role in queer culture through these two architectural and scenographic installations, Walsh shows how queer history can be mobilized for engaging with larger issues of detainment, exclusion, and dispossession. Similarly, Chapter 6 expands on queer performance’s ability to speak to a wide community by analyzing two intermedial queer performances: Belfast Ensemble’s 2020 digital production of Mark Ravenhill’s *Ten Plagues* (2011) and Split Britches’ *Last Gasp* (2020/2021)—to understand better the cultural response to COVID-19 and, in turn, COVID-19’s impact on cultural production.

Considering *Performing the Queer Past* as a whole, Walsh’s most exciting contribution to contemporary performance scholarship is metatextual: the book itself seems possessed by a queer past. This possession is most obvious in his selection of case studies; Wilde’s restless occupation of contemporary culture extends, of course, to Walsh’s own work. Furthermore, a shared set of references echo across many of the chapters, creating the sense of an intratextually haunted book. For example, when Walsh introduces his archive in the context of recent art exhibitions, he includes a major retrospective on the work of British filmmaker and activist Derek Jarman at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Jarman then reappears in Chapter 3 because Alabanza performed in an adaptation of Jarman’s film *Jubilee* for the Lyric Theatre in 2018. In Chapter 4, Jarman is named as a friend of Marc Almond (who originally performed in Mark Ravenhill’s *Ten Plagues*), and in the Epilogue, Jarman’s flotsam sculptures materialize Walsh’s argument (contra

José Esteban Muñoz) that we shouldn't overlook the shoreline in favor of the horizon. Taken individually, these references add context, dimension, and texture to Walsh's analyses. Taken collectively, they form part of a queer archive that reverberates in often surprising ways throughout the book and affords unexpected glimpses of connection between otherwise disparate people, objects, texts, and ideas. These resonances productively unsettle a sense of linearity, allowing the book itself to enact a queer temporality.

Performing the Queer Past will reward anyone interested in theatre history, performance studies, LGBTQ+ art, or contemporary culture with Walsh's sensitive, compelling readings. In the face of the historical trauma that possesses so many of his case studies, Walsh remains insistently hopeful: through performance, we can collectively bear the pain of our past and create better possibilities for future generations. Together, we can reforge each loss, absence, and ending into a new beginning.

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Feminist Rehearsals: Gender at the Theatre in Early Twentieth-Century Argentina and Mexico

By May Summer Farnsworth. *Studies in Theatre History and Culture*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2023; pp. vii + 285. \$95.00 paper, \$95.00 e-book.

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Feminist Rehearsals: Gender at the Theatre in Early Twentieth-Century Argentina and Mexico offers a nuanced, complex, and well-documented education in the evolution of women's rights from the nineteenth century through suffrage in Argentina and Mexico. May Summer Farnsworth delivers a tour de force with this history of women's activism and the many linkages between theatre and legislative debates in furthering social change. Farnsworth employs the term *feminist rehearsals* to "identify recurrent performative tactics used by authors, practitioners, and spectators to transmit feminist ideology, produce feminist knowledge, and create feminist publics" (1–2). These rehearsals manifest beyond what is traditionally considered theatre by broadening the definition of the stage to include public meetings and political events.

Comprising an introduction and seven chapters, *Feminist Rehearsals* applies frameworks posited by Jill Dolan and Judith Butler when considering "group identities born of labor struggles, suffrage protests, and feminist drama in Latin America" (3). Namely, the study interrogates the powerful effect that woman-centered performances have on feminist spectators. This monograph traces pivotal