

Introduction.

“What can be the rule of this disorder?” Disorienting Spaces
and Places in Contemporary Theatre

The experience provided by theatrical performances allows for a great variety of spatial relationships, probably surpassing that of any other form of artistic expression. The ever-changing ways of occupying and overcoming the stage, and of rethinking the ‘proxemics’ of bodies, can undoubtedly be considered one of the fundamental rules of theatre and its millennial tradition. Almost a convention in itself, this ‘rule’ has now become the driver of a creative spatial disorder that reflects the fragmentation of the contemporary world and enables the proliferation of new practices and policies concerning the practical engagement of bodies and places. As Una Chaudhuri aptly put it in her *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (1995), the most recent happenings, environmental theatre, performance art, site-specific theatre, immersive theatre and so on share some common goals: to encourage the audience to reflect upon the performance itself and reconsider the potential and limitations of its nature; to make people think about their own “position of privilege as audience for art” and to subvert societal practices and the well-established dogma of mimesis (22). What Peter Brook has termed “disorder” on the stage of the several places,¹ such as the nation, in which a play is represented and its own concept of nationality or cultural identity, the historical and geographical *other places* evoked or represented with their allure of reassuring exoticism or disturbing alterity.

¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre. Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (New York: Touchstone, 1968), 65.

All four aspects imply a political dimension and agenda since even the passive or active engagement of spectators with the performance can now be read as compliance with or reaction to mass societal conformism in art. Plays appealing to the naturalistic tradition can now be accused of advocating an adherence to the nineteenth-century bourgeois representation of the world, and appeal to a class partly responsible for the silencing and marginalization of minorities, the subjection of women, colonialist exploitation, etc. On the other hand, the rejection of the mimetic representation of the world and the demolition of the “home” as the rigid setting of naturalistic plays (in itself implying concepts like “family” and “nation”) have led to complex, blended, hybrid spaces like those experienced and crossed by people and authors in “exile”, one of the key topics of twentieth-century theatre, literature, art and history. Exile, and its sense of disorientation, can be considered a sort of postmodern geographical interpretation of Brecht’s estrangement, and has become the core of the theatrical experience shared by

² Nadine Holdsworth, Mary Luckhurst, "Introduction", in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 1.

performers and audience. According to Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst, eclecticism is the principal characteristic of contemporary theatre "in terms of the subjects it addresses, the sites it occupies, its increasing interdisciplinarity and the forms of representation it offers".² New forms and the new media have multiplied the possibilities for spatial experimentation, allowing British and European theatre (as concerns the essays gathered in this issue) to participate in the so-called "spatial turn", as Fredric Jameson defined it: that is to say, the increasing attention paid to geographical and spatial issues which has characterized the literary and philosophical debates and fostered – more or less directly – the rise of geo-centred approaches such as geopoetics, geocriticism and ecocriticism. It is widely acknowledged that since the second half of the twentieth century the reflection and representation of 'space' and 'place', and their shifting borders between the extremes of pure abstraction and hyperconnotation, have attained a central position in debate, undermining the centuries-old supremacy of 'time' and 'history' and their ideological fictions. The pretence to universality and objectivity that once fashioned a homogenous world has been replaced by attention to cultural stereotypes, imaginary literary places or spatial projections, landscapes and mindscapes reshaped by colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and terrorism (and its religious justifications) as well as by the intersection with new media.

These new critical ways of thinking about space/place are represented mainly in the first part of this issue, which collects essays on British plays dealing with national identity and security, economic and political stability, and migration. As is well known, 'new writing' theatre has always been engaged with social critique, and in the 1990s British playwrights strove to represent post-communist Europe and its difficulties. This political aspect became even more pressing in the 2000s after the attack on the Twin Towers, which imposed global terrorism and the debate on democracy as the new agenda for playwrights and directors.

In tackling these new interpretations of old issues, the forms of new-millennium British theatre have always looked to the two main models which characterized the past century: on the one hand *Don't Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne as example of a social portrait still pervaded by the naturalistic promise of transparency typical of "new writing" theatre; on the other *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, representative of a restricted experimental group of plays that defy conventions such as the plausible *chronotopoi* and the referential use of language. "The two kinds of writing have existed in a permanent state of tension, each challenging the other: the naturalists goading the experimentalists into being more comprehensible, with the minority challenging the majority to be more imaginative".³ All the papers gathered in this part of the issue offer an overview of the eclecticism of contemporary theatre by focusing on the manipulation of spaces and representations of places, interweaving spatial issues with phenomenological implications and political outcomes in the broadest sense. Savina Stevanato's "*Between the Acts of Hybrid Spaces*" helps us pinpoint the contiguities and

³ Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen, 2011), 25.

differences between the modernist treatment of space and the ontological interspaces and liminality of postmodernism through an analysis of the theatrical performance in Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*. According to Stevanato, this work "testifies to an already postmodern ontology of dislocation, open-endedness, and changeability" since Woolf manipulates space "in order to convey the increasing hybridation between outsideness and insideness". Whilst Stevanato explores spatial crossings and "the impossibility of fixing any boundaries relevant to both identity and aesthetics", a stronger commitment to the importance of place in contemporary theatre can be found in Maria Elena Capitani's essay "Appropriating Macbeth in the Contact Zone. The Politics of Place, Space, and Liminality in David Greig's *Dunsinane*". As Capitani shows, Greig's 2010 play illustrates how it is possible to reappropriate Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and stage the intercultural clash between Scottishness and Englishness to allude to the contemporary clashes emerging from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Eleventh-century Scotland is exploited as a chronotope to articulate the playwright's "stratified idea of place" since he "constantly oscillates between roots and routes, belonging and unbelonging, microcosm and macrocosm, local and global". Again revolving around the global and local consequences of political and economical phenomena is the theatre of Anders Lustgarten, to which I devote the essay "All the World's a Beach. Staging Global Crisis in Andres Lustgarten's *Lampedusa* (2015)". The play juxtaposes the island of Lampedusa and the Mediterranean sea, a physical space dramatically involved in recent mass migration but also an 'original place' for Western civilization, with London's indebted lower classes (often including people of foreign origins), suggesting the shared difficulties resulting from global inequality. Serena Guarracino's essay that follows, "Elsewhere is here. The Politics of Space in Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children*", tackles a free-license play published in *The Guardian* and performed worldwide in various different spaces even outside traditional theatrical spaces. This 'instant' play was written and staged as a reaction to Israeli military intervention in the Gaza strip and, as Guarracino shows through a linguistic analysis, testifies to contemporary theatre's attempts to shape "the performing space as a political space of engagement and confrontation". Andrea Peghinelli's essay "Agency, Staging and Representation Strategies in Sulayam Al Bassam's *The Speaker's Progress*" focuses on an appropriation of Shakespeare's *The Twelfth Night* again provoked by historical contingencies. Al Bassam's Arab Shakespeare Trilogy, to which the play belongs was inspired by a perception of the issues and concerns of the post-9/11 Arab World. It juxtaposes the performance of *Twelfth Night* with video excerpts from a 1963 performance of a free adaptation from a supposed Arab Golden Age. As Peghinelli notes, "the screening of fragments of that past production provides a cue for the performers to create a dialogue, in a metatheatrical doubling of the narration between two different worlds" while the agenda of the Shakespearean play is rewritten with a different authorial voice to present the audience with "a

story of secularism and religious tolerance”.

The last four essays gathered in this issue focus more on theatrical experimentations dealing with the stage and the space of performance, and on the role played by the media in doubling and multiplying the experience of audience and actors through radical formal innovations. Fabiola Camuti’s essay on “Theatre as a Shared Space of Exhaustion. Staging Contemporary Tragedies in Jan Fabre’s 24-hour Performance” centres on the Belgian author Jan Fabre and his recent 24-hour performance *Mount Olympus* (2015). Camuti reads the play as “an outstanding example of contemporary theatre that, starting from avant-garde experimentation, redefines the spatial relationship between stage and audience” and strengthens the bond between performers and spectators, driving them to the threshold of exhaustion. In her essay “The Theatricality of Exhibition Spaces. Fluid Spectatorship into Hybrid Spaces” Pamela Bianchi further explores the shifting boundaries of contemporary theatre and “the negotiation between visual art, museum spaces, and performing arts, which set up the spectatorship dialectic between temporal and spatial dynamics”. Her interdisciplinary approach focuses on the “exhibition space” as a hybrid space, a meta-theatre in which “the Renaissance monocular gaze” disappears. Vincenzo Del Gaudio takes us back to the British context with his essay “Remediated Spatiality. Performative and Medial Spaces in the Work of Imitating the Dog”, paving the way for an investigation of how digital media “relate to scenic space and modify its prerequisites and tensions”. He focuses on the principal works of the British company Imitating the Dog to show their use of a cinematic dramaturgy and attempt to employ the scenic space to redefine the boundaries of the urban environment. Finally, Salvatore Margiotta focuses on Italian New Theatre, and in particular on the collaboration between Carlo Quartucci and the artist Jannis Kounellis to show that they go beyond the notion of scenography to establish a closer relationship with the audience. We could not leave dance out of this survey of contemporary theatre, and the last essay we are happy to include is a wide-ranging reflection on space and dance by the choreographer Gabriella Riccio. She focuses on “the ‘body’ as territory of the creative and cognitive experience of the dancer-choreographer” and on “the ‘scene’ as territory of the aesthetic-cognitive experience of the spectator-witness” to offer insights into the role of the spectator in the performative dialectics. Although inevitably partial, this *Anglistica AION* issue hopes to offer useful analyses of thought-provoking plays and performances, but also to contribute to mapping theoretical and practical research on spatial representation and exploitation that are reshaping our own experience of the theatre and of the world.