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## **Review of Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction, and: Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader**

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*Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* , and: *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader* (review)

T. Fulton Burns

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Gellman structures his classes, introduces exercises, guides students, and helps those that are having difficulty. Where most books simply list a how-to for exercises and possibly a “watch for” list, Scruggs and Gellman’s book provides “real” examples of student–teacher interactions that can be applied to the classroom. Furthermore, since the book is presented from a student’s perspective, we get to see how the exercises appear to a student and experience Geoff’s insecurities, failures, and breakthroughs. *Process* offers a rather unique perspective compared to other improv manuals, and is a must for anyone who has ever taught improv or been mystified by the art form.

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**Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction.** By Simon Murray and John Keefe. New York: Routledge, 2007; pp. xv + 230. \$33.95 paper.

**Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader.** By Simon Murray and John Keefe. New York: Routledge, 2007; pp. xxviii + 283. \$33.95 paper.

Simon Murray (director of theatre at Dartington College of Arts) and John Keefe (senior lecturer at the London Metropolitan University Undergraduate Centre) offer the theatre world two movement-analysis texts. These well-written books, which focus on techniques from the Western world of physical theatre, would serve graduate level or highly focused classes in movement pedagogy or practice. With their identical six-chapter breakdowns (“Genesis, Contexts, Namings”; “Roots: Routes”; “Contemporary Practices”; “Preparation and Training”; “Physicality and the Word”; “Bodies and Cultures”), the books may be used in relation to each other or stand alone as individual texts.

The first volume, *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction*, expresses the theories of authors Murray and Keefe. With the idea of “pluralities,” the authors reveal the physical theatre and the physical in theatre. The goal (achieved in both texts) is to express the combined practice–theory–history of the physical world of the theatre. The authors acknowledge that their aim is “to focus on the matter and forms of physical theatres, to understand their claims and intentions, and to make explicit the kinds of relationships these practices have with other theatres territories, both culturally and historically” (22), and “to offer commentary, insights and analysis on the ‘bigger picture’—the social, cultural, ideological and philosophical contexts—which physical theatres inhabit” (22).

“Genesis, Contexts, Namings” defines what makes physical theatre. Here, mime, gestures, and feeling are contextualized in the world of physical theatre. The physical requirements of such performance groups as DV8 Physical Theatre and the Wooster Group are used as examples and viewed through the critical lenses of cultural materialism and feminist theory. “Roots: Routes” is where the authors take the reader to the Greek theatre, exploring origins and relating *The Poetics* to contemporary theatre movements. The origins

are also related to sections in the chapter such as the Miming, Expressive, Masked, Illusionary, Dancing, and Avant-garde. A particularly interesting section looks at visceral theatre where pieces by the Living Theatre such as *The Brig* and *Prometheus* provide strong roots for current physical theatre, while also connecting back to the ideas of Artaud and Alfred Jarry. “Contemporary Practices” is where the world of theatre and dance collide, as the physical dialogue in the world of dance is considered as well as physical theatre. Groups such as the Wuppertal Dance Theatre, DV8, and Divas Dance Theatre meet the ideas of Théâtre du Soleil, Goat Island Performance Group, and Dario Fo.

The theatre-movement instructor will find strong pedagogical ties in the chapter “Preparation and Training.” Lev Dodin, Eugenio Barba, Anne Bogart, Jacques Lecoq, Monika Pagneux, Phillipe Gaulier, Joan Littlewood, and Etienne Decroux provide the basis for the various movement schools of thought considered here. The chapter ties together diverse methods of training and is beneficial for both professional directors and actors as well as movement professors and their students. Those wishing to address text analysis in the movement world will find effective tools in “Physicality and the Word.” Text is viewed as the catalyst for movement and is related to needs in scripts such as the silent characters found in Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* and the stillness found in moments such as Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. Relationships between moments in the scripts and the audience are addressed by considering ways that the physical can break the fourth wall. “Bodies and Cultures” explores and reveals differences and similarities among movements from various cultures where East meets West. The ideas are strengthened by case studies that look at the Aboriginal cultures from Native Australia and Native American Indian mythology. Perhaps the most familiar topic for discussion found in this chapter is Peter Brook’s *The Mahabharata*.

The lexicon and glossary are wonderful additions to the text, providing definitions for concepts related to physical theatre discussed by the authors and others. The one drawback to *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* is that the authors do not allow readers to make connections for themselves. Throughout the book, references are made to what will be discussed later and what was covered in previous chapters; this constant cross-referencing becomes distracting at times, but does not detract from the overall value of the text.

The companion text, *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader*, not only complements the authors’ theories, but allows voices of other physical-theatre theorists, instructors, and artists/critics to be heard. In this second volume, the authors marry their own theories (outlined in the first text) with those of others. Each section begins with a quotation from a seminal physical-theatre expert that focuses the reader’s attention on key points and relates one section to the next. Ultimately, the book’s success lies in the totality of the collected information and essays. A “who’s who” of movement theorists and practitioners, *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader* is a valuable addition to the movement specialist’s library.

In “Genesis, Contexts, Namings,” thoughts and theories of theatre and its relationship to the physical are

brought to light by such theorists/practitioners as Terry Eagleton, Ana Sanchez-Colberg, and Augusto Boal, to name but a few. In the essay that begins the section “Claire Heggen Goes Fishing,” Dick McGaw ties the physical to the need for discovery; this idea provides the glue needed to connect all the people and their theories in this section.

In “Roots or routes; the technical traditions of contemporary physical theatre” by Jonathan Pitches, which ties into the book’s chapter “Roots: Routes,” we get a historical view of how movement plays a pivotal role in why we are performance movers. This section is broken down into two sections, which start with “Deep traditions: classical and popular” and looks at Aristotle, “Improvisation” by Jeff Pressing, and “Lazzi,” contributed by Mel Gordon (author of the book by the same title). The second section in this chapter, “Hybrid pathways,” considers ideas such as “theatre and the plague,” bringing in Artaud’s ideas that have influenced so many avant-garde artists.

In “Contemporary Practices,” a refreshing look at how the physical has taken center stage is showcased with analysis. There also are plays/scenes, such as *East*, scene 4, *Club of no regrets*, and Samuel Beckett’s *Act Without Words*, that reveal the importance of how performances may be entirely movement-based. For students and teachers of movement, “Preparation and Training” looks briefly at Etienne Decroux, Anne Dennis, Myra Felner, Yoisha Oida and Lorna Marshall, Michael Chekov, and Jacques Lecoq. For someone unfamiliar with these movement-training forms, etchings and photos related to these movement masters are also included. “Physicality and the Word” provides a look at the relationship between the importance of the written word and how it plays a role in the world of physical theatre. The essay by Phelim McDermott, “Physical theatre and text,” sets the tone of physical theatre and its relationship to the text, while also posing valuable questions for anyone considering a strong physical-based production. The ideas of Brecht, Jonathan Kalb, Mike Alfreds, Albert Hunt and Michael Kustow, Trevor Griffiths, Robert Kimball, and Stephen Sondheim are showcased.

In “Bodies and Cultures,” the common language of physical theatre is explored. “Assembling our difference: Bridging identities-in-motion in intercultural performance” by David Williams provides a look at a collaboration of multicultural ideas in physical theatre. The section is supported by theories previously expressed by Patrice Pavis, C. L. R. James, Edward Said, and Peter Brook, focusing more on Western ideas while still considering other cultures.

Experienced separately or in tandem, *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* and *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader* position, define, and discuss physical theatre in both theoretical and practical terms. By placing the physical historically and theoretically, Murray and Keefe offer two texts of appeal not only to movement specialists, but to theatre historians, critics, instructors, professional directors, and performers alike.

**What We Do: Working in the Theatre.** By Bo Metzler. Illustrations by Rob Hamilton. West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2008; pp. xv + 239. \$15.95 paper.

Anyone who has been asked by family or friends, “What IS it that you DO in the theatre?” should be handed this book. Written in a style any neophyte or lay person can easily grasp, it chronologically explains the nuts and bolts within the intricate machine that is today’s commercial theatre. Metzler brings over thirty years of employment experience to a comprehensive and well-conceived volume focusing upon theatre produced in New York City.

Utilizing appropriate theatre terminology, the text is organized into “acts” and “scenes” rather than chapters. Each scene in Act One describes a specific job and its usual duties and responsibilities, beginning with the playwright’s first impulse through the final events of post-production. The first scene describes the solitary task of writing, the process of submitting a play for production, the difference between a composer and a lyricist, and the relationship those who write have with the producer and the artistic staff. *Segue* to the next scene, “The Producer,” and so on. The reader soon realizes that the success of any production relies upon many individuals working together toward a common goal. Metzler is quick to remind us that if just one person “drops the ball,” the whole house of cards could fall.

The scene about the producer is particularly informative, as many, even some “theatre people,” are unaware of the complexity of the producer’s responsibilities. Clear explanations of how funding is obtained to begin production go well beyond a quick viewing of *The Producers*. The producer options the script from the writer, then seeks capital from numerous investors and backers. Laws that apply to raising capital are explained, as are the budget requirements for producing a Broadway show. Workshops, backers’ auditions, and other means of attracting investors are discussed. We also learn that in addition to choosing the play and playwright, the producer hires the director and has veto privileges concerning the set, lighting and costume designers, general manager, and stage manager. Given that the average Broadway musical costs \$3 million, one soon realizes that a producer must be a businessman first, with a secondary passion for the arts. The buck stops and starts with the producer; without a skilled producer, the show will never get off the page.

“The Crew” will be particularly informative for readers unfamiliar with the backstage life of a Broadway show. Who is the crew and what do they do? Many outside theatre do not realize that a running crew can outnumber the actors by two to one. An average audience is usually unaware of the unseen people who report to work daily, keeping a production running smoothly from curtain up to curtain down. Among them are stage managers, carpenters, electricians, fly men, wardrobe crew, house managers, and dressers. If their jobs are done well, they remain unnoticed. These trained professionals are unionized journeymen and highly employable in the field, often moving from show to show, year after year, because of reputation alone. The author, having held many of these jobs during his career, carefully