

The New Theatre: The People, Plays and Politics behind Australia's Radical Theatre ed. by Lisa Milner

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Lisa Milner, ed., *The New Theatre: The People, Plays and Politics behind Australia's Radical Theatre* (Coffs Harbour, NSW: Interventions, 2022). pp. 618. AU \$40 paper.

The history of Australian theatre and live performance has been a piecemeal affair. It often amounts to journal articles that are too brief and hard to find or individual or company biographies. This book is one of the latter and makes a crucial contribution to the story. It includes histories of each state's new theatre, such as Melbourne by Angela O'Brien, Newcastle by Laura Ginters, and Sydney by Lyn Collingwood, and analysis addressing themes like anti-fascism, feminism, the anti-war movement and the broader context and legacy of the New Theatres.

Originally a workers' art collective and official branch of the Communist Party, taking orders and direction (at some remove) from the Comintern (Communist International), the group undergoes ideological shifts and debates until it settles into individual New Theatre groups around the country. Community-driven, they would look to us today more like amateur theatre companies, but their nationwide spread, longevity, and dedication to the ethics, methodology and material of the original impulse make the New Theatre unique in Australian theatre history. Editor Lisa Milner describes how the "radical theatre sought to embody the broader aims and aspirations of an international working-class theatre movement, as well as developing cultural activism locally." Except for a handful of notable companies, Australian theatre mostly avoids political stands. Despite the obvious affinity between performance forms, like street theatre and forum theatre, and grassroots direct action, the New Theatre remains the most vocal and most dedicated to using theatre for political agitation.

The New Theatre regularly produced seasons of new local and international works with progressive, anti-war and anti-oppression themes, interspersed with classic texts including Shakespeare and Brecht. The New Theatre in Sydney is still producing new work, passing 90 years in operation last year. The New Theatre dedicated their work to raising awareness and generating support for the most marginalised groups. Though the New Theatre legacy is carried on by the remaining Sydney company and its influence on emerging companies – mostly Melbourne Workers Theatre and Urban Theatre Projects – there are few such companies focused on ideologically driven, community focussed work today. Where in Australian theatre is this voice now? In an environment targeting the international recognition of Australian artists and export potential of Australian performance, the essential work of local theatre at a local level, in workplaces, on picket lines, in working-class communities – provoking debate and promoting social change, all to folk who might not otherwise get to the theatre – has largely been abandoned.

Contemporary Australian theatre should emulate the New Theatre by bringing theatre to the wider community. Ideally, there would be government funding to support performers working in the community but, after three decades of industrial contraction, withdrawal of government support and sustained depredation of theatre and performance in tertiary institutions, the theatre community and its audience face seemingly insurmountable odds to become reacquainted. O'Brien explains in her chapter on the Melbourne branch that "the New Theatre repertoire ... was most often an artistic response to social and political events of an immediate or longer-term nature. It was unabashedly 'theatre with purpose' and rejected art that was purely entertainment or that existed for its own sake."

The book is a fine collection of research capturing the breadth of the New Theatre project across Australia and presenting it as both theatre company and political project. The people who ran the New Theatre were committed to an idea, believing that the political structure they lived in was failing them and that a better alternative existed. To spread the word, to convince other people to join them, they used live theatre, sketches, reviews, street performance, fully staged dramas, agit prop and literal propaganda. Today, the same impulse is perhaps found on social media – on TikTok and YouTube, in atomised ways, compartmentalised by the platform, shaped and ultimately given meaning by the corporations. Nevertheless, the value of this kind of performance is still not solely in the degree to which it can spread a message, nor how famous it makes its performers. Instead, the value is in the practice of community-building and the process of collective making that the company members and TikTokers go through. It is all about identity and belonging, a collective act of imagining into actualisation through performance. It is a kind of theatre as community health approach, at odds with the last 200 years of imperialist capitalist systemic organisation in Australian theatre, but vital to reclaim if Australian theatre is to have a future.

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