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Book Reviews

Konstantinos Thomaidis. *Theatre & Voice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017, xiii + 89 pp., £6.99 (paperback), £6.72 (PDF ebook).

Lynne Kendrick. *Theatre Aurality*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017, xxviii + 164 pp., £89.99 (hardback), £71.50 (PDF ebook).

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In seeking to advance understanding of voice and sound in theatre and performance both *Theatre & Voice* by Konstantinos Thomaidis and Lynne Kendrick's *Theatre Aurality* deliberately pose disciplinary challenges to the field of performance studies. Thomaidis' slim volume promises to go beyond well-rehearsed critical paradigms to readdress and reposition voice in theatre and performance as a critical "problem" (7). Kendrick's full-length monograph offers aurality as "a new field of enquiry" (159) within theatre and performance studies. Both books offer a range of critical approaches, concepts and frameworks that will be of value to students and scholars interested in practices and stagings of voice and sound, and the phenomenological, aesthetic, and philosophical issues of perception and reception that these inevitably raise.

Continuing the author's work in establishing a field of voice studies within performance scholarship, Thomaidis' *Theatre & Voice* is part of Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato's *Theatre &* series, which according to the editors aims to capture the "restless interdisciplinary energy of theatre and performance" (x). *Theatre & Voice* is exemplary of this objective, drawing from a great range of disciplines including philosophy, musicology, psychoanalysis and linguistics, as well as from cinema and opera studies. As scholars of performance with an interest in voice know only too well, approaching theatre by way of voice risks opening a critical aperture that seems capable of swallowing the whole of human ontology and cultural relations. Thomaidis reflects that as a key theatre practice through millennia, voice presents to the scholar of performance "the impossibility of a myriad of options for content" (8). Rather than provide a detailed overview of all aspects of voice, therefore, he chooses to thematise the 'problem' of voice according to a number of key areas that allow him to address critically a wide range of performance practices and their ethical and cultural dimensions. In this way, Thomaidis moves beyond habitual understandings of voice as a purveyor of script, or as a manifestation of institutionalised actor training, showing how a focus on voice can address live and ongoing disciplinary issues of critical impor-

tance, including questions of cultural authority, the erasure of bodies through practical and ideological traditions, and the dynamics of power in the staging of audience experience. In reading *Theatre & Voice* it becomes clear how such questions have been made even more urgent given the changes in theatre practice afforded by new technologies that facilitate the staging of voice and listening in ways that tap into contemporary discourses of anxiety and uncertainty.

Thomaidis' thematised approach to the critical issues raised by a focus on voice allows him to glide across and into different periods and contexts of performance, and to marshal a near encyclopaedic knowledge of artistic practice and history. Referring to a plethora of productions, genres, practitioners, and writers, his critical style is as nimble and deft as that of the skilful vocal practices he chooses to describe. His attention to so many diverse periods of history and practices of performance passes on to its readers the very problem of selection on which he reflects as author of *Theatre & Voice*, as well as to me as the book's reviewer. Such a wealth of practice and range of theoretical material is referred to in such concise and potted form in this slim volume that selecting aspects upon which to comment becomes a challenging task in itself.

Certainly, *Theatre & Voice* makes an important contribution in its identification, collection, and extension of genealogies of intellectual thought that pertain to understandings of voice and its performance. Thomaidis navigates established philosophical territory starting from Ancient Greece, through influential twentieth-century thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, and extends this lineage to a group of scholars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who more specifically address voice as a focus of critical interest. These he identifies as "a first generation of voice study scholars" (12). In this grouping he places musicologists Carolyn Abatte and John Potter, film theorist Michael Chion, cultural and literary scholar Steven Connor, Lacanian influenced philosopher Mladen Dolar and feminist scholar Adriana Cavarero, whose work on the properties of speech emphasizes the intersubjective relations of sonorously voicing bodies which materialize the public sphere. Starting his thematic sections by addressing the dynamic relations of voice and speech, he shows how the voice in performance escapes the schematisation and classification of speech that has been practised in influential traditions of philosophy and linguistics. To illustrate, he discusses a range of performances and practitioners, including the visceral and challenging vocal delivery of Irish actor Fiona Shaw in the title role of Deborah Warner's version of Sophocles' *Electra* (1988–1992), which received a vexed response in the Northern Irish town of Derry. Further examples address the de-yoking of sound and score by Armenian singer Cathy Berberian, the underwater singing of American soprano Juliana Snapper, Antonin Artaud's rebellious, defamiliarizing challenges to the intellectual subjugation of

language, and the “incoherent sonority” of Samuel Beckett’s “critique of the privileging of thinking and speaking over voice” (30). Throughout *Theatre & Voice*, Thomaidis addresses the anomalous properties of voice, its refusal to conform to classification, its capacities to exceed, to unsettle, or to subvert.

Readers with an interest in the role of voice in expressing critically vexed aspects of identity such as race and gender, or in aesthetic features of performance within cultural and ideological contexts, will find passages of the section “Voicing Music” rewarding. Thomaidis starts this part with a discussion of the ways that the operatic performance of Mozart’s *Queen of the Night* aria, “abandons (or abates) text and presents itself as pure music” (33). Drawing on Catherine Clément’s feminist approach to ‘unsinging’ the patriarchal scripts of male authored operatic plots, Thomaidis addresses the problem of how the female body appears or disappears in relation to musical performance. Via Abbate’s emphasis on the agency and the presence of the performer, and the “ecstatic determination” (40) heard by Stacey Wolf (40) in the ‘belting’ performance demanded by the song “Defying Gravity” in the mega musical *Wicked* (2003), Thomaidis emphasises how feminist perspectives have heard women’s voices in performance “as powerful agents towards renegotiating a bodily politics of assertion and pleasure” (40). For me the section is rich with potential, suggesting how further scholarly discussion of such ‘problems’ might extend to considerations of vocal performance in the light, for example, of the commercial commodification of vocal excess in popular culture; of the global economic ‘scripts’ and ethics of the neoliberal (whether or not feminist) musical; or of the ‘gagapocalypse’ envisaged by queer scholar Jack Halberstam (cf. Halberstam 132). Thomaidis’ commentary on the capacity of voices to express and perform non-hegemonic, queer and ambiguous identities also suggests a generative critical practice. Again, he is able to access critical questions through close attention to the qualities of voices in performance, such as the gender-ambiguous falsetto of the character Mary Sunshine in the musical *Chicago* (1975) and its waver between the enforcement of stereotypes and the encouragement of tolerance towards non-heteronormative identities. While Thomaidis gives a useful gloss of Wayne Koestenbaum’s argument of how diva singing can release the erotic desire of queer and gay listeners, I would note the omission of a link here to Judith Peraino’s work on the gendered and sexualised aural dimensions of singing with regard to lesbian voices.

Some of the most effective passages in *Theatre & Voice* for scholars of less familiarity with the discourses and practices on which it so skilfully draws are those that resist the urge to include and enumerate, allowing the reader a moment to settle before the restless and eclectic critical energy of the book resumes. Thomaidis’ detailed reflection on his experience as an audience member of Rimini Protokoll’s headphone theatre piece *Remote Paris* (2015), which tops and tails the

book, affords in-depth insight into the productivity and relevance of a focus on the staging of voice. Here, the author unpacks the role of the recorded voice heard through headphones in the re-orchestration of audience members' experience of the spatial, and dwells constructively on the philosophical implications of its artificial, synthesized, but mercurial and intimate presence. When this case study returns near to the end of *Theatre & Voice*, Thomaidis describes how the acoustic staging of the self-referential recorded voice links to the unsettled conditions of human existence in a technologized world. Given the multiple ways in which the book points to the usefulness of the voice in addressing historical and contemporary aesthetic practices and cultural issues, it is perhaps not surprising that the author reaches the conclusion not only that the process of 'voicing' is plural and elusive, but that it also relies on a practice of listening that is culturally situated. Throughout *Theatre & Voice*, Thomaidis' own critical ear does not fail to be alert to how the voice intersects with its surrounding contexts and the ideologies with which they are permeated.

Rather than being restricted to the challenging introductory remit of a *Theatre & short book*, Lynn Kendrick's *Theatre Aurality* affords its author the opportunity to delve deeper into the silos imposed by disciplinary boundaries, and demonstrate at length the ways that the field of aurality seeps across customary demarcations of thinking about human perception and experience. Kendrick's full-length monograph seeks to build on a flurry of recent publications concerned with sound and audience, carving out its aural field by applying a number of key concepts from philosophy, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology (some of which are taken from the first generation of voice study scholars identified by Thomaidis) to a small number of carefully selected early twentieth-century theatre productions with practices of sound and voice at their core. As if to ready the reader for the conceptual interludes that her writing will take with an advisory phrase that "writing about sound can tie us in knots" (xxiii), she argues in her introductory remarks for the necessity of recourse to the complex, abstract and poetic language of philosophy. While *Theatre Aurality* at times as a result of this determination becomes somewhat dense and abstracted, the reader is rewarded with deep insight into mechanisms at work and concepts concerning aural perception in contemporary performance practice. As a result of her rigour, Kendrick's insistence on the generative processes of aurality and the productive potential of sound practice is deeply convincing.

Theatre Aurality argues for a critical approach that goes beyond the understanding of sound as a mere *effect* in order to understand the senses in which it *affects* and *constitutes* theatre, through an aural field that encompasses material, phenomenological and haptic modes. Above all, Kendrick argues, "*sound performs*" (44). In carving out and exploring the field of aurality she also emphasises the

importance of audience perception: “It makes no sense to refer to sound without hearing it, and voices cannot be talked about without engaging the ears upon which they fall” (xxii). Thinking through aurality thus enables an exploration of the inevitably comingled properties of sound, both vocal and non-vocal, and its reception as staged through performance. Her enquiry, she insists, in its examination of the creation of stories, experiences and ideas by contemporary practitioners, points to the radical potentials of sound in its various guises. By putting the ‘sonic sensibility’ advocated by Salomé Voegelin into practice, Kendrick attends to the possibilities of sound that reveal “the invisible motility below the surface of the visual world” (Voegelin 3). For Kendrick, acknowledging and embracing the covert properties of sound is thus not primarily to dwell on its potentially insidious nature and the ethically dubious uses to which its technologies might lend themselves. Rather, this process becomes an opportunity to understand more fully the conditions of contemporary subjectivity and its re-staging through aural means.

In the opening chapter of *Theatre Aurality* that sets up theoretical frames for her study, Kendrick deals with historical and scholarly understandings of sound, listening and aurality in philosophical and phenomenological thought, and how these understandings intersect with modernist and post-modernist notions of selfhood and subjectivity. Addressing herself first to the visual field, she makes a welcome and nuanced intervention into the recent diagnoses in critical discourse of the occularcentricity of culture, illuminating the hegemonies associated with sight, and the related misunderstandings and muting of the aural in sonophobic philosophical thought. She finishes the section with a discussion of how the materiality of resonance as described in the work of Veir Erlmann suggests an alternative to a Cartesian model of a self that is distinct and separate from the world. Resonance collapses subject and object in an encounter of self and other. This important phenomenological insight informs and recurs throughout the book, often underpinning Kendrick’s argument for the radical properties of sound and its potential to suggest alternative political and social relations.

In a second contextualising chapter, Kendrick focusses on the historical development of sound technologies in theatre, giving details and commentary on the progression from material mimetic sounds created in the wings and by cumbersome nineteenth-century mechanical devices, through to the twentieth-century practices of sound recording and amplification, the electronic and digital technologies used in increasingly sophisticated sound design, and the earpieces and headphones now being popularised in several types of contemporary practice. Throughout, she explores how these technologies raise anxieties around the ontology of theatre itself, in ways that contribute to the ongoing debates around authenticity, liveness, mediation and presence found in the influential work of

scholars such as Philip Auslander and Hans-Thies Lehmann. The value of thinking through sound as performance, she argues, is that it bypasses the tendency to understand it as a medium, and enables a focus on what it *does*. Circling back to what ‘lurks’ within the audience experience, she stresses the intersections of sound, experience and meaning making in contemporary theatre practice, the presence of the body amidst perception and the “permeability and motility of the subject” (44) amidst the theatrical aural field.

In the case study chapters of *Theatre Aurality*, Kendrick examines in greater depth productions and processes that have in recent years centralised sound or voice. In each case, Kendrick carefully develops her arguments by exploring critical concepts that in their application enable sustained engagement with the ways that sound performs. In order to reflect on Fuel Theatre’s headphone piece *The Ring* (2013), directed by David Rosenberg and experienced by audiences largely in darkness, she draws on phenomenologist Don Ihde’s thinking on auditory perception, and on interdisciplinary understandings of its intersections with the experience of the self in relation to space. Developing her commentary on contemporary subjectivity in the following chapter, Kendrick addresses voice as part of the aural field in relation to Elevator Repair Service’s production of *Gatz* (2012), which staged F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* in a New York office basement. To deconstruct the company’s ‘translation’ of the novel, which was read in its entirety, from page to stage, Kendrick places in dialogue the idea of acousmatisation found in Dolar’s theory of the ‘object voice’, in which a division in the sense of self is caused when the voice leaves the body, and the sonorous presence of the subject voice as theorised by Cavarero which suggests that the body remains present in vocal performance and interaction. The move allows Kendrick to suggest not so much what meanings are carried in voicing, but what voice and listening *do* in terms of their roles in bringing forth the space in which subjectivity is staged.

Kendrick follows her densely argued commentary on *Gatz* with a chapter which considers the use of sound practice to reconfigure relations between sound, noise and meaning, and which draws amongst other material on Michel Serres’ conceptualisation of the capacity of noise to annihilate meaning. In this chapter she considers the polyphonic funeral chants of Theatr Zar’s production of *Armine, Sister* (2014); the moments of ‘fuzziness’ that theatre maker Chris Goode finds in the transitions between sonic signals; and the dynamics between sound, signal and noise staged in the practices of sound designers Tom Gibbons, Scott Gibbons and Ben and Max Ringham. In her final chapter’s case study, Kendrick explores the “sonorous, sensual and sensitising potential” (133) of sound to form audience experience. Applying Jean Luc-Nancy’s theory of relational listening to audience experience in *Flatland* (2015), a collaboration between university re-

searchers and artist Maria Oshodi, Kendrick demonstrates how the production reverses the common expectation that sonic technology guides the visually impaired by showing how it provides a theatre experience that gives access to the world through embodied aural and haptic modes. The flip is typical of Kendrick's consideration throughout *Theatre Aurality* of the implications for a dynamic audience experience of self and other through theatricalisation in the aural mode.

In each of these case studies then, Kendrick's intellectual and academic rigour yields rich and insightful readings, her somewhat lengthy diversions away from theatre practice into phenomenological and philosophical thought bringing firm conceptual frameworks to the little understood field of sound practice, as well as attention to the overlooked acts of listening that engagement with theatre requires audiences to perform. Her determination to grapple with ontological knottiness allows her to make a contribution that will be welcome to scholars of performance with an interest in sound, even though a reader less familiar with such an abstract approach may very well feel knotted themselves. Though she does not dwell at length on the ethically dubious, unsettling practices of some immersive or sensory practices, and while the presence of intersectional factors such as gender, race, and economic privilege in the aural field and cultural material contexts that surround and influence the practices of theatrical staging are not explored at great length, Kendrick's achievement in showing the relevance of conceptual thought to the sonic staging of selfhood in contemporary contexts is significant. On a rather more mundane note, while I admired Kendrick's intelligent and rigorous writing, the decision to relegate some information to very long chapter end notes made the experience of reading *Theatre Aurality* a little disrupted. I often found myself leafing through pages to find them, eager not to miss more of Kendrick's informative and instructive insights.

At a time of rapid technical advance and creative experimentation amongst practitioners, the critical interrogations of aurality and voice offered by *Theatre & Voice* and *Theatre Aurality* are important and timely. Both books are critically challenging and edifying additions to the emerging body of scholarship that is engaged with the staging of voice and sound. In *Theatre & Voice*, Thomaidis more than demonstrates the fertility and potential of voice as a locus of scholarly enquiry. His book not only provides suggestions for a range of fruitful critical approaches to vocal performance, but also signposts a range of scholarly literature that will usefully supplement such endeavours. Throughout *Theatre Aurality*, Kendrick consistently demonstrates how a more rigorous understanding of the workings of aurality can illuminate how theatre practice is staging the conditions of contemporary subjectivity. Together, these books provide a welcome corrective to the tendency for a visual register of analysis. Thomaidis and Kendrick attend to the numerous ways in which the stealthy and seductive properties of voices and

sound unsettle boundaries, seep across disciplines, breach silos, and open fields. Both books productively vex the purlieus of scholarly disciplines. Reading them, I have been reminded of the insight of the recently deceased British punk rock singer Pete Shelley into the capacity of the aural to provoke and challenge: “noise,” as he so succinctly and noisily put it back in the day, “annoys” (Shelley).

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