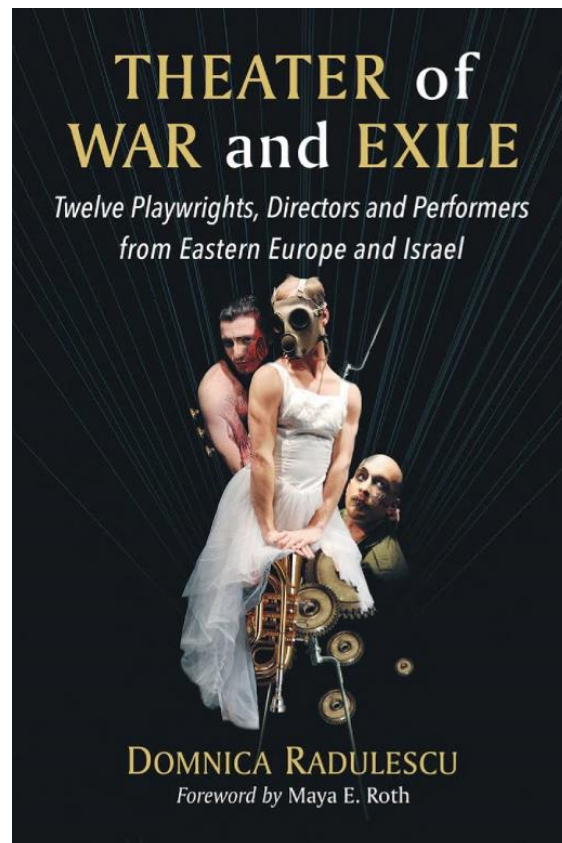


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Theatre Within and Against Postmodernist Aesthetic

Book review: Rădulescu, Domnica. *Theatre of War and Exile: Twelve Playwrights, Directors and Performers from Eastern Europe and Israel*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015.



Theatre of War and Exile (hereafter, *Theatre*) asks the counter-intuitive question not of what theatre says about war and its aftermath (a philosophical and political question) but how theatre says (an aesthetic and performance

question). It probes with a surgeon's scalpel and artist's flair into the ontological shortcomings of and seeming absurdity in writing about theatre – which comes and goes before one's eyes like an explosion. Without pretense and with the resilience vested within its post-modern framework, *Theatre* recaptures both the fragile memories of these manifold traumas and the theatre's daring aesthetics which create a space-time for these memories to harbor.

Fulbright scholar, novelist, literary critic, and playwright Domnica Rădulescu has written a scholastically daring and ethically rich comparative study of theatre emerging from Israel and in and outside the Balkans – on writers living in exile and through wartime. The driving-force of *Theatre* is her interest in the “politics of aesthetics” (8). This interest stems from her rich (if not speculative) philosophical claim regarding the malleability of a creative artist's psychological ontology based upon the premise – wartime and exilic experiences profoundly shape the aesthetics of theatre makers' creations. It changes the way they think and how they create. She reasons that these traumatic experiences “cause an ontological mutation in our psyche and in our relation to time and space” (13). The ontological mutation manifests itself, in a word, through the aesthetics of fracture and fragmentation (191). More to the point, Rădulescu's years of studying Balkan theatre in conjunction with her own experience as an émigré to the United States in 1983 not only inform her aesthetic theory but also her methodology. Her desire “to speak from a place of experience and embodiment” theoretically paves a path for her to get closer to her study's object: the creative collision of the artist's being and their theatrical aesthetic. *Theatre's* intention is three-fold: define the ontological mutation (Part 1), define the aesthetics of the ontological mutation (Part 2), and identify the aesthetics' means to heal fractured communities (Part 3). One can hear the classic apologia for theatre's relevance.

In terms of scholastic and theoretical discourse, Rădulescu comfortably positions *Theatre* within and against postmodernist aesthetic, gleaning much support from and debating with theorists and their theories, such as Mikhail Bakhtin (the carnivalesque), Jean Baudrillard (the simulation), Edward Said (exile), Bertolt Brecht (alienation), and Erik Ehn (genocide). Her study of live theatre uniquely positions her argument for the real in opposition to the post-

modern world view of simulacra, of which Baudrillard is a fountainhead. If part one is a manifesto describing the particular Balkan aesthetics with respect to its ontological genesis, part two acts as this aesthetics' diatribe against the vanity of Horace's ode, "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," by asserting the theatre's real presence, its peculiar form of political theatre after the vision of Brecht (95). Part three follows in that it argues that true presence can lead to true healing of individuals, communities, and nations, thus theatre's relevance to the world.

Rădulescu's thesis emerges from the existential need latent within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to fashion spaces for public memory and history-making, public spaces for communities to create remembrances of recent atrocities. In a few words, her thesis is that the "conspicuous aesthetics" arising out of theatre in the Balkans uses the carnivalesque, pastiche, and fractured narrative forms (1) because the playwrights'/theatre makers' psyches as a result of war and exile have undergone ontological transformation and (2) this ontological transformation uniquely enables these artists to create aesthetic forms that "through alchemic processes of transformation...have a restorative potential" (14). A bold thesis, to say the least.

In keeping her focus on the real, not only *Theatre's* thesis but also its form challenge Baudrillard's and others' prescriptions of reality. This proved to fortify and weaken *Theatre's* thesis. Rădulescu organizes *Theatre* into five parts: Introduction, Parts 1-3, and Conclusion. In Parts 1-3, she writes multiple performance studies on a range of authors who fit under the auspice of the part's theme, whether it be "exile as ontological mutation," "theatre of war and genocide and theatre dystopias," or "performance as memory keeper and promoter of peace" (37; 94; 163). Within each part, she includes a range of genres from political theatre history, memoir, performance/textual analysis, to interview, and more. While these multifaceted approaches at times poignantly describe the Balkan artist's being and his/her theatre's aesthetics, other instances, as in Part 1 (66-77) in which is the insertion of memoir and the analysis of her own novel *Train to Trieste* (which is neither a play nor theatre), obfuscate the theatre of war and exile at which she ultimately aims. Yet, it would be remiss not to mention a moment of her journalistic-scholastic

brilliance during her interview with Marcy Arlin (173-184), which breaks as much as it does confirm one of the major premises of her study, itching one of the uncomfortable scratches one has in reading these interviews, since the artists rarely answer her research question with such New York directness. Rădulescu asks (in all of her interviews):

“**DR:** Do you connect fractured or fragmented theatrical form, non-linear structures and carnivalesque aesthetics to the theater and productions dealing with war, oppression or displacement?

MA: Sometimes, but not necessarily.”

Arlin’s response stands in as a symbol for the critique one has upon arriving at the end of her book: Has Rădulescu’s theoretical frame adequately hosted the vast and eclectic network of theatre makers *Theatre* represents? The answer is: sometimes, but not necessarily. Rădulescu relies too heavily on the theoreticians above, when her work as well as her own interests advantageously position her to conduct the same study with part of the main purpose being to advance the postmodernist aesthetic theories as formulated by Bakhtin, Baudrillard, and others filtered through “Balkan flair” with a more pronounced feminist critique. Towards the end of *Theatre*, in Part 3, she briefly identifies “the intersection between feminist theatre aesthetics and postmodernist aesthetics” and goes on to mention their use of autobiography and other non-traditional forms of knowledge-making – which if emphasized to a greater extent, would reorient rather than disorient her readers (scholars, theatre makers, and laypersons), forming a rather beautiful argument about a “conspicuous aesthetics,” its Balkan, feminist, and postmodernist embodiment. If the feminist critique were more evident, *Theatre* could tout itself as an outstanding piece of scholarship and a pioneer for a new genre of feminist literature.

Trent SANDERS

University of Tennessee – Knoxville

Babeş-Bolyai University

trent.sanders.ak@gmail.com