

**Book Review: Wendy Aarons & Theresa J. May (eds.).  
Readings in Performance and Ecology. New York: Palgrave  
Macmillan, 2012, 256 pp., \$59.49.**

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As the editors point out in their introduction to the volume under review, the relationship between performance and ecology is an uneasy one. Performance is a distinctly human activity and thus a human-centered one—a tendency reinforced by our millennia-old theater tradition, but also by the practical difficulties of putting non-human phenomena on stage. If students and practitioners of performance have stayed clear of ecological questions under these circumstances, the other side has not been forthcoming either. Environmentalists often dismiss performance as an unnecessarily abstract, indirect, and thus ineffective form of activism, while many pioneering ecocritics fault performance theory for its alliterations with a poststructuralist epistemology that has exacerbated our disconnection from the physical environment.

It is the editors' stated goal to reconcile performance and ecology by exploring "ways to represent the more-than-human world on stage that do not ineradicably 'other' nature" (2). An important methodological step, they argue, is to foreground the material rather than the metaphorical dimension of both terms. This entails a certain skepticism toward recent approaches that examine the discursive negotiation of environmental issues (such as cultural ecology and frame analysis), though it remains unclear whether the editors are aware of these approaches. Like most of the contributors, they hail from performance studies, where by their own admission ecocriticism has "just begun" to arrive (4). This explains the conspicuous absence of ecocritical theory throughout the volume, and also the limited and dated conception of ecocriticism underlying the editors' brief comments on the field. Their focus is clearly on performance, and specifically on what they call "ecodramaturgy": "theater and performance making that puts ecological reciprocity and community at the center of its theatrical and thematic intent" (4). The seventeen essays that make up the volume take the analysis of ecodramaturgy in three main directions: they examine the performative aspect of eco-activism, the material conditions and effects of performance, and, predominantly, the ecological interpretation of dramatic texts. In keeping with the editorial policy of this journal, my review will focus on contemporary drama and theater, leaving aside essays on historical and nontheatrical performances (chs. 1, 4–6, 9, 15).

The volume opens with three ecocritical surveys of American drama, two of which address contemporary plays or productions. Nelson Gray's contribution on the "ecopolitics of place" (ch. 2) traces the "consistent presence" of ecological issues in twentieth-century Canadian drama from early dramatizations of the settler experience to contemporary First Nations playwrights (23). It convincingly

juxtaposes playwrights' nationalist celebration of the Canadian landscape at the beginning of the century with the apprehensive discussion of global environmental threats at its end. The animals and hybrid creatures that populate these contemporary plays point toward the concerns of the following chapter, in which Robert Baker-White examines the role of animals in American drama (ch. 3). Starting from the observation that human/animal associations are "a surprisingly common trope in American drama generally," Baker-White hypothesizes that animals on stage serve "as a means of reimagining possibilities for human interaction" (33–34). His reading of *The Glass Menagerie*, which draws heavily on a previous article on the subject, demonstrates the interpretative potential of this thematic approach. Surprisingly, Baker-White shows no awareness of the burgeoning field of animal studies, which has not only furnished ample support for his claims but has considerably broadened and deepened scholarly discussion of his topic.

From a theoretical perspective the relationship of performance and ecology is most thoroughly discussed in Bruce McConachie's essay, which outlines an "ecological ethics of performance" on the model of John Dewey's philosophy (ch. 7). Pointing to the ecological values behind some of Dewey's key concepts, McConachie suggests that a pragmatic ethics built around notions of variety and interdependence is the most promising response to the ecological crisis of our age. Performance art, he argues, is an important means of stimulating sensual response to the physical environment and at the same time a forum for continual pragmatic debate over environmental policy. The epistemological priority he accords the physical environment stands in stark contrast to the poststructuralist notion of reality-as-performance underlying the following chapter. In her somewhat discontinuous sketch of Irish-Caribbean cultural interactions (ch. 8), Kathleen M. Gough shifts the focus from the environmental onto the cultural dimension of natural disasters. In her discussion of a volcano eruption that left two thirds of the Caribbean island of Montserrat uninhabitable, Gough draws attention to the substitution of cultural spaces for now-unavailable natural ones. Her assumption that discursive spaces are ultimately formative of natural ones—she claims, for example, that "Caribbean ecological and cultural life" was "*invented* ... by the early Atlantic world's accumulation and globalization" (106–7)—illustrates a fundamental difference between ecocriticism and poststructuralist performance theory.

Most contributors emphasize affinities rather than differences, however, and three chapters are devoted to exploring the functions of performance for environmental activism. Sara Freeman analyzes antinuclear plays from the 1980s to outline the strategic basis alternative theater provides for ecological ideas and to demonstrate the consciousness-raising impact of activist stage productions

(ch. 10). Meg O'Shea describes a theater company that turned itself into the target group of their own environmental activism: they decided to travel by bike and live sustainably for the entirety of their tour (ch. 11). Lastly, Sarah Ann Standing's examination of eco-activism as itself a performative activity provides a useful, original perspective on the "theatricality" of such activism, which is after all staged for immediate audience impact and broad media consumption (147). Its "aesthetic components," Standing writes, "often include a juxtaposition of the real and the performative, as well as humor, traditional theatrical considerations of time, place, and action, and sophisticated use of the media" (151).

The interplay of textual and material considerations returns to the foreground in the five "Case Studies in Green Theater" that form the last section of the volume. The essays by directors Downing Cless (ch. 13) and Anne Justine D'Zmura (ch. 14) approach the question of green theater from a textual angle. Cless describes his "ecodirecting" as an attempt to emphasize "ecological themes" in canonic plays (159). This project seems to have both an analytic and a didactic component: it traces the ways in which plays "reflect or critically refract their culture's natural philosophies and environmental circumstances," and it replaces traditional, human-centered interpretations with ecological ones (159). While some of Cless's examples are well within expectations (*The Birds*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*), his conception of "ecohubris" allows him to extend his approach to plays that have not yet come under ecocritical scrutiny, such as *Doctor Faustus* (160). D'Zmura's pedagogical theater projects, by contrast, aim primarily at enhancing environmental awareness among the participants; only at the very end of her essay does she briefly comment on audience response. In counterpoint to these text-centered conceptions of ecodirecting, the concluding chapters by Justin A. Miller (ch. 16) and Ian Garrett (ch. 17) examine stage production as a material, and materially wasteful, practice. Miller offers his own "greening" of a university theater production as a model for reducing the environmental impact of such productions. In the larger picture, of course, his many sensible innovations would need to be implemented far beyond the narrow circle of environmentally conscious academics, and Garrett discusses how such progress could be achieved in the theater industry as a whole. While he recognizes that the relatively small sphere of theater "won't revolutionize" our environmental practices, Garrett lays out a number of efficient, workable suggestions on aspects ranging from public transportation to career preparation (202).

While many of the contributors, including those not discussed in this review, claim to "theorize" the nexus of ecology and performance (182), the emphasis of the volume is clearly on practical approaches and specific theater projects. Most of the chapters are case studies, often by and for theater makers, that prioritize

practical questions over contextualization in scholarly discourse. As a result of the absence of ecocritical theory, few of these case studies touch on the broader implications of the ecological perspective for performances and performance studies. Inversely, those chapters that take their cues from performance theory tend to perpetuate the poststructuralist conception of the physical environment as a discursive construct rather than explore ways beyond that divide. Despite its limited significance to these theoretical debates, however, the volume will be a rich source of ideas and inspirations for readers interested in ecologically aware performance art.

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