

Christene d'Anca. Book Review. Radulescu, Domnica.¹ *Theater of War and Exile: Twelve Playwrights, Directors and Performers from Eastern Europe and Israel*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2015. 264 p.

In the “Forward” to *Theater of War and Exile*, Maya E. Roth sets the stage for conceptualizing theater as it transcends its entertainment value and acts as a significant step in the healing process of trauma. Experience lends itself to writing and story-telling and theater provides an avenue for the playwright to explore the past with the promise of a psychological purging, such as the Bosnian women (in the last chapter) who create a salt circle to cleanse pain, as in Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Domnica Radulescu begins with a series of poignant questions about the ways we write and the effect our experiences have on our writing and, most importantly, whether such writing makes a difference beyond the initial catharsis – a term derived from the Greek *κάθαρσις* to mean purification, cleansing, and the purgation of emotions, particularly pity and fear. This last point is clearly affirmed through twelve case studies in which she makes evident the power theater has not only for the playwright, but also for the audience who can vicariously view their own similar past or learn about others as a means towards empathy.

“Theater,” however, is also the term used to identify a place where military events occur in war. Thus, while the violence and trauma of war and consequent exile are splayed out on the stage, the production acts as a war front against these very atrocities. From the time of the Greek tragedies, the play wages war against war itself and sheds its passive existence solely concerned with aesthetically representing politics as it translates itself into an “art of resistance,” transforming the space into a place for “politics of aesthetics.” By facing trauma head on, theater renegotiates and negates the effects. From amidst all the negativity it gives birth to art, to beauty and to peace, essentially striving to mediate the damage of the past.

A focal point throughout the case studies is theater of the absurd due to its dual status as one of the best coping mechanisms and, simultaneously, its ability to provide unapologetic commentary on regimes and practices that have resulted in trauma. Humor heals, as one is able to come to terms with the absurdity of one’s own predicaments by laughing at tragedy, while drawing attention to the actions that have brought them about. Through the exaggeration provided in absurd theater, the simulacrum to life is both confirmed and denied. The actions performed onstage reflect the larger actions committed against those same bodies in the real world and, in the process of becoming amplified, they bring an ever-increasing awareness to the despair. By not shying away from the trauma and pain, theater works towards minimizing the chances of events, such as genocide and mass exoduses, from recurring.

Radulescu asserts that progress involves looking towards the past to shape the future. A suppressed, traumatized voice cannot always be heard, but as theater is concerned with bodies and motion, the present space unravels the timetable of events even in the absence of words. Theater offers immediacy in the present to remind the audience of their surroundings in order to avoid repeating mistakes and subsequently works towards a better future. Radulescu begins her exploration using a cornucopia of theaters that merge to form a chorus of voices from distinct backgrounds that share the underlying theme of having been fueled by their respective traumas and compelled to relate their histories.

Politics is about activism and advocacy, but also silence since listening to what is happening before one speaks engenders the careful stage planning and coordination. Silence is where the movement physically and metaphorically occurs. The bodies on stage represent the much larger national bodies that have been systemically displaced and disparaged by both their own nations and those in which the main characters have taken refuge.

In quoting Matei Vişniec, I would say “Europe is an open wound” that theater helps heal. However, the book is not only concerned with Europe, but with the world, reaching into its disparate corners to grasp the many traumatic experiences that have been enacted on stages, each representing yet another facet of devastation. Post-modern identities embrace the nowhereness of home and the plurality of selves that come across the stage. The theater of war and exile is also the theater that focuses on those who have been marginalized in the aftermath of traumatizing events that lead to hybrid realities and identities. The entire book is aware of this fragmentation as it reads like a montage of plays. Each one broaches similar aspects of trauma, underscoring the universality of suffering while offering nuanced differences attractive to a variety of audiences from Serbia, Bosnia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and other Eastern European countries to the distant war-fraught Israel. Where extensive plot summary is usually redundant, here it is absolutely necessary to situate the different pieces into the larger thematic quilting of ideas that draw from each stage production to orchestrate a sense of unity. The disparate problems facing each location become combined into a single plight for peace. Diversity is celebrated – it is the connecting fiber of trauma since playwrights and audience members can look to these pieces as an inspiration for their collective hardships.

Ultimately Radulescu’s *Theater of War and Exile* theoretically and rhetorically delves into the intricacies of displacement and the role theater plays in coping with loss and ending at the precarious point of embarking on the beginning of a new stage in life. Theater productions, such as the Parisian ones under the Vichy government, or at the SARTR in 1990s Sarajevo, offer hope, refuge, or at the very least an escape from the minutia of ordinary life for those who are entrenched in everyday trauma. It offers solace for those who have escaped only to find their journey becomes more complicated. It offers meaning for those who have trouble making sense of their dilemmas, or that of others. It creates this meaning in the moment and transports the audience into the “present” reality for those on stage. Once there, one can better view the actions that have been and are taking place off stage. From this dual vantage point trauma can be addressed, come to terms with and the healing process can commence.

ⁱ Domnica Radulescu is the Edwin A. Morris Professor of French and Italian literature at Washington and Lee University. She is the author of three novels: *Country of Red Azaleas*, *Black Sea Twilight*, and *Train to Trieste*; and several plays, including: *The Town with Very Nice People: A Strident Operetta*, and *Naturalized Woman*. She has authored, edited and co-edited several scholarly books on theater, exile and representations of women and received the 2011 Outstanding Faculty Award from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. She is also a Fulbright scholar and is presently working on her fourth novel titled *My Father’s Orchards* and on two new plays, titled *House in a Boat* and *Crack in the Wall*.