There is a sad irony in writing about theatre and performance scholarship at a time when most US and UK theatre are still closed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, for all its challenges, 2020 saw the publication of several noteworthy books that significantly advanced the field of theatre and performance studies, and which offer some cause for celebration. This review focuses on three major subject areas: 1. Performing Women, Women in Performance, 2. Tackling the Body, and 3. Social and National Borders. Several larger ideas unite the texts reviewed here, in varying constellations across these three sections: questions about representing identity, about failure and impossibility, and about unity, division, and the porous boundaries between the two. The term ‘encounter’ recurred with startling frequency across these eight texts, signalling a shared central concern with how far the performance space might offer a site of communion—or, at least, communication—in our fractious historical moment.

1. Performing Women, Women in Performance

Nicola Abram’s *Black British Women’s Theatre: Intersectionality, Archives, Aesthetics* is an impressive book by any measure, but is all the more so for being Abram’s first scholarly monograph. Billing itself as the first critical study of black British women’s theatre to focus on unpublished playscripts and other archival materials, Abram’s book presents an in-depth exploration of the work of five black British theatre companies and playwrights. As well as contextualizing and close-reading unpublished work, Abram also offers a theorizing of the black women’s archive, and of a non-naturalistic ‘intersectional aesthetic’ (p. 17). Indeed, it is worth quoting Abram’s own outline of the book’s scope in full, to do justice to her range of exploration:

[This book] studies a number of unpublished works for the first time: various early pieces for performance written by Bernardine Evaristo, and her co-authored work with Patricia Hilaire for Theatre of Black
Women, *Silhouette* (1983) and *Pyeyucca* (1984); poems constituting the three productions by Munirah Theatre Company, *On the Inside* (1986), *thinkofariver* (1987), and *Our Bodies Are Our Maps* (1990); and Zindika’s *The Day Mother Took Us to the Seaside* (1996). Other works that have been previously discussed in scholarship—*Mothers* (1990) and *Drowning* (1991) by Black Mime Theatre Women’s Troop, Zindika’s *Paper and Stone* (1989), and SuAndi’s *The Story of M* (1994)—are given fresh attention informed by additional archival sources and new interviews with the practitioners. The chapters that follow assemble a record of each production from the fragments that remain, including draft typescripts, press reviews, photographs, audio and audio-visual recordings, storyboards, and scribbled diagrams. Where this source material is held in private collections and is not currently publicly available—as for Theatre of Black Women and Munirah Theatre Company—it is described in detail, going some way towards compensating readers for that distance. (p. 6)

More broadly, *Black British Women’s Theatre* offers a generative alignment of two forms of materiality: the black woman’s body, ‘at once overlooked—that is, unseen—and overlooked, or hypervisible’ (p. 2), and ‘the fragile materiality’ of archival material, and the scholar’s material encounter with it. From this standpoint, Abram examines the embodied form of theatre as a possible corrective to ‘both the problem of objectification and the problem of invisibility’—a way for black women to ‘make themselves visible to the audience on their own terms: as present in and part of Britain, and as successful, professional actors’ (p. 3)—and the archive itself as a site of politically inflected attention: ‘An archival recovery project is also conceptually appropriate when studying the work of a population that is culturally silenced’, Abram observes (p. 7). Abram pays particular attention to a common aesthetic trope that runs through the performance work under examination: ‘a model of identity through encounter’, wherein the staged bodies ‘function not to guarantee a fixed individual identity but as the public site of a subject’s dynamic, interactional, formation’ (p. 3). Noting that former scholarship has more typically concentrated on realist and naturalistic black theatre, Abram offers a new focus on the non-naturalistic, defamiliarizing theatre aesthetics—including symbolic movement, ruptured continuity, the expansion and compression of time and space, ‘deviant grammar’, intertextual allusion, and audience participation—and rightly argues that ‘more abstract theatre forms do not constitute a withdrawal from the ‘real’ but instead facilitate a productive critical perspective on it’ (p. 13).
One of the most striking moments of discussion comes in the book’s concluding chapter, in which Abram traces her recovery of Debbie Tucker Green’s unpublished early playscripts, *She Three* (1997) and *Stratford/Two Women* (2000). Abram tells us, ‘I sought permission to quote from those early works in print. My communications with Tucker Green’s agent revealed that the playwright had not known these materials to be present in the archive’ and Tucker Green, preferring that the scripts not be made publicly available, had the archived texts sealed in the Victoria and Albert Museum archive, and removed from the National Theatre’s Black Plays archive. For an early-career scholar, the sudden refusal of access to such significant unanalysed material must have been a considerable blow, and we could have forgiven any consequent bitterness in her relating of the episode. Instead, Abram transforms the event into a powerful reflection on minority-author authority, pointing out that ‘with calls to “decolonise” resounding around academia and the arts, the heritage institutions that curate the nation’s story of itself are actively seeking to diversify their collections, and scholars enjoy funding and publication opportunities that open up new ground. It is within this current context of being claimed and championed by the establishment that Tucker Green has expressed her authority over her work and exercised her right of refusal’ (pp. 238–39). Echoing Hazel Carby’s observation that ‘the black women’s critique of *history* has not only involved us in coming to terms with “absences”; we have also been outraged by the ways in which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us’ (Carby, *White Women Listen!*’, p. 178), Abram draws an illuminating line of comparison between how, ‘by giving interviews and sharing unpublished materials, the earlier playwrights and performers sought to correct their underrepresentation: to insert themselves into theatre history, to secure their visibility’ and Tucker Green’s own response to the problem of misrepresentation: ‘Tucker Green’s decision to withhold her early work from scholarly scrutiny can [...] therefore be understood as a different act with the same aim: to represent herself on her own terms. This should, I argue, be thought as gain: what was once silenced or sidelined by cultural gatekeepers is now subject to the will of its authors, who may express their authority precisely by choosing not to speak or be read, to make newly absent what was—albeit unknowingly—present’ (p. 239; original emphasis). *Black British Women’s Theatre: Intersectionality, Archives, Aesthetics* is an urgent, astute, and often deeply moving study of the politics of the archive and the performance aesthetics of the intersectional; it deserves wide attention across the field.

Elaine Aston’s *Restaging Feminisms* appears in the Palgrave Pivot series, which publishes 25,000- to 50,000-word texts—that is, research that falls
between the standard journal or monograph length. Aston uses the format to produce an exciting, richly detailed yet also concisely written analysis of the echoes of late twentieth-century feminist ideologies in early twenty-first-century British theatre. The ‘feminisms’ of Aston’s title are the liberal, radical, and socialist feminist movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Tracing a rough line of development through 1970s essentialism, 1980s identity politics, 1990s poststructuralist-inflected play, and twenty-first-century intersectionality, Aston argues that each of these ‘renewed feminist struggles [has] occasioned a critical (in all senses) recycling of the second wave’ (p. 2), as contemporary performance-makers struggle with depressingly similar issues of oppression, harassment, and neglect. Each chapter of Restaging Feminisms explores the history and present-day reanimation of a historical feminism—liberal, radical, and socialist in turn—in a pair of contemporary plays, in conversation with another modern or contemporary feminist theoretical text. Refreshingly, the urgency of feminist action is taken as read throughout the text; the anti- or a-feminist reader will find no concession to their scepticism in Aston’s book.

The first chapter reviews feminist political activity of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, drawing into clear distinction the trajectories of radical, socialist, and liberal feminist concerns, and tracking the parallel history of female theatre practice, from women-only and lesbian-only collectives, the male-dominated in-yer-face movement, and (following the legacy of Caryl Churchill’s and debbie tucker green’s critique of capitalism and Western privilege) the rise of new anti-neoliberal female playwrights such as Bola Agbaje, Ella Hickson, Lucy Kirkwood, and Lucy Prebble. The chapter ends with a detailed review of recent equality and diversity problems in the British theatre industry, with particular attention to the 2017–18 #MeToo movement and burgeoning recognition of intersectional race and class prejudice. In Chapter 2, Aston briefly historicizes liberalism, new liberalism, neoliberalism, and liberal feminism, or what Aston dubs ‘the mainstream, popular face of feminism’ (p. 32), in order to read Laura Wade’s Home, I’m Darling (2018) and Nina Raine’s Consent (2017) as two National Theatre plays that trouble liberal-feminist legacies. In conversation with Betty Friedan’s The Feminist Mystique (1983), Aston reads Wade’s Home, I’m Darling as critiquing ‘neoliberal choice feminism’ (p. 32). In turn, she puts Raine’s Consent in dialogue with Helena Kennedy’s Eve Was Shamed (2018) as two texts that problematize faith in a liberal-but-still-patriarchal state upholding women’s rights in law. The chapter ends by exploring how both plays invert but continue Ibsen’s theatrical legacy, as ‘theatre of ideas’ plays that stage ‘urgent social questions’, in defiance of recent critical vaunting of experimental and
post-dramatic theatrical forms over ‘drama that adheres to conventions of narrative and character and works through ideas that connect to the outside world’ (p. 53). Chapter 3 is dedicated to the contemporary reworking of radical feminism via the onstage female chorus. Aston begins by examining the #MeToo movement in greater detail, using Tony Fisher’s essay ‘On the Performance of Dissensual Speech’ to read the phatic, agonic, and affective dimensions of the movement’s resistant ‘chorus’. The chapter’s first case study analyses David Greig’s adaptation of Aeschylus’s *The Suppliant Women* (2016)—and particularly its chorus of female suppliants objecting to male control and sexual violation—alongside Mary Beard’s *Women and Power* (2017). Aston explores how the production history of Greig’s *The Suppliant Women*—which toured the UK with a professional cast, but drew a new ‘amateur actor’ chorus of women from the local community at each stop on its tour—intersected with the height of the contemporaneous #MeToo movement. Aston balances analysis of how Greig’s adaptation opened up space for a new, deconstructive understanding of patriarchal power against critique of ‘the gendered economic divide between unwaged, female amateur and waged, male professional’ (p. 67), the allegations of historic harassment brought against the director Ramin Gray during the plays’ run, and the recurrent problem of how the re-performance of classical texts limits the space available for women’s own writing. By way of contrast, Aston then moves into a reading of Morgan Lloyd Malcolm’s *Emilia* (2018), a radical-feminist reimagining of the life of poet Emilia Bassano (1569–1645) staged at the Globe Theatre with an all-female, multi-ethnicity, multi-ability, multi-generational cast and creative team. Aston’s analysis of *Emilia* as a radical-feminist protest against masculinist abuse of female creativity and a celebration of collectivist female action is complemented by her own clear delight in the production. She speaks of her attempt ‘to keep hold of the joy I felt during and after Emilia’ as she writes about it (p. 77)—figured against Sara Ahmed’s rendering of the ‘killjoy’ feminist—prompted by the production’s feminist unruliness, carnivalesque energy, and its embodiment of ‘the feminist-political power of a diverse body of women “acting” together’ (p. 65).

Aston’s final chapter explores how socialist feminism’s concern with the inequalities of women’s labour has been reimagined on the contemporary British stage by way of new theatrical representation of historic struggles by female workers for workplace justice. The chapter interweaves Amrit Wilson’s *Finding a Voice* (1978) and Sheila Rowbotham’s *Promise of A Dream* (2000) with analysis of Townsend Theatre’s *We Are the Lions Mr Manager* (2017), which commemorates the Grunwick factory strike by female
Asian workers in the 1970s, and Caryl Churchill’s eco-socialist feminism as represented primarily by *Escaped Alone* (2016), read in conjunction with Sianne Ngai’s concept of stuplimity. If readings of Churchill’s work as ecological and apocalyptic in nature are no longer particularly hard to come by, Aston’s attention to the intersection between shifting theatrical form and affect—and particularly how theatrical form shapes a ‘mode of affectively rendered politicizing engagement’ through which ‘spectators might feel-see their way to identifying with the social and ecological values’ which the playtext proposes (pp. 100, 12)—is an original and valuable discussion. Overall, Aston’s analysis of the ‘wave of feminist-political anger’ that runs through her case-study plays, and which she traces as both ‘the muscle memory of capitalist and patriarchal injuries that stretch back in time’ and ‘the muscle memory of the feminisms forged by the seventies women’s movement: the reanimation of liberal-, radical- and socialist-feminist dynamics’, is a characteristically illuminating and urgent read (pp. 107–08).

Sarah Gorman’s *Women in Performance: Repurposing Failure* maps a resurgence of identity politics onto postmodern performance praxis, via an exploration of the work of contemporary female, trans* and non-binary artists including Rachael Young, Selina Thompson, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN, Bryony Kimmings, Bridget Christie, Project O, Lolly Adefope, Shazia Mirza, and Hannah Gadsby, among others. Following Sarah Janes Bailes’s conceptualizing of a poetics of failure which might be both anti-capitalist and counter-hegemonic, Gorman analyses recent plays and performance pieces that she reads as encouraging audiences to revisit hegemonic assumptions about identity, performance, and indeed failure itself—or, as Gorman describes it, ‘the work of a range of artists who draw upon a postmodern aesthetic of failure in order to articulate a sense of being ostracised, or set apart from, heteronormative, white, patriarchal culture’ (p. 30). This is a deliberately expansive project, confronting the historically exclusionary nature of much feminist theory and practice, and paying particular attention to the intersection between new race, queerness, and trans* theories, and the fields of feminism and performance.

Like both Aston and Abram, Gorman probes the potentially essentializing mode of identity politics in relation to contemporary feminist performance praxis. She begins by reviewing the recalibrated resurgence of identity politics in Anglo-American theatre practice in response to racist, misogynistic, and homophobic activity. Thus, Gorman explains, *Women in Performance: Repurposing Failure* ‘responds to a perceived tension between the now established discourses of performing failure, postmodern and intersectional feminism’ (p. 3). Observing that ‘performing failure has come to exemplify
postmodern and postdramatic performance and as a result can be seen to replicate postmodern theories of human subjectivity and agency’ (p. 4), Gorman resituates the performance of failure within what she claims is a post-2008 surge in ‘performances about subaltern categories relating to class, race, gender, disability and sexuality’ (p. 3). The book draws together two key areas of thought: a minority-identity resistance to renouncing ‘fixed identities and subject positions because, for better or worse, they inform the material experience of their day-to-day lives and provide a crucial concept around which to forge activist communities’, and the adaptation of ‘techniques from the praxis of performing failure’ by present-day minority artists in order ‘to foster a sense of agency on stage’ (p. 4). This, then, is the significance of the titular term ‘repurposing’: Gorman traces a contemporary trend of female, trans*, and non-binary artists borrowing stylistic techniques from postmodern performance practice (which more typically emphasizes identity flux and indeterminacy) while simultaneously claiming a subject position of both recognizable (and potentially communal) identity and workable agency. Gorman acknowledges the potential impasse of an artistry employing a poetics of failure within a neoliberal environment that has absorbed the discourse of ‘failure’ into a capitalist-inflected narrative of resistance and eventual reaffirming success. In response, she draws the queer theorizing of Lee Edelman, Leo Bersani, J. Jack Halberstam, and, particularly, José Esteban Muñoz into generative discussion, tracing an alternative history of failure as a more deliberately anti-social and counter-cultural tool that resists mainstream assimilation, a means of ‘conceptualising agency in a way that continues to push against a conservative, individualistic sense of selfhood’ that characterizes the performance pieces Gorman examines (p. 17).

Following the detailed outlining of relevant theoretical framings in the book’s opening chapter, Chapter 2 examines irony and metatheatrics as a tool for distanciation, underlining ‘the difficulty of speaking from a sincere or fixed subject position in a post-postmodern age’ (p. 31), and drawing particularly on Liz Tomlin’s theory of the sceptical imperative and Lydia Rainford’s theory of irony as a form of internalized agency. Chapter 3 uses Audre Lorde’s and Lora Mathis’s idea of self-care and ‘radical softness’ as a weapon or act of aggressive resistance—helpfully balanced against the neoliberal co-opting of the discourse of ‘self-care’—to explore post-trauma self-case in Selina Thompsons’s salt. (2016), Bryony Kimmings’s I’m a Phoenix, Bitch (2018), and Annie Siddons’s How (Not) to Live in Suburbia (2017). Chapter 4 compellingly analyses the shared nightclub aesthetic of Rachael Young’s Nightclubbing (2018), Project O’s Voodoo (2016), and Lucy
McCormick’s *Triple Threat* (2016) as a mode of performer–audience interaction that evokes Muñoz’s queer heterotopia; this chapter is particularly fun and persuasive, a gorgeous mix of rigorous, theoretically grounded analysis alongside a concise but immediate evocation of the ephemeral performances themselves. Chapter 5 unpicks how the work of Kate Bornstein, Lucy Hutson, and Lois Weaver undermines heteronormative constructions of gender, foregrounding ambivalence and idiosyncrasy in place of binary oppositions. Chapter 6—perhaps the least successful chapter, too often simply ‘retelling the performance’ in a manner much unlike the other chapters’ powerful but succinct evocations of the staged action—examines the use of anger as countercultural critique in contemporary stand-up comedy, with reference to the work of Bridget Christie, Lolly Adefope, Hannah Gadsby, and Shazia Mirza. As a whole, Gorman’s book offers a delicately wrought negotiation of the tensions inherent in both identity politics and the valorizing of ‘failure’ on the contemporary Western stage and beyond.

2. Tackling the Body

I began Alex Mermikides’ *Performance, Medicine and the Human* somewhat sceptically. I’m revealing my own prejudice against ‘me-search’ when I admit that I was at first disappointed to discover that Mermikides would be analysing her own plays in lieu of the wealth of other playtexts dealing with illness and medical practice. Moreover, the book’s opening pages give the impression of some lack of theoretical precision. Mermikides initially draws performance and medicine together on the basis of their shared preoccupation with ‘the human’ and with the process of enhanced visibility and consequent knowledge. ‘Each domain positions human beings as its main object of enquiry. In doing so, each presents human bodies and behaviours for display and comprehension, whether this be upon the illuminated stage of a theatre or on the doctor’s examination bench’, she tells us. ‘Both theatrical and medical technologies are designed to prioritize and enhance our ability to see: space is orchestrated around optimal viewing distances’ and ‘a process of revelation is enacted’ (p. 1). It is too much of a stretch to claim a preoccupation with ‘the human’ and with ‘enhanced visibility’ as true for *all* theatre, *all* medical practice. (Kirsten Shepherd-Barr’s scholarship, including *Science on Stage: From Doctor Faustus to Copenhagen* and the recently published edited volume *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Science*, provides ample exploration of non-human-focused theatre practice, for example.)
However, Mermikides goes on—both in her introductory chapter and across the rest of the book—to refine her opening statements to superb effect. She crafts an elegantly nuanced text that highlights ‘the dramaturgy of lived and represented experience’ in both medical and performance praxis (p. 27), with particular attention to the gestures and values that are conditioned by both inner subjective and outer sociological forces. Mermikides offers illuminating intervention in four key subject areas. Firstly, the status of the ‘human’ in our post-human context as informed by the work of Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and N. Katherine Hayles (and particularly significant in this study since ‘this unsettling redefinition of the human is, at least partially, an effect of biomedical science and technology’; p. 14). Secondly, the shifting, multi-perspectival gaze in both the theatre and the medical site, caught between caring attention and objectifying curiosity, between revelation and misrecognition. Thirdly, the status of medicine itself in its ‘deeply ambivalent position in public discourse and in critical thought’ (p. 9), framed alternately as ‘an unequivocal force for good’ and as a site of public mistrust, ensnared in the apparatus of state power, commercial greed, a history of eugenics. Finally, the relationship between medical humanities, performance, and medicine itself, one of the book’s and most memorable interventions: Mermikides troubles the critical commonplace that positions humanities and theatre practice as ‘more “human” than medicine’, a ‘civilising, “humanizing” force’ that compensates for the objectifying, dehumanizing gaze of medical practice (pp. 28, 17). In all four subject areas, Mermikides combines detailed medical research with finely theorized performance scholarship to offer illuminating new perspectives.

Mermikides offers broad but generative definitions of both ‘medicine’ and ‘medical performance’. She uses the word ‘medicine’ as ‘a shorthand to encompass the scientific project of understanding the human body, its processes and functions, the deployment of the resulting knowledge for the prevention of alleviation of pathology [...] and biopolitical implications of how health, disease, well-being and illness are promoted and policed in the social domain’ (pp. 7–8). The term ‘medical performance’, borrowed from Philip Auslander’s and Petra Kuppers’s work (p. 17) but significantly expanded here, denotes any performance that foregrounds the medical or medicalized body, from mainstream theatre to body-focused performance art to treatment- or training-focused ‘performance’ in the hospital or healthcare sector itself. Thus Performance, Medicine and the Human ‘explores some of the complex, layered and sometimes contradictory ways in which "the human" is enacted in theatre and performance, in medicine and, above all, in those practices that sit in the interfaces, overlaps and splices between
those domains’ (p. 3). Performances within these interstices include, in Chapter 2 (which draws a parallel between the medical and the theatrical gazes), the sixteenth-century public dissection and the body-based performances by Sterlac, ORLAN, and Annie Sprinkle; in Chapter 3 (which queries the relative performance or performativity of ‘empathy’ and the ‘humane’ in the medical domain), the training of early-career doctors in ‘breaking bad news’ in simulations with actors playing the part of their patients; in Chapter 4 (which explores the notions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ as complicated by organ transplantation and cancer), Mermikides’ play bloodlines (2013); and, in Chapter 5 (which analyses the concept of ‘care’ in relation to the medical nurse and the applied performance-maker), Mermikides’ applied performance initiative, Careful (2016), developed in collaboration with a nursing educational programme. A necessary confession: my initial scepticism about ‘me-search’ is proved resoundingly wrong by Mermikides. Her self-interrogative analysis of the aims, successes, and missed opportunities in her own interdisciplinary work is both illuminating and rigorously theorized. Indeed, Chapter 4, which explores the development of her intermedial performance bloodlines, is the most exciting chapter in the volume. It opens with a lucid discussion of how advances in genetics and microbiology have complicated contemporary ideas of human identity, framed by Braidotti’s concept of the new ‘molecular gaze’ (p. 88). From this basis, Mermikides goes on to explore how this new ‘genetic imaginary’ might be played out in dramaturgical tropes that respond to the unsettling of human embodiment and ‘the boundary between the human self and the other’ (p. 89), with particular attention to the identity-blurring experiences of cancer and organ transplantation. At both literally and emotionally the centre of the book, Mermikides quietly unfolds the story of her brother Milton’s acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, which necessitated a bone-marrow transplant from Mermikides herself. Theorizing how the experiences of cancer, cancer treatment and organ transplant can provoke new conceptions of what might count as ‘self’ and ‘other’, Mermikides traces the devising of her multidisciplinary, intermedial production bloodlines, which she describes as pathographic performance: ‘that is, a genre of performance based on autobiographical accounts of illness and medical treatment’ (p. 26). Her analysis here offers a new theorizing of the ‘chimeric’ body on stage, alongside a genuinely moving reading of the forms of kinship engendered by transplant relations, and a meditation on how to create ‘a theatrical form that might capture and convey the disruptions of self and embodiment experienced by people undertaking stem cell transplant’ (p. 91). The whole chapter is a virtuosic intertwining of performance practice, medical
research, and broader performance and embodiment theory, and it reflects the broader achievements of *Performance, Medicine and the Human* as a whole.

I include Karen Quigley’s *Performing the Unstageable: Success, Imagination, Failure* in this section on ‘Tackling the Body’, since many of its most generative insights relate to the challenges of staging the human body. At its heart, however, Quigley’s book is about theatre as theatre, exploring the value of ‘the unstageable’ in performance, and analysing a range of theatrical performances encompassing ancient Greek theatre, Shakespeare, the French Grand Guignol, contemporary stagings by the Wooster Group, Dead Centre, and Tim Crouch—among much else. Quigley offers a resoundingly positive valuation of the unstageable, conceptualizing ‘impossibility as a spur to artistic endeavour’ (p. 4); the spectre of apparently inevitable failure becomes ‘an ally of creative freedom’ here (p. 206). She emphasizes the plurality of the term ‘the unstageable’, meaning variously “things that we find technically difficult to put on stage”, “things that people find difficult to watch at the theatre”, “things that aren’t socially appropriate to put on stage”, “things the theatre can’t do yet”, “things that some theatres can’t afford to do”, “things beyond literal mimesis”, “things that some bodies on stage can’t do” (p. 7). The breadth of consideration of what the unstageable might mean allows Quigley to develop a carefully nuanced consideration of her topic, emphasizing that ‘our ideas and concepts of what is unstageable for the theatre vary through historical and geographical specificity, over genre, style, form and content borders, and across political, ethical and ideological positions’, she reminds us (p. 24).

Quigley’s introductory theoretical framing stretches from conceptualizations of the sublime by Longinus, Burke, and Kant, to post-Holocaust and postmodern ideas of the unrepresentable from Lyotard, Adorno, and Rancière, alongside brief but generative engagement with the concepts of closet drama via Martin Puchner’s and Kimberly Jannarone’s work (p. 19) and of the offstage as theorized by Andrew Sofer (pp. 31–32). Following this, each of the book’s main chapters deals in turn with particular instances of theatrical engagement with the unstageable: ‘impossible’ stage directions, intermedial adaptation, extreme violence, and ghosts. Drawing on what Quigley describes as ‘the productive resistance between text and performance’ (p. 35), Chapter 1 explores the unstageable stage direction as provocative push to theatrical innovation. The chapter opens with a remarkable reading of Annabelle Comyn’s staging of John Osborne’s 1956 play *Look Back in Anger* at the Gate Theatre in January 2018, following the scandal provoked by accusations of sexual harassment and bullying levelled against the theatre’s former director Michael Colgan and the subsequent investigative report. In
this context, the fact that the actor playing Alison does not follow the stage direction’s demand that she stroke and kiss the abusive Jimmy produces a silent but startling renegotiation of the script’s gender politics. Quigley uses the moment as a jumping-off point to discuss other, more obviously ‘impossible’, stage directions, including the history of closet drama, the Puritan theatre shutdown in 1642, and the ‘unstageable’ body parts in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1594), Martin McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), and Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed* (1998). Chapter 2 explores the inevitable gap between original text and adapted performance in theatrical adaptation, focusing on Dead Centre’s *Chekhov’s First Play* (2015), Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’s *An Octoroon* (2014), and Elevator Repair Service’s *Gatz* (2010) as adaptations that offer ‘a dramaturgy of impossibility, in which the adaptation specifically addresses the unstageabilities of its adapted text and generates new approaches to adaptation in the process’ (p. 36). Chapter 3 explores a range of attempts to stage or narrate bodily violence and bloodshed in ‘an intricate choreography of visuality, expectation and imagination’ (p. 129). Alongside a review of theoretical approaches to the role of the spectator’s imagination confronted with the staged spectacle, the chapter includes a fascinating history of fake blood as used in the theatre industry, the rise and fall of the French Grand Guignol’s graphic stagings of (often eroticized) brutality, and analysis of how the Italian performance company Societas Raffaelo Sanzio and English playwright Tim Crouch deliberately draw attention to the theatrical apparatus and audience engagement demanded by their radically different stagings of violence and bloodshed. This is a wide-ranging but utterly compelling chapter, offering rigorous scholarship and sheer entertainment value in equal measure. Chapter 4’s exploration of the stage ghost is just as engaging, tracing the history of the stage ghost across shifting historical conventions, and theorizing the broader ‘relationship between the ghostly encounter and the ephemeral nature of performance’ (p. 165). Taking Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1609) as a central point of discussion, Quigley moves from theorizing historical forms of staging the ghost—with particular reference to Edward Gordon Craig—to extended consideration of how the Wooster Group’s *Hamlet* (2007) and Dead Centre’s *Hamnet* (2017) rework Shakespeare’s ghost (in all the various senses of that term) to explore the boundaries of the unstageable, of theatrical memory, and of the unseen and the unseeable. With its wide-ranging scope and theoretical nuance, Quigley’s *Performing the Unstageable: Success, Imagination, Failure* is to be highly recommended as a meticulously researched new conceptualizing of theatre’s breaching of the boundaries of the ‘possible’—and also as a
welcome reminder of how captivating, how much fun, good academic writing can be.

The joyful energy of Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers: Drag in a Changing Scene, edited by Mark Edward and Stephen Farrier, is immediately epitomized in its contributor list: ‘[Raz Weiner’s] performance work presents in venues in Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem, London and Berlin, in the capacity of a performer, director and/or dramaturg. His drag persona, Tilda Death, is a life project, epistemic framework and activism all put in one short wig’ (p. xv); ‘Olympia Bukkakis—Queen of the Heavens and of the Earth, Empress of Despair, and Architect of your Eternal Suffering—began performing while completing a BA in social theory at Melbourne University. […] She has a passion for the unholy marriage of queer utopianism and historical materialism and prefers darker shades of lipstick’ (p. x)

Following Roger Baker’s Drag: A History of Female Impersonation on Stage (1968, rev. 1994) and Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood’s The Drag Queen Anthology (2004), Edward and Farrier’s Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers: Drag in a Changing Scene is one of the few full-length volumes from a major academic press to focus entirely on drag performance, and as such represents a major step forward for the field. (A second volume, Drag Histories, Herstories and Hairstories: Drag in a Changing Scene, also edited by Edward and Farrier and published by Methuen Drama, is forthcoming.) The list of contributors is pleasingly wide-ranging, including established, early-career and independent academics, practitioners, and practitioner-researchers from across the UK, USA, and Australia, identifying as cis male, trans*, and non-binary, with academic specialities ranging across women, gender and sexuality studies, theology and religion, social theory, queer theory, and dance, theatre, film, media and performance studies and practice. The editors engage in careful reflection as to the volume’s aims, particularly their attention to drag’s anarchic political potential. They emphasize the plural and constantly evolving nature of drag practice: ‘We acknowledge that this volume is not definitive and can never be. Indeed, the queerness of drag offers creative abundance and, therefore, is in constant creation. To offer a definition or claim a definitive guide misunderstands and rubs against what drag does’ (p. 13). If the repeated, near-pathological reluctance to declare anything definitive about drag performance in the volume’s framing occasionally becomes frustrating, the plurality of focus represented across the ensuing chapters is one of the project’s key strengths. The volume explores an exhilarating range of topics with nuance and verve, including chinoiserie drag (Rosa Fong, pp. 45–58), bioqueens (Stephen Farrier, pp. 103–16), drag kings (Mark Edward, pp. 159–72), the tranimal and
Two figures inevitably loom large across the volume. Judith Butler is an oft-invoked figure, so much so that both the editors’ preface and introductory chapter seem compelled to note that Butler’s work ‘does not form the core of the volume—that is taken up by performance—but her work does enact a profound influence on how drag is thought’ (p. xxii), and that ‘although we see Butler’s breakthrough ideas about gender as highly important to our understanding of gender intellectually and in our daily lives, her notion of gender performativity does not imply theatricality, a theatricality we are interested in pursuing with this volume’ (p. 9). The recurrent interrogation of Butler’s work in relation to drag performance is a particular strength of the volume read cover to cover, however, as the contributors’ engagement with the knotty intersection of gender performativity versus gender performance is typically nuanced and insightful, adding up to a really innovative new engagement with the subject. The other towering figure is, of course, RuPaul and the smash-hit series RuPaul’s Drag Race (and multiple spin-offs). The volume deals neatly with the potential monolith. It takes seriously the show’s ‘gravitational pull on current discussion’ of drag (p. xxii), and two chapters—Joe Parslow’s ‘Dragging the Mainstream: RuPaul’s Drag Race and Moving Drag Practices between the USA and the UK’ and Kalle Westerling’s ‘Race for the Money: The Influence of RuPaul’s Drag Race on the Livelihood and Aesthetics of New York City’s Drag Culture’—focus specifically on the show’s impact, complemented by other briefer references across later essays. However, Edward and Farrier also emphasize their drive to ‘mak[e] room at the table for other forms of drag to take a seat’, rightly observing that ‘not all roads lead to RPDR nor does RPDR represent drag’s pinnacle’ (pp. xxii, 4), and the volume as a whole calls attention to the wealth of other drag practice beyond RuPaul’s influence.

Intertwined with consideration of queer and gender theory is a productive attention to the lived practice of drag performance and the historical and contextual communities that shape it. In this respect particularly, the volume demonstrates both the advantages and drawbacks of practice-as-research. If some of the weaker essays in the volume are marred by tenuous or unconvincing readings of the claimed effects of author-staged work, several of the outstanding chapters draw very generatively on self-questioning auto-reflection. Raz Weiner’s ‘Of Hills and Wheels: Tilda Death Drags Memory’ (pp. 73–86), for example, is a stunning autoethnographic reflection on his performance as drag persona Tilda Death for disabled veterans of the Israeli
Army on Holocaust Memorial Day, tracing the specific political workings of the project, ‘the incompatibility of queer bodies in heterosexual hegemonic spaces’ (p. 78), and the changing nature of the very ‘meaning’ of performance itself transplanted into a new context with the attendant shifting in economies of power. Olympia Bukkakis’s ‘Gender Euphoria: Trans and Non-Binary Identities in Drag’ (pp. 133–44) draws on a range of practitioner interviews alongside personal reflections to theorize ‘gender euphoria’ as a radically optimistic alternative to gender dysphoria enabled by drag practice, and frames their careful reflection on Judith Butler’s work with the caveat that ‘most queer lives happen outside academic spaces, so it is vital that these theories are grounded and relatable to trans and queer-lived experiences and material realities’ (p. 135).

Two other chapters deserve particular mention: ‘Destabilization through Celebration: Drag, Homage and Challenges to Black Stereotypes in the Practice of Harold Offeh’ by Kieran Sellars (pp. 117–32) and ‘The Tranimal: Throwing Gender out of Drag?’ by Nick Cherryman (pp. 145–58). Sellars offers an illuminating and often moving account of Harold Offeh’s performance Covers, in which Offeh re-enacts the poses of famous black female singers on their most recognizable album covers. Offeh attempts increasingly difficult poses—culminating in Grace Jones’s ‘impossible arabesque’ from the cover of Island Life, an image ‘heavily manipulated through visual trickery’ and thus impossible for Offeh to achieve in performance (p. 117)—in what Sellars theorizes as a ‘critical celebration’ of the ‘often-unnoticed labour’ of both these black female artists and the drag performer themselves (pp. 117–19). With similarly impressive finesse, Cherryman explores ‘tranimal’ drag as a variant of the practice that pushes beyond the subversion of gender binaries and crosses the boundary beyond human morphology, into the fantastical or animalesque. Thus, these artists create in performance (and between performance spaces) what Cherryman theorizes as a liminal space of ‘the queer-other’ characterized by flux and instability (p. 149), rendering the very attempt to ‘read gender’ at all ‘not only impossible but futile’ (p. 152). At its best, Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers: Drag in a Changing Scene is both rigorous and invigorating, combining queer and performance theory with the insights of individuals alive to the actuality of performance practice beyond academe.
Nadine Holdsworth’s *English Theatre and Social Abjection: A Divided Nation* is a remarkable balance of meticulous research into the social and political situation of each group, detailed attention to a range of representative theatre and television plays, and a broader framing of England as a nation ‘blighted by a number of internal rifts and fissures that pit people against each other in ways that cast particular groups as threats to the nation, as unruly or demeaned citizens that need to be contained or expelled’ (p. 3), as most recently exemplified by the bitterness of the Brexit debate. Holdsworth explores ‘the ways that certain groups of people are figured in terms of national division, a state of non-belonging, or as outright threats to national safety, coherence and ways of life’ (p. 4), and how recent British theatre has represented this state of affairs. She outlines several socially abject groups in England—specifically, the north of England, rioters, Gypsy and Traveller communities, and black British citizens—and traces their representation in contemporary English theatre. The volume as a whole is particularly concerned with analysing theatre’s role in broader public and political life, framed by Sara Ahmed’s ‘sociality of emotion’ and Jacques Rancière’s ‘distribution of the sensible’ and cultural dissensus.

In her introductory chapter, Holdsworth theorizes social abjection—the figuring of certain groups and individuals as ‘waste’ (p. 13)—as not merely a matter of personal failing of social design and a deliberate mode of governmentality, drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s and Mary Douglas’s work to define the concepts of the abject or ‘dirty’ as socially determined. Although the book is primarily focused on twenty-first-century plays, Holdsworth briefly but usefully sketches a broader informing political backdrop, reaching from the social optimism of Clement Atlee’s post-Second World War Labour government and the Beveridge Report, through Margaret Thatcher’s attack on the welfare state, to the rise of neoliberalism and austerity following the 2007 economic crash. Against this contextual setting, Holdsworth offers theatre as a possible mode of social resistance. If ‘a natural response to fear—fear of the other, fear of contamination, fear of violence—is a desire to remain distant from the offending subject’, she argues, then theatre as a medium has ‘the ability to bring a range of subjectivities into proximity through representation’, and a ‘capacity, through *storying*, to provide alternative political imaginaries or counter-narratives’ to the wider national discourse (p. 15; original emphasis). In Chapter 2, which focuses on Simon Stephens’s *Port* (2002) and Lee Hall’s *Pitmen Painters* (2007), Holdsworth explores the recurring motif of the north of England as either a space of
abandonment, decline, and poverty, or a site of Robert Eaglestone’s ‘cruel nostalgia’ for a ‘lost’ authentic, masculine community. In Chapter 3, she traces how urban riots—including the 1991 ‘estate riots’, the 2001 race riots, and the 2011 London ‘looting’ or ‘shopping’ riots—have prompted playwrights from Trevor Griffiths to Alecky Blythe to employ theatre as a means of interrogating the relevant socio-economic inequalities and community politics, theatricalizing the frictions and fissures that led to these explosions of public disobedience. In Chapter 4, Holdsworth examines the increasing fascination with Gypsy and Traveller communities, from popular culture examples such as My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding (Channel 4, 2010–12) and Peaky Blinders (BBC2, 2013–), to mainstream theatre plays including John Arden’s Live Like Pigs (1958), Chloe Moss’s The Way Home (2006), and Jez Butterworth’s Jerusalem (2009). The chapter smartly highlights the lack of much actual Gypsy or Traveller representation among playwrights, performance-makers, or theatre audiences in England (in contrast to the contemporary Irish situation), and emphasizes the consequently heightened potential for subject fetishizing and narrative control. In Chapter 5, Holdsworth draws the work of playwrights including Anders Lustgarten, debbie tucker green, Somalia Seaton, and Testament into conversation with postcolonial theory and theatre scholarship by Lynette Goddard, Reni Eddo-Lodge, Paul Gilroy, and Deirdre Osborne, in order to explore how English theatre has probed ‘the legacies of the British Empire and slavery that serve to cast black citizens as inferior disruptive presences to be feared and contained’ (p. 23), right up to the increasing tolerance of a far right anti-immigrant rhetoric in twenty-first-century Britain.

English Theatre and Social Abjection: A Divided Nation is a consummate, intensely valuable book. Holdsworth is an experienced scholar at the height of her game; she delves deeply into the complex nuances and contradictions of her subject while remaining completely in control of her material. She crafts a scholarly narrative concerning the theatrical representation of social abjection while remaining alert to how different groups—and different individuals within those groups—experience abjection in variously distinct ways. Perhaps most usefully, Holdsworth’s assertion of theatre’s potential positive impact in shaping more sensitive ideas of these various populations also encompasses a thoughtful acknowledgement of theatre’s limitations, in terms of both limited social reach and its own sometimes questionable ethics of content and representation. If cultural divisions are generated and circulated in public discourse, Holdsworth observes, then ‘theatre is implicated in both counter-hegemonic and resistant narrative that question and challenge’ these assumptions—but it can also ‘contribute the recirculation of
problematic cultural imaginaries’ that further extend social stereotyping and the abjectifying, commodifying gaze (p. 3), particularly while performance scripting, creation, and audiences remain dominated by white middle- and upper-class citizens. Within the contemporary neoliberal capitalist system, mainstream theatre remains closed off to many of the social groups that the book analyses. As a result, Holdsworth cautions, although theatre ‘can offer up ways to see society anew and to highlight its complexities’, it is nevertheless ‘a tall order to expect theatre to in any way change society or to make the lives of those defined as socially abject, better’ (p. 19). English Theatre and Social Abjection: A Divided Nation articulates the power of the theatre medium to generate expansive new cultural imaginaries, while remaining alert to our need to attend to the working politics of the contemporary theatre industry itself.

A comparable attention to the political potential of the theatre medium animates Yana Meerzon’s excellent Performance, Subjectivity, Cosmopolitanism. At a moment when the global number of international migrants has reached 258 million, Meerzon reads cosmopolitanism as a new historical condition, encompassing a heady mixture of travel, tourism, asylum, and exile. Building from earlier theorizing of transnational and globalizing cultural practice—including the modern figure of the flâneur, the literary modernist exilic aesthetic, and Rebecca Walkowitz’s work on critical cosmopolitanism—Meerzon describes our new cosmopolitanism as producing ‘a cosmopolitan persona out of the divided self’, the rhizomatic ‘cosmopolitan subject’ who is located between habits and worlds, ‘constantly on the move and forced by the conditions of labour, politics, or physical and economic upheaval to seek new opportunities elsewhere’ (p. 6; original emphasis). Cosmopolitan theatre practices, in turn, are informed by their makers’ own experience of mobility, displacement, and hybridity, and frequently spotlight ‘the multicultural and multilingual urbanite torn between the accelerated time of hyper-consumption and hyper-productivity and the stillness of nothingness’ (p. 6). Across the book’s three parts, ‘Encounters in Language’, ‘Encounters in Body’, and ‘Encounters in Time, Space, and History’, Meerzon examines the dramaturgy of the cosmopolitan encounter in, respectively, mono-, bi-, and multi-lingual performance; the performative and choreographed construction of the individual body and body politic on stage; and the ‘co-creator’ audience in the spatial-temporal continuum of the cosmopolitan theatre site.

Meerzon’s analysis of cosmopolitan theatre offers two crucial contributions to the broader field: first, in tracing how recent theatre and performance work has responded to the situation of the ‘hypermodern nomad’ (p.
3); second, in theorizing the potential ethical value of immersive and participatory cosmopolitan theatre as an antidote to the bleaker forms of forced globality and xenophobic resistance that see children imprisoned in cages. ‘Mass migration leads to dehumanization. People—the subjects and agents of their own destiny—become objects, nameless bodies moving across water and land; they become numbers and application files’, Meerzon observes. ‘We desperately need to learn and adopt the practices of human pluralism, in order to avoid the pitfalls of the culture of fear’ (p. 276). Meerzon’s reading of the ethical potentials of cosmopolitan theatre is thus largely an optimistic one, conceiving a performance practice that, by ‘confronting the bodies of the spectators with the bodies of the performers in the space/time immanence of a live performance’, can rehumanize the individual migrant and offer ‘new models of interpersonal and transnational communication’ (p. 277). This is a theatre that, in short, turns strangers into neighbours. The motif of the encounter, ‘both as a dramaturgical device on stage and as a gesture of theoretical conception’, underpins this idea of ‘the live theatrical work as a social, performative, philosophical, and aesthetic event, when several independent subjects come together to form new environments for intellectual, emotional, and affectual collaborations’ (p. 5). In particular, Meerzon explains, she aims ‘to shift the discussion of the ethics of encounter from the self (us)/other (them) paradigm to the self as other formula and produce a new understanding of subjectivity as embodied self, conditioned by its material and cultural situation’ (p. 6; original emphasis). This focus on the self as other is a welcome antidote to an alternative brand of theatre and performance theory that posits the appropriative understanding of the other-as-if-self as the pinnacle of theatrical ethics. Most specifically, in the context of cosmopolitan theatre—where the categories of leisured traveller, voluntary expatriate, political or economic exile, and forced asylum seeker or refugee must be carefully disentangled—this ‘post-Brechtian gesture of alienating self from self’ can push the spectator to self-reflection and self-recognition, to ‘contemplate their position as a privileged subject’, Meerzon theorizes, to beneficial effect: ‘Not only can it make a person of privilege suddenly recognize the other within themselves; it can incite them to take the first step towards an ethical dialogue with the other outside the self’ (p. 3).

Meerzon acknowledges the optimism of her argument, inherited from the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Jill Dolan—but it is a hard-won and determinedly cultivated optimism. In carefully distinguishing between the various forms of privileged and traumatic ‘cosmopolitan’ existence, from tourist to refugee, and in emphasizing the political and
financial precarity involved in much cosmopolitan production, Meerzon grounds her theorizing of a plural and pluralizing theatre in a deeply circumscribed recognition of the forces that work against it. If cosmopolitan theatre might help foster ‘a type of social consciousness which promotes competence of co-residing with people of different backgrounds and interest in the well-being of the collective’, as Meerzon puts it, this is a hope that she sets in starkly explicit contrast to her moment of writing, characterized by ‘Donald Trump’s xenophobia and anti-immigrant discourse to Brexit, Hungarian and Italian neo-nationalism’ and the new interpersonal and international divisions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic (p. 27). Thus, Meerzon’s conceptualizing the site of performance as ‘a training ground for offstage behaviour’, and cosmopolitan performance specifically as a reminder of the ‘potential for transnational encounters and communication’ that facilitate understanding rather than suspicion, is a determinedly political gesture (p. 27). As Meerzon herself remarks, ‘However utopian and privileged the idea of cosmopolitanism can be, without its basic imperatives—such as right for free movement, curiosity towards the other, openness to the encounter, embracing difference, and a transnational mindset—our march into an unknown future [...] can be extremely dark’ (p. 27). Performance, Subjectivity, Cosmopolitanism is a powerful, clear-sighted book, and it balances the dark and the hopeful of our contemporary moment in compelling and discerning measure.

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