

Book Reviews

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF ASIAN THEATRE. Edited by Siyuan Liu. New York: Routledge, 2016. 578 pp. 99 B/W illus. Cloth, \$240.

With ninety-nine illustrations, four major sections, and 578 pages, the *Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre* weighs in as a major reference guide that surveys, as the publisher's advertising notes, the "rich and diverse traditions of classical and contemporary" Asian performing arts in a "cutting edge overview." And indeed it is. This large volume contains contributions from the worlds of academia, theatrical production, and cultural studies, with specialized reports by theatre historians, costume designers, choreographers, scholar-performers, PhD students, and so on.

The more than fifty contributors are from the United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, Bangladesh, Japan, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Korea, Thailand, Nepal, Tibet, Indonesia, the Uyghur Republic, and India. Several of the authors appear in multiple sections.

There are many ways to enter such a multifaceted collection of writings. One could focus on the traditional, the modern, on gender and performance, on movement or music, or on various intersections among these topics. Or the reader could look for fascinating asides—on musicals or Shakespearean productions in Asia, for example. As Jonah Salz enumerates in terms of early Japanese performance, we could look for "dramaturgic and mise-en-scène continuities" (p. 52).

Editor Siyuan Liu from the University of British Columbia supplies a spirited introduction as well as several subsequent sections. In the introduction, Liu offers an homage to earlier books about Asian theatre upon whose shoulders this book stands. He explains the rather complex structure of this

current volume through a discussion of four (somewhat unclear) parameters: geographical scope, structure, fluid hybridity between tradition and modern in contemporary times, and gender performance. The parameters are not delineated by number after the first, geography, so hopefully this is the correct list. In terms of structure, Liu eloquently explains that the decision was to adopt “a hybrid structure that seeks to balance country coverage with thematic discussion and cross-region comparison, [giving] equal weight to spectacular traditional forms and vibrant modern and contemporary practices” (p. 2).

Rarely has such a range of Asian theatre topics been housed under one roof. The four parts of the volume build upon each other, and also intersect. There are the inevitable overlaps and, at times, the reader has the sensation of “wrestling with an octopus.” This is not necessarily an overwhelming sensation but one where the quality of exploration (rather than exhaustive mastery) becomes paramount. It is possible to dip into this book at any point and find possibilities. *The Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre* certainly expands our view of the framework of this subject.

Part 1, “Traditional Theatre in Asia,” and part 3, “Modern Theatre in Asia,” offer succinct overviews and updates. Part 2, “Dimensions,” focuses on dance, music, masks, puppets, costume and makeup, and architecture and stage. This section, in particular, offers details that encourage a comparative glance. Part 4, “Perspectives,” focuses on spoken theatre, actresses, traditional performances in contemporary Asia, Shakespeare in Asia, and musicals. Parts 2 and 4 tend to move in unexpected directions, expanding the exploration of the field. As key examples, note how chapter 21 (“Modern Asian Theatre and Indigenous Performance”) describes the way political movements helped initiate a reexamination of spoken theatre (in the mode of Ibsen or Stanislavski) and a concomitant reappraisal of the need for traditional forms. Jennifer Goodlander and Ashley Robertson’s case study of Indonesian women’s *dalang* is fascinating and reflects current research. More of those kinds of case studies would have been a welcome addition. As Sissi Liu points out in another context, women in Asian theatre have tended to be met with both “ecstatic enthusiasm and societal prejudice” (p. 421).

The chapters in the *Handbook* begin with a paragraph that summarizes (or at least leads invitingly into) the subsequent writing in the section. Some of the writers chose imaginative ways to subdivide their sections. Note, for example, Jonah Salz’s division of “Traditional Japanese Theatre” (part 1, chapter 3) into such subdivisions as “Gods, Ghosts, and Madwomen” (referring to *nō*) and “Twisting Plots by Chanter Specialists” (referring to *bunraku*), or Aparna Dharwadher’s depiction of twenty-first-century projects in Indian modern theatre in terms of “centre, periphery, and plurality” (p. 259).

Some of the chapters are subdivided by localities (for example, the one on traditional Indonesian theatre by I Nyoman Sedana and Kathy Foley), while others tend toward a chronological survey (for example, the one on traditional Chinese theatre by Colin Mackerras, which also includes subsections titled “Ideology” and “Censorship”), or a division by performance types (for example, the chapter on traditional Indian theatre by Farley Richmond).

One way to approach this large book is to focus on just one topic, or on one country, and see how it is presented across sections. Another way would be to look for examples of the interplay of traditions and change. In terms of topics, one could look, for example, at how the discussion of music takes us from India to China, Tibet, Uyghur, Japan, Korea, and also to Southeast Asia. The section on music deals with a range of terms and concepts, from *tala* (rhythmic patterns, India) to Tibetan chant, to musical forms influenced by the *maqam* “system of modal scales and melody types” from Arabic music (p. 141 on Uyghur music) to the husky vocal tones of the *pansori* (Korea). This is far from an exhaustive list of the varied offerings.

Extending the discussion of music in Asian theatre, chapter 24, “Modern Musicals in Asia,” focuses on American-style musicals “inspired by vaudeville, jazz, and Broadway.” In the section on Japanese musical performances, Makiko Yamanashi points out that *ongaku-geki* (musical theatre) is fundamental to the Japanese performing arts, but the “hybrid genre” (p. 530) of the *myūjīkaru* (musicals) is distinctive, whether they be Western opera, Takarazuka productions, or other forms. In the contribution about China in this section, Sissi Liu points out that the phrase *yinyueju* (musical theatre) is an “unstable, imported term” (p. 530). She rightly notes the role of transnational collaboration as well as a “nostalgia of a lost empire” (p. 534).

The black-and-white illustrations in the *Handbook* range from advertising stills to shots of performances to personal snapshots. Some are full page, while others are a half page or even smaller. Many of the images have a grainy quality, making them hard to decipher. On the other hand, some of the photos taken by contributors give this large scholarly book a welcome immediacy.

There is also a useful glossary of key terms. While each chapter has its own bibliography, it would have been helpful to have a selected reading list of major sources at the end of the book. Any book of this scope will still be lacking at points. For example, the section on Japanese theatre under “Gender and Actresses” (chapter 19) only focuses on kabuki, leaving out a report on extraordinary female performers in *nō*. I wish there had been more attention to puppetry, in addition to the excellent entries by Kathy Foley, Jennifer Goodlander, and others. Then again, there is a separate Routledge publication just on this theme (Poser, Orenstein, and Bell 2014).

Mentioned in the acknowledgments are illustrious precursors to this volume, such as *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* edited by James Brandon (1997) and the two-volume *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre* edited by Samuel Leiter (2007). The dedication in the current volume to the late James R. Brandon (1927–2015), one of the founders of the field, reminds us of the timeliness of this study, even as the roots of many of the theatrical forms extend back into mythological time. *The Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre* provides new frameworks, challenges our preconceptions, and honors what has come before. The hefty price is a deterrent but the investment is worthwhile.

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