

Joanne Tompkins, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre*. Basingstoke UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 204pp.

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Joanne Tompkins's book is a welcome addition to Australian theatre studies. It is nearly ten years since Veronica Kelly published her collection of essays by multiple authors in *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s*, and since the publication of Helen Gilbert's *Sightlines: Race, Gender and Nation in Contemporary Australian Theatre*. Therefore a serious and comprehensive examination of the field is well overdue. The strengths of Tompkins's book derive from its focused approach to contemporary Australian theatre, the breadth of material considered and the attention given to important, genuinely radical, recent theatre. If you are looking for a survey of Australian theatre since 1979 then this book offers a useful, at times provocative, study in which Tompkins takes her cues explicitly and insistently from cultural and postcolonial studies.

Tompkins uses Paul Carter's celebrated book *The Lie of the Land* (1996) as a platform for her analysis of contemporary Australian theatre. Carter examines perceptions of space and place, and seeks to contest the narrowly linear views of space he sees as inherent in, and aligned with, imperial discourse. But Tompkins is neither as poetic nor as digressive as Carter.

Tompkins also draws heavily and explicitly on Ken Gelder's and Jane Jacobs's reconfiguring of Freud's notions of the uncanny, and their application of the experiences of the uncanny (being unfamiliar and "out of place") to the "modern Australian condition", articulated in their book *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (1998). Specifically, Tompkins applies the idea of the uncanny as a way of understanding interpretations of spatiality in recent Australian drama. Tompkins argues in her introduction entitled "Spatial Coordinates" that "Gelder and Jacobs's uncanny provides a means of accommodating—metaphorically if not literally—manifestations of spatial anxiety in Australia." The discussion of plays that follows in this study investigates what Tompkins regards as recurring anxieties that arise primarily out of the facts of European settlement and associated disruption of indigenous inhabitants of Australia, as well as the particular anxieties arising out of the fear of invasion and contamination expressed in Australian social life in the last few decades.

With all of this underpinning the discussion of numerous contemporary plays, Tompkins sets out to explore the ways in which contemporary Australian theatre offers significant engagement with social and political life, or at least facilitates a “dialogue with ideas”, without simply performing them. And this is where the theoretical framework becomes cumbersome and some might say overly elaborated. However, the theoretical lens becomes less restrictive once Tompkins hits her stride in the sharply observed, thoroughly researched, discussion of particular plays and specific productions which make up the bulk of this text.

Tompkins states that theatre needs to be historicised. Here she refers to Elin Diamond’s ideas about unmaking mimesis in order to allow it to become what Tompkins calls a “radical site”. Tompkins offers this explanation: “A rigid mimetic reflection is boring in its reproduction of life off stage; it also limits the potential for the audience to read the details of performance as signifying (historically and politically) beyond the narrative of a particular production”.

For Tompkins the important departure point is that most of the plays with which she engages “unmake mimesis with the intention of politicising the space between mimetic and non-mimetic representation”. Thus the plays under the microscope here fulfil an important function: they unsettle their audience, they question and refute accepted constructions of historical and spatial identity. Persevering with this is helpful and will both stimulate and inspire undergraduate students (as well as scholars) in their approach to Australian drama and Australian theatre history. Fortunately Tompkins does not allow the primary interest in landscape as an icon of national identity (following Lowenthal 1997) to hinder discussion of plays that do not fit the rubric.

One of the ways in which Tompkins explores the nature of “theatrical” unsettling is through methexis. This might be manifest in an interpretation that does not reproduce “the topograph” of a colonial mindset, but instead embodies other, usually non-realist interpretations of land and landscape. Tompkins demonstrates that the substantial increase in plays written by indigenous writers over the last few decades has contributed to this reinterpretation. The author’s analysis of Jack Davis’s protagonist, Worru, in *The Dreamers* (1982) provides an excellent example of methexis at work. Tompkins points to the way in which a character such as Worru presents a figure who is experiencing his dreaming past in the present. The naturalistic or mimetic elements of the stage (kitchen table, etc) are present but the tribal dancer’s appearances are highly allusive and powerfully methektic.

Tompkins's analysis does not follow a chronological sequence but, within the thematically arranged chapters, her analysis is historically presented and clearly contextualised. The chapters of her study are structured under the organising *topoi* of monuments, contamination and borders. In her chapter on contamination Tompkins recalls *Rocket Range* (1946) by Jim Crawford with its grim portrayal of the injustice and violence of the Woomera rocket range and Dymphna Cusack's *Pacific Paradise* (1955), in which Cusack expresses vehement outrage about the nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll and Christmas Island. Tompkins then proceeds to a compelling discussion of Nowra's *Sunrise* (1983) with its portrayal of escapism in the face of anxiety and the "terrifying beauty of the bomb" experienced by Clarrie, in addition to other "Maralinga plays", such as Janis Balodis's *Heart for the Future* (1989), Lemon's and Cathcart's *Tiger Country* (1995) and Rankin's and Jamieson's *The Career Highlights of the Mamu* (2002). In the original production of the latter play some 20 members of Jamieson's extended family participated. The play combines history and comedy, blends all manner of performance styles, uses country and pop music (and, in the first production, video made by indigenous film maker Debbie Gittins), all serving, as Tompkins suggests, to "refract" the past. Dancers performed emu dance sequences that had not been performed for possibly 40 years and never performed outside the community. In this fascinating account of a powerfully imagined and rousing executed theatrical *tour de force* Tompkins fully explores the meaning of *methexis* in action.

Recent Australian theatre has also addressed the treatment of refugees, asylum seekers and mandatory detention. Tompkins's analysis of seven recent plays including Linda Jaivin's *Halal-el-Mashakel* (2003), as well as Sidetrack Theatre's *Citizen X* (2003) and the collectively authored play *The Waiting Room* (2002) by the Melbourne Workers Theatre and Platform 27, makes compelling reading. Tompkins's detailed analysis here is valuable and her conclusions thought-provoking. She says that most of the plays dramatising asylum seekers "only gesture towards the future and to what psychological locations the asylum seekers will inhabit if and when they are released (or deported)". Significantly Tompkins states that a balanced play on the topic "that establishes a convincing representational space" has yet to be written, though in a footnote she points to Philip Dean's *First Asylum* (1999) as a work that avoids didactic attack of government policy.

In her final chapter, "The Borders of Identity", Tompkins works creatively with her primary argument that "identity is grounded in spatiality". She moves to a discussion of psychic places in contemporary drama examining

Jenny Kemp's *Still Angela* (2002) and Richard Frankland's *Conversations with the Dead* (2002). Once again Tompkins offers a rich and detailed analysis of the performance space, its use in productions of these plays, and the intriguing exploration of the mind, memory and subjectivity rendered in these experimental plays.

Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre offers a valuable and enlightening contribution to scholarly debate in theatre studies. Its discussion is informed by, and intersects with, cultural studies more broadly. Tompkins's expansive coverage of contemporary theatre, detailed analysis of productions, comprehensively articulated theoretical framework and illuminating conclusions about the staged explorations of spatial politics in Australia, combine to produce a sensitively written, fully researched and timely monograph.

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