

**Hilary Glow. *Power Plays: Australian Theatre and the Public Agenda*.
Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2007, 224pp.
AU\$32.95**

ISBN 9780868198156

http://www.currency.com.au/product_detail.aspx?productid=1602&ReturnUrl=/search.aspx?q=Hilary+Glow

The dramatic shift in Australia's political landscape since this book was published highlights two of its central preoccupations: the diversity of the forms and locations of public political performance together with what Hilary Glow refers to as the 'contemporary Australianness' of the political theatre she examines, 'its commitment to the here and now'. This shift, made visible in what has been perhaps the pre-eminent performance moment of 2008—the formal apology made in February by the Prime Minister to the Stolen Generations in Federal Parliament—marks both a historical break from the period of political theatre with which Glow concerns herself and a point of reconnecting to that now-past time, a sense of the importance for readers and audiences of recalling the recent past and its bearing on our current cultural preoccupations.

Power Plays examines political theatre in Australia across a period roughly corresponding to the Howard decade, considering the aims and concerns of major works and writers across this decade in light of traditions of (mostly Anglophone) political theatre, with a particular focus on post-Thatcher British theatre, but also informed by a careful account of political theatre traditions in Australia. Glow argues for the connections that she and her playwrights draw between the imperatives of Australian theatre under Howard and those broader traditions that have insistently and repeatedly thrown theatrical premises into debate across a range of political and governmental circumstances. What brings many of these positions together—and aligns Glow with most of her writers—is a critique of nationalism as a defining cultural mode and the commitment of writers to accost this view through their work. The broad sympathy between Glow and her writers thus generates the book's conceptual energy, but also provides for (at least the appearance of) a certain univocality, a point raised with some irritation by Louis Nowra in his review of the book in *The Australian* earlier this year. I will return to this later in the discussion.

Power Plays is located squarely and authoritatively within the field of theatre-performance studies, making it enlightening, if at times somewhat frustrating, for literary scholars who might wish to extend the commentary into adjunct cultural fields, alluded to in the broad account of public debate and political culture thrown up by the book, but excluded by its performance studies rubric. On the other hand, Glow's detailed knowledge of political theatre and her

familiarity with the specifics of the recent Australian scene provide the grounds for just such a conversation with readers from related fields. In particular the book's detail, supported by a methodological approach using interviews and close analysis of highlighted major works to exemplify key points, contributes to what is possibly its main appeal: the record it provides not simply of the broader debates, but of the works themselves and their reception. As the book progresses, our understanding and appreciation of political theatre in Australia is enhanced through the detailed accounts of these key texts, rather than through complex theorisation of its premises or wider impacts.

The book is divided into six chapters, each focusing on a clearly delineated set of themes that are in turn approached through different conceptual lenses. The Introduction sketches the scope of contemporary theatre in terms of imperatives to critique assumptions and question their truth. It proposes as a direct challenge to 'the Howard government's rhetoric around one nation' the addition of the theatre to Edward Said's conceptualisation of 'stages itinerant', that is, 'platforms that either aren't available to or are shunned by the television personality, expert, or political candidate' (15-16). The first chapter 'Indigenous Identities' explores the personal-political nexus of Indigenous theatre in order to provide a conceptual point of departure for the book's broader examination of political theatre. It traces the detail of the negotiation of autobiography, biography, community account and lived experience across defining 1990s theatrical works by Indigenous practitioners in terms of the 'intercultural exchange' (36) they initiate and sustain. These works are central to the scope of Glow's consideration of political theatre in Australia, and to the kinds of debates such theatre opens up, in their emphasis on diversity and difference and their staging of 'national public discussion' (37).

The second chapter 'The History Wars' restates this premise that 'political theatre' is theatre that 'engages in current debate . . . and uses theatre as a forum to do so' (40), making use of the public debate around the nature and impact of diverging understandings of the place of memory and history in the public imagination. The focus here is on work by non-Indigenous writers that addresses questions of race and 'the relationship between racial politics and national history', with a particular focus on engagements with concepts and theorisations of 'whiteness', and representations of settlement, invasions and the land. Rhetorically, the argument moves in this chapter to examine oppositional debate in the form of a 'critical approach to hegemonic nationalism' (71), a stage for a larger public conversation. This historical critique provides in turn the ground for the account in 'The Politics of Place' of a politicised landscape for theatre across this decade in the form of the representation of rural communities. For Glow, the dramatisation and recreation of the country

town in a number of major plays across this period metaphorically invokes a newly reworked and critical terrain of the nation, extending significantly the scope and ambit of the public-political conversations she is charting.

'Globalisation and Class' revisits the conceptualisation of 'political theatre' through a survey of Australian theatre's preoccupation with class. This oblique account, approached in terms of the rise of politically-located theatres such as community and feminist theatre practice, sits a little oddly with the explicit focus of the title; but Glow's trajectory in fact provides a sound path into the works of Katherine Thomson and the group of writers who produced the *Who's Afraid of the Working Class* anthology, and into the insistent engagement these works provide with the ascendant politics of economic rationalism. 'Fortress Australia' focuses attention on the 2005 production and subsequent public critique of Hannie Rayson's *Two Brothers*, as a fulcrum of debate around the role and place of precisely targeted political theatre. What's really interesting here is the way Glow constructs as diverse but interimplicated contexts for this work firstly, the history of multicultural theatre in Australia, followed by the critique of official accounts of national sovereignty as seen in government policy on refugees, and finally the acerbic criticism of Rayson's play by the conservative media. While the chapter doesn't provide a meta-commentary on this debate, the arrangement of the material and the commentary speaks to the complexity of this field of public performance. The final chapter 'The War on Terror' focuses on theatre taking up the specifics of a post-9/11 world, thus extending the ambit of national identification into the global domain through the plays' explicit addressing of global ideological and political dilemmas.

Nowra's rejection of what he terms the 'monologues' of political theatre invites a more broadly-based engagement with the medium. However, in place of this, Glow presents a sympathetic, even synergistic account of key works and of key theatre practitioners—that is to say of left-wing theatre—from the past decade and considers their work in terms of a broad and coherent tradition of political theatre. The conversation *Power Plays* imagines and documents, then, is to be determined in the critical and energetic response of these writers to the rise and sustained dominance of conservative political-aesthetic agendas through the Howard decade. The electoral shifts since the book's publication throw its historical brief into starker highlight, rendering it perhaps no longer timely in an obvious way, but in many senses more useful for readers and practitioners, as an engaged account of the diversity and continuing possibilities of articulate resistance and critique across a changing national political field.

Brigitta Olubas, The University of New South Wales