

- BOOK REVIEW -

**Steve Blandford, ed. 2013. *Theatre and Performance in Small Nations*.  
Bristol and Chicago: Intellect.**

This book sets out to illustrate how theatre and performance in small nations contribute to debates about the construction of the nation in a globalised world. In a clear and inviting introduction, editor Steve Blandford argues that theatre and performance have much to offer to conversations about cultural identity and the nation, because 'the act of performance itself draws attention to the idea that identities are performed and that different versions of identity can compete for our attention or allegiance' (3). Blandford highlights the 'opportunities' in small nations where individual citizens, as well as theatre performances, have a 'better possibility to influence decision making' (5) than in larger cultures. Blandford sees a connection between 'small nations' and 'first nations' and argues that some of the most interesting work globally comes from these sources, such as Indigenous theatre in Australia.

These arguments are developed throughout the book in chapters discussing developments in small nations such as Ireland, New Zealand and Malaysia, as well as the reconstituted states of Eastern Europe and Hispanic theatre in the USA. There is an intriguing focus on 'stateless nations' such as Wales, Scotland, Catalonia and Assam in North-east India. The book also develops questions around the notion of a 'national theatre', illustrating that small nations can come up with effective alternatives to the monolithic national theatre structure, such as the mobile National Theatre of Scotland. In discussing a rich tradition of Scottish playwriting during the political devolution period, Ian Brown contends that 'playwrights were redefining the nation' (40), aiding in a growing self-confidence. Brown's celebratory stance concludes with the formation of the National Theatre, a company without a building that is based on co-productions with established companies and marks a 'new, progressive and visionary theatrical confidence' (48).

Blandford's chapter on Welsh theatre exemplifies the book's overall thesis by highlighting the role of theatre in establishing a national identity in relation to larger, more powerful nations. Wales has the apparent luxury of two national theatres (one of which, Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, focuses entirely on work in the Welsh language). Blandford produces a useful comparative analysis between the foundation of National Theatre Wales and the National Theatre of Scotland,

with the Welsh theatrical ambition being viewed with ‘detached amusement’ (60) by the British press. Despite this, and various ongoing problems acknowledged by Blandford, Wales serves as an inspirational example of the benefits of expanding debates about national identity through theatre. The use of online social networks expands the value of National Theatre Wales’ benefits to the community as a whole. Like the Scottish, the Welsh seek to ‘reinvent and repossess the very idea of a national theatre and, to some extent, the very idea of the nation’ (61).

Questions around perceptions of a national theatre are developed further by Sharon Mazer, who considers a hypothetical national theatre in New Zealand. Mazer provides a succinct overview of theatre practices in New Zealand, encompassing the mainstream and the experimental, highlighting the central position of Māori and Pacific performance companies in the overall performance culture, building a picture of diversity rather than unity, and concluding that a national theatre for New Zealand might be a fluid space or meeting place rather than a singular institution.

The essays consistently highlight the effectiveness of theatre as a way of contesting or debating nationalist narratives established by governments and other authorities. Susan Philip illustrates how post-independence English-speaking theatre in Malaysia has questioned the rigid classification of citizens according to race. Although her conclusion seems pessimistic, her examples convincingly demonstrate that theatre has a role to play in creating a public forum for debates about race. Teresa Marrero examines the vigour and range of Latin@/Hispanic theatre companies in Texas that contest cultural stereotypes perpetuated by Hollywood. The relationship between cultural identity and classical drama is intriguingly dissected in Helena Buffery’s account of four *Hamlets* by Catalan directors. Buffery frames her analysis of the relationship between the local and the global with the pertinent reminder that in *Hamlet* itself a small nation becomes the conduit for complex universal issues.

Rea Dennis explores changing identity narratives in Australia through a comparative analysis of two productions exploring identity politics. Nigel Jamieson’s multi-media physical theatre work *Honour Bound* examines the imprisonment of Australian David Hicks in Guantanamo Bay detention camp, while Dennis’ own PhD project, *Reconciliation! What’s the Story?*, incorporates a Playback Theatre performance based on audiences’ responses to reconciliation with Indigenous Australians. This comparison leads to an illuminating discussion of contesting identity narratives arising from the Howard government’s engagement with post 9/11 global politics, leading to a simplistic notion of national identity based on unity, not diversity, at the expense of reconciliation at the local level.

As befits the topic of small nations questioning the values of dominant cultures, several writers cite their own personal experience. The most striking example is a subjective account of the impact of two decades of conflict in the Balkans by Macedonian-born playwright Goran Stefanovski. The essay is filled with striking images from Stefanovski's work, such as Donald Duck, representing the forces of 'cowboy capitalism', swaggering into Byzantium (Eastern Europe). Yet at times Stefanovski's highly personal approach leaves me longing for more socio-political context. His account of his fascinating *Hotel Europa* production involving nine directors and 25 actors from Balkan and Baltic countries describes the staging but provides no inkling of themes or narrative, ending with an invitation to the reader to read the published play.

In the book's final essay, Aparna Sharma vividly illustrates how the erotic physicality of the *Bohag Bihu* agricultural fertility dance from the Indian state of Assam has been adapted for urban performances. Despite a dilution of the dance's performative energy, Sharma argues that *Bihu* dance remains a strong assertion of the distinctiveness of Assamese culture, as a non-violent, non-separatist expression of the micro-nationalist ambitions of the Assamese people.

*Theatre and Performance in Small Nations* is a relatively small book with a big ambition, a timely addition to debates about the role of performance in relation to national and cultural identity. Many of the writers draw attention to the use of local languages, highlighting the fact that bi- or multi-lingual theatre is common in small nations. It seems ironic, however, that the first five chapters deal with countries in Europe, after which the focus moves to more marginal places (from the European perspective), concluding with discussion of a remote state of India in the final chapter. This is a common hierarchy in books about world theatre, implying that Europe is still the cultural centre. Perhaps, given the book's critique of the large and powerful nations, a symbolic geographical re-ordering of the essays would have been appropriate. Nevertheless, as the book unfolds, the evidence mounts up – theatre in small nations can make a difference, socially, culturally, politically.

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