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**VIRTUAL THEATRES: AN INTRODUC-
TION.** By Gabriella Giannachi. London:
Routledge Press, 2004; pp. 184. $105.00
cloth, $36.95 paper.

Virtual Theatres: An Introduction positions itself
as the first full-length investigation of theatre and
digital media, analyzing performances that not only
incorporate the virtual but are becoming completely
virtual in and of themselves. Performance in the
twenty-first century, as analyzed in Gabriella Gianna-
chi's book, has been rapidly ushered into the era of
the simulacrum. Viewers are not so much "liberated
from the canon and the dramaturgy of theatre arts or
even life, but . . . continuously performing the simu-
lation of that liberation, and thereby continuously
re-enacting their own performance of the medium,
creating an actual theatre, a theatre of virtual real-
ity" (8). The virtual theatres studied in Giannachi's
book place the viewer not only inside the work of
art, but also in the position of "operating it, possibly
even modifying it, in real time and being modified
by it in return" (8). Giannachi, a senior lecturer in
drama at Exeter University, has created a very com-
pelling introduction to this emerging area of theatre,
performance studies, and digital media.

The "virtual" in Giannachi's *Virtual Theatres* is
understood as operating within the real, yet simul-
taneously "perceived as separate from it" (123). The
virtual thus "consists of a dichotomous paradox,
torn between its ontological status which locates it
as part of the real and its aesthetic, through which
it demonstrates its difference from the real" (123).
Virtual theatres, Giannachi argues, "multiply and
disperse the viewer's point of view, thus creating
the simulation of a condition that the viewer also
experiences in the real" (10). Giannachi's expansive
definition of the virtual allows for a reading of a
variety of performances, which are grouped into
five well-focused and thoroughly engaging chap-
ters: "Hypertextualities," "Cyborg theatre," "The
(re-) creation of nature," "Performing through the
hypersurface," and "Towards an aesthetic of vir-
tual reality." She situates these chapters through a
carefully laid out introduction, chronicling virtual
performances and their accompanying theories. By
linking Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanical actor
and the forms employed by Bauhaus, Dada, and
cubism to the theories of Marshall McLuhan, Jay
David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Brenda Laurel,
Jon McKenzie, and Sue-Ellen Case, Giannachi lays
a foundation of virtual performance upon which to
analyze an array of performances.

Giannachi's selection of performances is one of
the strongest attributes of the book. For example,
in her first chapter, Giannachi examines the inter-
active CD-ROM performance by Forced Entertain-
ment, one of Britain's foremost experimental theatre
groups. Her description of the performance piece,
combined with her thoughtful theoretical analysis
and the book's crisp images from the CD-ROM, al-
low access to the virtual performance for those who
have not encountered such convergences of theatre
and digital media. In this digital performance, im-
ages function as clues to a hidden narrative, requir-
ing the viewer to search the digital stage for various
narrative connections. Yet in Forced Entertainment's
interactive drama, set on the mostly vacant streets
of an urban landscape, the viewer is only engaging
with "leftover traces" of an event that has already
taken place; thus, "all the viewer can witness is
its aftermath" (37). Since, quoting Peggy Phelan,
"'History has already happened and the spectator-
witness is left to decipher its elusive causes and
meanings'" (37), the process of narrative construc-
tion can "neither be completed nor fully grasped . .
. the viewer is obviously excluded from the seminal
act" (38). Although these performances are labeled
as interactive or hypertextual—thus implying a
degree of audience agency in narrative construc-
tion—they exclude the audience from this seminal
act of meaning making.

Interactivity, as analyzed in other moments of the
book, seems to take on the opposite effect, allowing
an unprecedented level of audience agency in the
performance. In chapter two, Giannachi discusses
the work of performance artist Selarc, who con-
nected himself simultaneously to the Internet and
a muscle-stimulation system, allowing users to re-
motely move parts of his body. In this performance,
interactivity allows the body to be positioned at the
crossroads of "inside and outside, where everything
is outside and the inside is no longer a private and
inaccessible world, the body becomes an open and
fluid entity that is always already enmeshed with
a wider world" (62).

Giannachi makes similar claims about the perfor-
mances of Eduardo Kac in her third chapter: Kac's
performance *Rara Avis* (1996) placed a telerobotic
bird-machine in an aviary with live birds. Gianna-
chi writes, "Spectators could assume the perspective
of the bird-machine by using the Internet or data
glasses and observe themselves, or the real birds in
the aviary, from the bird machine's point of view"
(84). She goes on to describe the effects of audience
interactivity in the performance piece: "Thus, in *Rara
Avis*, it is no longer possible to distinguish between
real and virtual because the viewer's point of view
is ultimately a construction of the interaction be-
tween the real and the virtual" (84). Giannachi em-
ploys these interactive performances in an almost
fetishistic manner, reading them as significantly
able to deconstruct numerous binary oppositions

in performance (inside / outside, public / private, real / virtual, audience / performer). Though these moments of her survey may reduce the complexity of interactivity in virtual performance, Giannachi's overall theoretical analysis of these performances remains very persuasive.

Virtual Theatres operates as a successful introduction to the convergence of performance and digital media by locating itself in a specific cultural moment in theatre, as well as gesturing towards the impulses that are altering the future direction of performance. Giannachi's analysis of the shifting role of the audience in performances that incorporate new media is strong, as is her study of alterations of stage space in chapter four. Looking at examples of telepresent bodies that converge on various hypersurfaces, she posits a theatrical space that allows actors and spectators to simultaneously inhabit the real space and the representational space, to exist "between locations" (105). Paul Sermon's piece, *Telematic Dreaming* (1992), exemplifies this theatrical hypersurface. In her concluding chapter five, Giannachi offers a promising look at the future of these converging media: "Virtual reality is not only a rehearsal space and a theatre, but an archive, a place of memory, a repository for humankind's past, present and future plans, activities, dreams and failures" (151). *Virtual Theatres* is thus a significant work which creates a foundation for many more academic studies of digital performance to build upon.

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EXPRESSIONISM AND MODERNISM IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE: BODIES, VOICES, WORDS. By Julia A. Walker. Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama, volume 21. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; pp. vii + 300. $75.00 cloth.

Expressionism is unquestionably one of the more significant early-twentieth-century artistic isms, exerting enormous influence on the shape and scope of creative expression in the West, including the practice and theory of theatre. The received narrative of expressionism is that it had its genesis in the graphic arts in Paris in the first years of the century; quickly made its way to Germany via arts criticism early in the second decade; was, in turn, applied by German critics, editors, and historians to describe the work of a loosely connected though never formalized group of artists, including notable theatre

artists; and was eventually replicated (though not necessarily enhanced in any discernable way) by a handful of artists working in the United States during the 1920s. Hence, the practice of expressionism in America typically is situated as something of a minor, albeit fascinating, splinter of the better-known European movement. Even those few critics who have offered focused studies of American expressionism—most notably Mardi Valgemae's *Accelerated Grimace* (1972)—situate it as essentially linked to and entirely derivative of the better-known German movement.

In her fine study, Julia A. Walker convincingly counters this often-rehearsed narrative, suggesting instead that "American expressionism . . . is not simply a minor derivation of the better known German movement, but a complicated artistic response to the forces of modernization" (2). In light of this view, Walker poses her primary research question: "What if [American expressionist playwrights] were not directly influenced by German expressionism in the writing of their plays?" (5). For Walker, then, while German and American expressionism share certain traits—"the stylized presentation of the subjective inner world, compressed syntax, exaggerated caricatures, and episodic action" (4)—such parallels should not be taken as indisputable verification of the German form as the only or even the principal influence on the development of the American. Instead, by way of a nuanced consideration of the larger American cultural field, Walker works to position the expressionist theatre in America as essentially related to the anxiety many turn-of-the-century Americans felt regarding the forces of modernization. Additionally, she persuasively argues that those American playwrights working in the expressionistic mode were largely responsible for establishing a space in America for dramatic modernism. They did so, Walker contends, by challenging the status of playwrights as fundamentally connected to the traditional modes of theatrical production—particularly the view that their art was created to support actors—and modeled instead a conception of the playwright as an independent artist who composed autonomous works of dramatic literature.

At the heart of Walker's argument regarding the autonomy of American expressionism is her locating of the now nearly forgotten expressive culture movement as the chief motivation in the development of the art form. In view of this, in the first part of her study Walker maps the development and achievements of this movement, noting how this wide-ranging and broadly practiced program of reform, which placed the performing arts as the primary method for opposing the alienating conditions of modernity and modernization, exerted its influence on the larger culture. This program of