

## Theatre Research in Canada Recherches théâtrales au Canada

**Joslin Mckinney and Scott Palmer, eds. Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design. London and New York: Bloomsbury/Methuen Drama, 2017. 216 pp.**

Claire Carolan

Volume 39, numéro 2, 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058051ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058051ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama, University of Toronto

### ISSN

1196-1198 (imprimé)

1913-9101 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Carolan, C. (2018). Compte rendu de [Joslin Mckinney and Scott Palmer, eds. Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design. London and New York: Bloomsbury/Methuen Drama, 2017. 216 pp.] *Theatre Research in Canada / Recherches théâtrales au Canada*, 39(2). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058051ar>

**JOSLIN MCKINNEY AND SCOTT PALMER, eds.**  
***Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design.***

London and New York: Bloomsbury/Methuen Drama, 2017. 216 pp.

CLAIRE CAROLAN

*Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design* is an invaluable collection of articles written by an international buffet of scenography researchers from the UK, US, Australia, Germany, Canada and the Netherlands. The collection is deftly edited by Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer, both from the University of Leeds. *Scenography Expanded* puts forth what scenographers have known for decades: scenography matters—and is ripe for expanded discourse beyond its aesthetic and decorative function. The articles conceptualize scenography as a performative act that “can operate or reflect the political, social, cultural or ecological impact [...] through performance events” (McKinney and Palmer 1). Indeed, the collection moves beyond the standard aesthetic-centric analysis of scenography and into “scenography as a framework to analyze” (Brooks and Collins 95) a host of contemporary issues.

*Scenography Expanded* is divided into five sections that represent contemporary research concerns: Technological Space, Architectural Space, Agency, Audiences and Materials. Although these topics may feel overworked in other fields of theatre studies, discussion in the context of scenography is quite underdeveloped. The articles demonstrate the international expansion of scenography into a methodology for research. For example, in “‘Devices of Wonder’: Globalizing Technologies in the Process of Scenography” (23–38) Christopher Baugh explores connections between colonialism, digital technology and scenography. He suggests “the technologies that underpin the manufacture of spectacle are also the technologies that provide the basis for expansion and control of the economic and political capital” (23). In “Between Symbolic Representation and New Critical Realism: Architecture as Scenography and Scenography as Architecture,” Thea Brejzek seeks to push past time worn binaries (64–78). Brejzek’s focus is the more intriguing interstices created by binaries, to provoke “debate from a scenographic perspective through close readings of the architectural scenographies and performative architectures” (64).

Kathleen Irwin, one of the rare Canadian voices on the international scenography research stage contributes the article “Scenographic Agency: A Showing-Doing and a Responsibility for Showing-Doing” (111–24). Irwin’s article is reflective of growing interest in applied theatre in Canada. Irwin discusses the thickening of the term *scenography* to propose “ways in which the field manifests its essential role/responsibility to both show things and do things in the world” (111). She presents three case studies that demonstrate a range of ways an *applied* approach to scenography aids in understanding and responsibly considering what scenography “does” in performance (122). Irwin discusses contemporary refugee crises in Europe informed by the latent scenographic action that is harnessed by “the potential

of found site, adjacent populations and their interests" (116). For example, one of the three case studies examined is the Holland Festival's 2014 production *Die Schutzbefohlenen*.<sup>1</sup> This particular case study demonstrates how the scenographies of site specific performances in places of past trauma can "constitute a potent agentic assemblage" (116). In this example the original performance of this piece took place in a church that provided sanctuary for eighty Pakistani refugees in 2012.

Part three, "Agency" is interestingly the longest section of the book giving a range of views on "inscribing matter with meaning" (17). An excellent inclusion in this section is Melissa Trimingham's "Ecologies of Autism: Vibrant Space in Imagining Autism" (184-95), which examines how scenography might be expanded into therapeutic applications. Trimingham explores "sustained intersubjective engagement [with autistic children] through the medium of scenography" (184) taking the concept of drama therapy into new avenues.

*Expanded Scenography* is structured to "help the reader navigate the range and breadth of contemporary work...[in] hope that the concepts of relationality, affectivity and materiality in scenography will resonate in slightly different ways in each of the parts" (14). McKinney and Palmer suggest that the need for this collection stems from a "scenographic turn" wherein,

scenographic practice has expanded from an exclusive function as a craft-based practice serving the performance of a theatrical text to incorporate autonomous art practices that operate in contexts beyond theatre buildings and engage directly with social as well as the cultural dimensions of contemporary experience. (3)

Previous texts about scenography tended to focus on the artist and their impact on theatre (see for example Burian 1971; Holmberg 1996; Parker 1996; Doona 2002; Howard 2002; Rewa 2004) but this collection focuses on the spectator as observer/participant and scenography as a performative act (McKinney and Palmer). The articles are theoretical in tone and do assume a pre-requisite level of scenographic knowledge. The questions posed are important for the both twenty-first century scenography student and professional practitioner. One shortcoming of this book is the presentation of the visual content. There are total of thirty-four colour plates collected in two unlisted sections in the book, but as is often the case in scenography books, the images fail to consistently connect to the written content in any meaningful way. The images are laid out with two or three per page, as a result they are small and the fine details are difficult to see. Links to online sources for these images would allow for readers to view them in a larger format.

The accessible and engaging content in *Expanded Scenography* is curated so that the individual articles are strong when excerpted for specific class use or as a primary text for inclusion in both upper level undergraduate or graduate design courses. It is no longer adequate to simply decorate our performance space without considering "the potential of the scenography as a critical practice or as a way of thinking about performative encounter[s]" (McKinney and Palmer 3). It is an overdue and very welcome addition to scholarly scenographic texts that will hopefully promote continued expansion of scenography as a research methodology.

## Notes

- 1 *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (translation, *The Suppliants*). Directed and designed by Nicholas Stemann, and performed at the Transformatorhuis Westergasfabriek, Amsterdam.

## Works Cited

- Burian, Jarka. *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1971. Print.
- Doona, Liam. "Hope, Hopelessness/Presence, Absence: Scenographic Innovation and the Poetic Spaces of Jo Mielziner, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller." *Exploring Scenography*. Ed. Malcolm Griffiths. London: The Society of British Theatre Designers in association with Nottingham Trent University, 2003. 55-64. Print.
- Holmberg, Arthur. *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print.
- Howard, Pamela. *What is Scenography?*. Abingdon and Oxon: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- McKinney, Joslin and Scott Palmer, eds. *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design*. London: Bloomsbury/Methuen Drama, 2017. Print.
- Parker, Ellie. "Talking About Theatre Design." *Studies in Theatre Production*, 13.1 (1996): 72-82. Print.
- Rewa, Natalie. *Scenography in Canada: Selected Designers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Print.

## BARRY FREEMAN

### ***Staging Strangers: Theatre and Global Ethics.***

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. 198 pp.

EURY COLIN CHANG

In an age often characterized by terms such as *mass migration* and *globalization*, Barry Freeman's book has deep resonance and application within theatre studies and other socio-political fields. His book astutely explores how the current climate fosters a simultaneous fascination with, but also hesitation towards, accepting "strangers."

Chapter One situates the study within Toronto's theatre milieu, then as expected, credits the many scholars who laid the foundation for Freeman's research: including but not limited to Charles Taylor ("The Politics of Recognition"), Neil Bissoondath (*Selling Illusions*) and Sunera Thobani (*Exalted Subjects*). Overall, Freeman makes strides at further developing an "ethical way of looking" by generously quoting the work of Sara Ahmed, and by engaging with her concerns regarding the production of strangers through an encounter which "itself *already* assumes the possibility and virtue of 'knowing' strangers" (59). This book provides