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Citation: Dunne, J. (2018). Imagined Theatres: Writings for a Theoretical Stage. Drama Research, 9(1),

This is the accepted version of the paper.

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This book review originally appeared in Drama Research, Vol. 9, No. 1

Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage (2017)

Edited by Daniel Sack

Abingdon: Routledge

Review by Joseph Dunne

Imagined Theatres acts as a bridge linking the theatres that live in a writer's mind with the theatre they experience in reality. The sense of an imminent field of possibility, rendered as an open ended textual discourse, is evoked by the highly engaging layout. Over one hundred theatre imaginaries appear on the left hand page, and on the right, a response from either the same writer or a different one is presented as a 'gloss'. The gloss contextualises the imaginary into a present context and reminds the reader what the theatre is failing to be. The effect is to use text as tool of performative emergence.

At the heart of an imagined theatre is an embrace of the impossible as a means of invigorating what can occur on a stage, where these stages can be found, and who is permitted to decide what constitutes legitimacy in the theatre. The book contains many imaginaries in the form of microfictions, scripts, scores, prose, poems, and essays, each one expanding the field of the reader's vision of what impossible performances need to be experienced. The importance of reclaiming the impossible as a driver for critical dialogue is not buttressed with any specific polemic, which underscores the power of the imagination as a tool of liberating the artist from existing hegemonies to effect change. Exactly *how* change is enacted remains unknown, and it is this very unknowability that affords the imagination an emancipatory potential in its refusal to conform to the contingencies of current practices. Daniel Sack is right to note that the imagination "fragments intention" and so unleashes the potential for limitless theatres to come into being through text.

Theory and theatre have never entirely resolved their tense dance in the academy, and certainly not in the theatre industry. Unperformed text, or text that is not written to be performed, is codified in the language of ideas, whereas the animacy of live performance is codified in the language of experience. But what does the language of experience constitute when potential manifestations of it are excluded from discourse? Daniel Sack adroitly uses theory to signify a space of imagination by dispensing with a conventional index and arranging key words in a series of "constellations", ranging from subjects as diverse as the apocalypse, semiotics, post colonialism, ecology, disability, technology, the archive, history, and many more. The lack of strict categorisation implicitly attributes new significations to the discrete roles at work in the theatre (director, playwright, actor, dramaturg...). As Matthew Goulish notes in his gloss to Lin Hixson, words that describe different art practices are "misleading" because they suggest "a largely nonexistent uniformity between an endless range of hyper-personal techniques, discovered individually in experience" This approach invites the reader to walk amongst the texts in a spirit of curiosity and playfulness.

The contributors cover an impressive range of subjects. Irma Mayorga, for example, stages poor American Latinos risking their lives to steal copper from electric cables. The image of a man sitting precariously on top of a telephone pole at night does not easily transpose into a context US audiences would understand and so it remains unperformed. Jonathan Ball

envisages a performance constituted purely of data obtained from the audience's presence and deftly illustrates how the performativity of digital communication is staged online everyday. The economic injustices of neoliberalism are laid out in *The Means of Production*, where Jen Harvie elucidates a clear vision of how creativity can be financially supported by institutions and individuals.

Feminist critiques feature strongly and serve to remind us that what counts as impossible can often reveal the prejudices of political norms rather than describe what is feasible in reality. Deirdre Heddon asks what else 'women' can signify on the stage and on the page. Moreover, can theatre provide a space for new variations of gender to be constructed and made visible in the public sphere? Her imaginary *Variations (I-III)* is a series of three scenes where women of all ages appear on stage one at a time. It is a sobering fact that these scenes remain figments of Heddon's imagination because of the scandalous underrepresentation of women at all levels in theatre. Yelena Gluzman demands performance be recognised as a way of knowing and equal to text. Her company, Feminist Theatre Theory, transform reading into a shared performative activity and imbue the text with an experiential immediacy associated with performance, producing a new kind of knowing. Gluzman's imaginary can be read as a coda for the entire volume.

Imagined Theatres contains profound visions of the theatres we are yet to make and see. Fortunately, the book is just one part of an ongoing online project where people can contribute a text at any time. It is a project guaranteed to infect readers with the fever of possibility theatre offers us.