

**contents**

<i>Series editors' preface</i>	vii
<i>Foreword by Rabih Mroué</i>	ix
Introduction: against intuition	1
The human right to theatre?	6
Thinking theatre and human rights	34
Theatres of cruelty	64
Conclusion: unaccommodated man	71
<i>Further reading</i>	78
<i>Index</i>	87



theatre & human rights

Introduction: against intuition

When casually expressed, opinions about the relationship between theatre and human rights tend to be at once impassioned and vague. Human rights are generally held to be worth fighting for, and theatre-making one way of fighting for them; theatre is thought to be a progressive activity, and addressing human rights themes one way of ensuring its social relevance. There is some truth to these sentiments, and in societies whose citizens enjoy a well-established human rights culture, they serve to make the link between staging human relationships and denouncing human rights violations seem intuitive, self-evident.

However, another reason for the haziness with which this relationship is articulated, as well as the strength of feeling it can arouse, is that it is more complex and contradictory than it first appears. From the thematic treatment

of human rights issues in plays, to activist and participatory performances with explicit human rights agendas; from theatre-makers playing an advocacy role as public intellectuals and civil society actors, to performances that challenge human rights norms, to theatre itself coming under threat from human rights abuses; from theatre aesthetics echoing the formal legal and political contexts within which human rights law is enacted and challenged, to the theatricality queasily inherent in some of the most iconic and widely publicised human rights violations of recent years – all these phenomena colour the relationship between theatre and human rights today. As such, presuming an *inherent* sympathy between making theatre and safeguarding human rights does neither – and no one – any good. In this book, I consider many facets of this relationship and argue that, ultimately, each activity best serves the other by throwing its practices and underlying assumptions into relief. Intuitions, in short, are not always to be trusted.

In a moment, I start by surveying common understandings of the term ‘human rights’. I go on in Part One, ‘The Human Right to Theatre?’, to outline the diverse ways theatre-makers have sought to promote human rights, as well as which rights are expressed through theatre practice itself. In Part Two, ‘Thinking Theatre and Human Rights’, I argue that the relationship between theatre and human rights might best be understood in terms of complementarity rather than in terms of one always being in the service of the other. The three extended examples I provide in Part Two lead me into Part Three, ‘Theatres of Cruelty’, about

aspects of the theatre experience that are uncomfortably close to the dynamics of abuse. In my conclusion, I conduct one more exercise in ‘thinking theatre and human rights’, which raises questions about the future of the relationship and suggests a more nuanced way of understanding it than the one I glossed in my opening paragraph.

First, though, a few words on my approach to the topic. My rule of thumb in selecting examples has been to respect both the range of theatrical approaches and the scope of human rights, by being as open as possible to different styles of performance and to diverse geographical and cultural locations. ‘As possible’ underscores the parameters of any such project, and it will soon become apparent how this discussion reflects what I have been able to see, read, learn and think as a moderately well-travelled British national and long-term resident of the Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore.

It is important to stress, though, that parameters are not the same as limitations. Any reflexive enquiry into the theatre *or* human rights must contend at some point with the relationship between the specific and the general, and establishing parameters is one way of mediating between the two. Plays are written, workshops conducted and performances staged at specific times and in particular places; understanding this context keys us in to the details of the event, but it also provides the basis for comparison with other events, as well as grounds for more widely applicable assertions about what theatre is and does. Similarly, how ‘human rights’ are interpreted, practised or violated in individual situations has a bearing on claims for their universality.

Married by that apparently innocuous ampersand, 'Theatre & Human Rights' express the specific-general dynamic in numerous guises, which I account for where I can. I have combined discussions of particular performances, well-known practices and classic plays; I have aimed to balance the immediate demand that suffering makes of us, and the urgency of the theatre produced in response, with the reflective and measured tone that characterises much human rights theory; and I have given space to some of the more 'radical' critiques of the liberal idea of human rights, while acknowledging the importance of consensus and moderation in getting things done on a global scale.

I consider these tensions a characteristic of the relationship between theatre and human rights, rather than a problem to be solved. But don't take my word for it. There will always be more to say, especially about context, than a short, sharp book such as this can accommodate. The 'Further reading' section provides suggestions for fleshing out the discussions that follow and for opening new lines of enquiry.

One more parameter bears flagging up. With a few exceptions, I have restricted my focus in this book to theatrical performances and practices. However, my approach owes a critical debt to the more expansive discipline of performance studies, as well as to important work in that field that lies beyond the scope of the present study. Although it has provided me with a means of thinking across theatrical forms and of understanding their place within a wider social context of performative actions and meaning-making

processes, I do not have the space here to do justice to the work of scholars such as the late Dwight Conquergood. His politically committed analyses of social and judicial violence and highly reflexive work with culturally marginalised communities laid the ground for a mode of activist scholarship that is strongly informed by human rights concerns. For examples of this approach, see *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies* (2006), edited by D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, and *Violence Performed* (2008), edited by Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon.

Part One

the human right to theatre?

Rights talk

When the freedom to make or watch theatre is threatened, especially by states or institutions, human rights are often perceived to be at stake. But ask the people around you to name some human rights, and ‘theatre’ is unlikely to be one of them. Understanding this apparent paradox requires that we survey how theatre has been used to address the *subject* of human rights (for example, in being about freedom of expression) and outline the ways in which theatre is itself the *object* of those rights (for example, as an exercise in freedom of expression). First, though, it is useful to clarify what the term ‘human rights’ conventionally means.

A clue can be found in ‘Art, Truth and Politics’, a lecture given by the British playwright Harold Pinter on accepting the 2005 Nobel Prize in Literature. At a time of heightened geo-political tensions, the prize was widely taken to

recognise Pinter's track record on human rights advocacy as much as the quality of his writing. Indeed, the Nobel committee signalled this in their appropriately terse announcement of the prize, which stated simply that Pinter 'uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms'.

True to form, Pinter's lecture combined reflections on the writing process with a coruscating and contentious attack on the 'systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless' crimes perpetrated by the United States through its foreign policy since the end of the Second World War. As we shall see, although Pinter did not use the term 'human rights' specifically, the time-frame of his analysis was significant, as was the way he chose to conclude. Having described as 'mandatory' the obligation all of us have to define the truth of our lives and our societies, he warned: 'If such a determination is not embodied in our political vision we have no hope of restoring what is so nearly lost to us – the dignity of man.'

The reference to 'dignity' was pointed, for the term has historically underpinned the moral appeal to a set of human values existing independently of the laws and customs of particular states or societies. Any rights that can be shown to follow from these values (rather, say, than those rights owed a citizen by dint of nationality) can therefore be described as human rights. In the Western tradition, one of the earliest extant and oft-cited explorations of this idea is Sophocles' Theban tragedy *Antigone* (c.441 BCE), whose titular heroine flouts the laws of the city-state to observe burial rites for

her slain brother, the traitor Polynices. Fearing any threat to the recently becalmed 'ship of state' (l. 189) (as well as to his own self-interest), Antigone's uncle, King Creon, sentences her to be buried alive. Refusing to suborn her dignity to 'such crude laws' (l. 938), Antigone somewhat impetuously embraces her fate in the name of blood ties and of 'the great unwritten, unshakable traditions' (l. 505), traditions embodying an apparently timeless justice impervious to the worldly concerns of mortals.

Two millennia later, the Enlightenment saw a revival of interest in this idea of a pre-social moral or spiritual law, which would inform much Euro-American thinking about rights. This thinking included John Locke's (1632–1704) concept of natural rights (to life, liberty and property), Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) right to freedom (leading to civil, international and cosmopolitan rights), and proclamations and treatises such as the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789), the American Bill of Rights (1791), Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–2) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

Although the influence of these ideas would be long-lasting, they would not go unchallenged. It is perhaps testament to the richness of Sophocles' play that *Antigone* would subsequently be invoked by the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) in his *critique* of natural law, particularly as it related to Kant's assumption that human subjects were rational and autonomous. For Hegel, neither Creon nor Antigone is entirely in the right. Rather, their tragedy lies in



index

- Akand, Motahar, *Action Theatre: Initiating Changes*, 21–2
- Amnesty International, 15, 67, 78, 80
- Antigone*:
- Anouilh, Jean, 9
- Brecht, Bertolt, 9
- Sophocles, 7–9, 75
- appearance/disappearance, 62–3, 64–71, 73–6
- Arendt, Hannah, 61–2, 73
- Asian values, 24–5, 52–4
- Australia, 31–2
- Bangladesh, 21–2
- Beckett, Samuel, *Waiting for Godot*, 58–65, 75
- Belarus Free Theatre, 15, 27
- Bharucha, Rustom, 32, 54
- Bhatti, Gurpreet Kaur, *Bezhti*, 26
- Blank, Jessica, and Eric Jensen, *The Exonerated*, 16
- Boal, Augusto, 13, 18–19, 21, 75
- Bobbio, Norberto, *The Age of Rights*, 42–3
- Book of Blood, The*, Leibniz Performance Collective, 44–5
- Brazil, 37–8
- Brenton, Howard, *The Romans in Britain*, 25
- Butler, Judith, 73–4, 75–6
- Cambodia, 55–8
- Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields, The*, Theatre Works, 56
- Crimp, Martin, *Attempts on Her Life*, 34–7
- Dorfman, Ariel, 13
- Death and the Maiden*, 23–4, 34
- Speak Truth to Power: Voices from Beyond the Dark*, 16

theatre & human rights

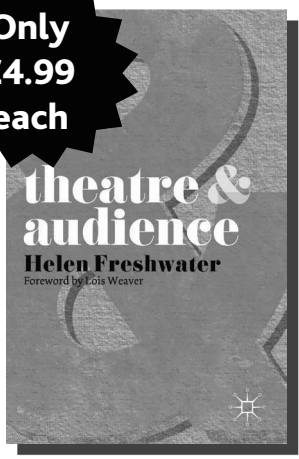
- Enslar, Eve, *The Vagina Monologues*, 16–17, 51
- environment, the, 72–3, 74, 80
- Fijabi, Mufuliat, *A Mock Tribunal to Advance Change*, 47–8
- Guantánamo Bay Detention Camp, performances about, 66–8, 70–1
- Hegel, G. W. F., 8–9
- Heritage, Paul, 37–8
- human, concept of the:
 - and dignity, 7, 10, 13, 58, 67, 72
 - limits to, 58–63, 74–6
- human rights:
 - covenants, declarations, instruments, 10–11, 29, 32, 52; *see also* Universal Declaration of Human Rights
 - and cultural difference, 24–5, 29, 51–8, 72–3
 - cultural rights, 28–33
 - freedom of assembly and association, 27–8
 - freedom of expression, 24–7
 - and indigenous peoples, 30–3
 - and the law, 13, 26, 57–8; *see also* paralegal performance
 - as performatively enacted, 43–5, 46, 48, 51, 58, 80
- human rights violations:
 - censorship, 25–6, 51–4
 - civil liberties, restrictions on, 16, 53
 - in conflict zones, 16
 - death penalty, 16
 - genocide, 19–20, 55–8
 - racial discrimination, 45–6, 48–50, 76–7
 - torture, 23–4, 48–50, 57
 - violence against women, 16–17, 47–8
 - see also* appearance/disappearance
- Indonesia, 29–30
- Lebanon, 69–70
- Lessac, Michael, and Hugh Masekela, *Truth in Translation*, 48–9
- Malaysia, 51–4
- Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Argentina), 69, 80
- Mroué, Rabih, 69–70, 75
- My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*, Walid Raad and The Atlas Group, 70
- Ngapartji Ngapartji*, Big hART, 31–2
- Nickel, James, *Making Sense of Human Rights*, 13, 79
- Nigeria, 47–8
- non-governmental organisations (NGOs), 10, 12, 53, 78; *see also* Amnesty International

- Norton-Taylor, Richard, 45–7
Called to Account: The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression against Iraq – a Hearing, 46–7
Colour of Justice: The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, The, 45–6
- paralegal performance, 42–51, 80
- Pinter, Harold, 6, 40
- Ross, Monica, *rightsrepeated*, 44–5
Rwanda 94, Groupov, 19
- Shakespeare, William, *King Lear*, 71–5
- Singapore, 3, 28, 76–7
- South Africa, 48–50, 80
- Taylor, Jane, William Kentridge and Handspring Puppet Company, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, 49–50
- theatre-making, approaches to:
 activism, 5, 13, 21, 28, 37, 80
 forum theatre, 18, 28, 76–7
 interculturalism, 32, 54–6
 live art, 20, 44–5, 69–70
 participatory, 15–16, 21–2, 37–8, 41, 80, 81
 testimonial, 16–18
 tribunal, 45–8
see also individual playwrights and performances
- 3 Years, 8 Months, 20 Days*, Amrita Performing Arts, 57
- Trick or Threat*, Drama Box, 76–7
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission (South Africa), 48–50, 80
- United Kingdom, 25–6, 45–7
- United States, 7, 26–7, 66–8
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 10, 23–4, 28, 39, 42–5, 52, 57, 58, 63; *see also* human rights
- West Bank, 65
- ‘who did what to whom’, 14, 16, 21, 22

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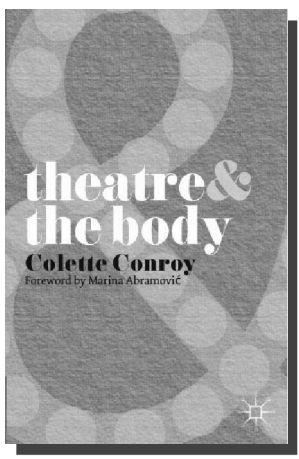
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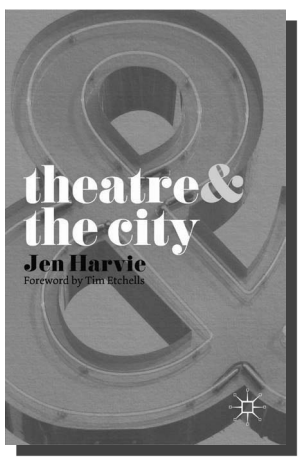


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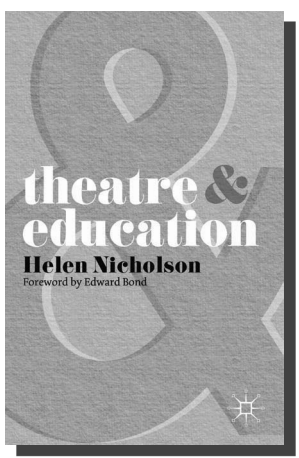
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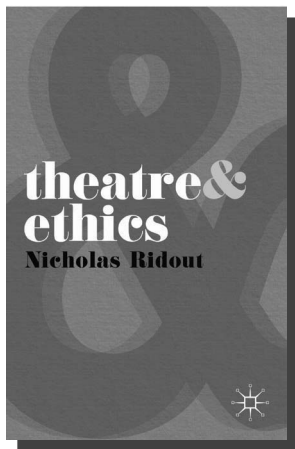
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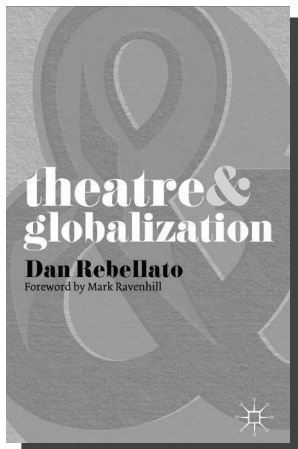
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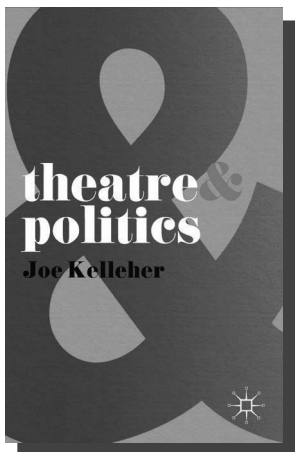


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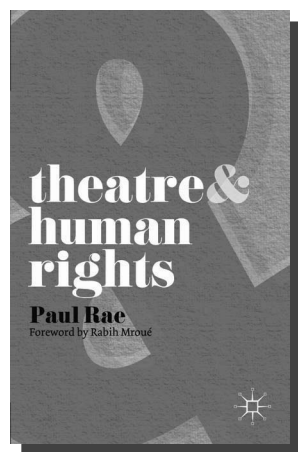


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