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Book Review

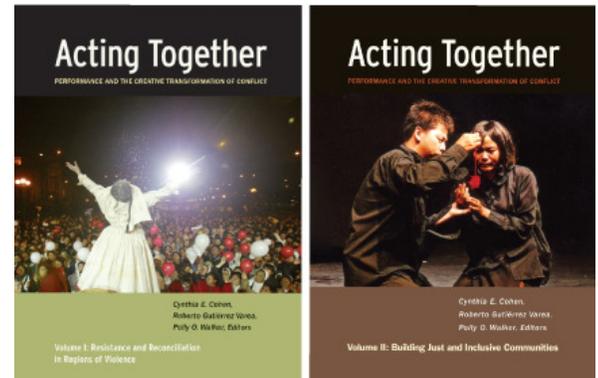
Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict. Edited by Cynthia E. Cohen, Roberto Gutiérrez Varea and Polly O. Walker. Oakland: New Village Press, 2011.

Vol. 1: pp. xxv + 310 + 45 illus. £13.71/\$21.95 Pb.

<http://www.newvillagepress.net/book/?GCOI=97660100223600>

Vol. 2: pp. xxiii + 280 + 38 illus. £13.71/\$21.95 Pb.

<http://www.newvillagepress.net/book/?GCOI=97660100007200>



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The product of collaboration between Brandeis University's Peacebuilding and the Arts programme and the virtual community Theatre without Borders, the two-volume set *Acting Together* anthologizes fourteen case studies in which playwrights, scholars and activists employ the power of performance to help resolve and make sense of social conflicts around the globe. The editors group the performance modes on display here into three categories, while acknowledging substantial crossover in some chapters. Traditional rituals, whose roots date back many generations, place community leaders at their centre while collapsing the distinction between performer and spectator, and contain an element of the sacred. Community-based performances emphasize the process of production and relationship-building in their creation of a fictional space in which a group investigates its needs and structures of power. Artist-based performance is professionally organized and more product-oriented. In recognition that the performances documented here depend on collaboration on multiple levels – logistical, imaginative, compositional – the editors refer not to chapter authors but to ‘curators’, capturing the care visiting scholar-artists take in respecting native beliefs and customs and remaining sensitive to both sides of sometimes centuries-old conflicts. The editors maintain that live theatre possesses unique transformative potential, in that it enlists ‘live practitioners’ in a multi-voiced, ‘embodied’ event with little to no barrier separating an engaged audience (Vol. I, p. 5).

Volume I first presents five case studies of peacebuilding performance carried out during periods of violent conflict, in Serbia, Israel, Palestine, Sri Lanka and Uganda. Particularly intriguing here are Diljana Milošević's chapter on DAH Teatar, a company she co-founded that dramatized aspects of the ongoing violent split of Yugoslavia despite government disapproval, and a dialogic chapter devoted to Palestinian–Jewish collaborative theatre, co-written by Aida Nasrallah and Lee Perlman, whose ‘conversations’ model the slow process of mutual understanding that is the precondition for empathy. The second section analyses performances that follow acts of mass violence, including the ‘dirty wars’ in Argentina and Peru, the 2002 Gujarat massacre in India, the Khmer Rouge-sponsored genocide in Cambodia, and the colonial atrocities visited upon aboriginal peoples in the United States and Australia. These chapters reveal that even after peace is achieved, writers and performers face daunting challenges. In choosing historical conflicts as their subject matter, they risk retraumatizing victims or rousing in them the impulse for vengeance. They must often weigh the costs and benefits of partnering with governments that had a stake in, or ignored, recent atrocities, or decide how best to represent both sides of asymmetrical conflicts. There is also the imperative to maintain artistic integrity, so that peacebuilding performances achieve something more beautiful and poignant than overt didacticism.

The bulk of Volume II comprises case studies involving ‘situations characterized by structural violence, exclusion, and social injustice’, among which the editors identify ‘economic and social inequalities, poverty, gender-based violence, homophobia, and age discrimination’ (Vol. II, pp. 3, 4). Individual chapters take up community theatre in the Netherlands and the US; hip hop performances in Ghana and South Africa; youth arts initiatives, including a skateboarding project, in Australia; applications of Jo Salas's participant-oriented Playback Theatre around the globe; and the capacity of theatre to mitigate American racism. The second volume concludes with ‘Reflections and Recommendations’ – wherein the editors synthesize the discoveries of the previous chapters and draw some conclusions – and ‘Resources’, which lays out a framework for conceiving, designing, and evaluating further interventions in this area.

In keeping with its policy and educational objectives, this project has produced resources in other media to complement the volumes. These include a feature-length documentary and an accompanying toolkit (with short videos expanding on the film and print resources designed to assist instructors and organizers of peacebuilding initiatives), and a website with news, interview clips, and event announcements, including film screenings. These resources testify to the politically and personally salutary effects of performance while offering a range of applications to artists, policymakers and educators.

To learn more about the “Acting Together” anthologies, visit:

<http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/actingtogether/anthology/index.html>