
BOOK REVIEWS

Arnab Banerji, Editor

SISTUHS IN THE STRUGGLE: AN ORAL HISTORY OF BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT THEATER AND PERFORMANCE. By La Donna L. Forsgren. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020; pp. 384.

La Donna L. Forsgren's *Sistuh*s in the Struggle: An Oral History of Black Arts Movement Theater and Performance powerfully demonstrates the importance of thoughtfully attending to the stories that Black women tell about their art, activism, and revolutionary activity. Forsgren shrewdly draws on the traditions and methods of oral history and critical performance ethnography to sharpen focus on the vital role that Black women played in shaping and sustaining one of the most catalytic periods in Black art-making. Sharply conceived, cogently organized, and compellingly written, the study grants its narrators crucial space to give voice to their experiences, perceptions, and motivations for contributing "to the creation and dissemination of Black Arts Movement theory, theater, and performance" (12). In so doing, it further exposes the shortcomings in the masculinist narratives that have come to delimit understandings of 1960s and '70s Black liberation struggles.

The book's four thematically organized chapters are rich with fresh details and insights about the manifold ways Black women helped initiate and drive the conversations on Black art amid growing calls for Black Power. Chapter 1 features several prominent and lesser-known artistic trailblazers—Micki Grant, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, and Jackie Taylor, among them—reflecting on their relationships to some of the concepts, theories, and practices that would define the era, including feminism and the Black aesthetic. In her brief introduction to the chapter, Forsgren notes, for example, that "while none of the Black women intellectuals [she] interviewed joined feminist organizations during the seventies, some joined Black sororities and many voiced Black feminist attitudes within the Black freedom struggle" (17). Many of the chapter's

narrators maintained a commitment to combating the pervasive sexism they encountered both within and outside of their creative and activist circles, even if some were ambivalent about the feminist label. They were unwavering in their view that there could be no movement for Black liberation without Black women.

Chapter 2 elucidates the urgency that many Black women in the Black Arts Movement felt to create cultural centers that would honor the experiences and aspirations of Black people. Jackie Taylor, who founded Chicago's Black Ensemble Theater in 1976, observes that she was motivated to do so, in part, because of the racism she experienced as a Black actress in the film industry. "I created a theater that would tell the truth about African American people, perpetuate the greatness of who we are, supply jobs within the community, deliver positive messages, and serve thousands of children and help them understand that they are somebody," she explains (118). Doris Derby, who cofounded the Free Southern Theatre with Gilbert Moses and John O'Neal in 1963, reveals that she and her collaborators were similarly compelled by a shared desire "to use theater to present issues to reflect our past, present, and future goals" (152). What is striking about each of the institution-builders the chapter spotlights are the ways they understood and made use of the theatre as a potent site for imagining and embodying the world differently.

This point comes into even sharper focus in chapters 3 and 4, which document the extraordinary range of projects that Black women created for the stage and other alternative venues. In addition to writing more conventional plays, Black women also innovated and experimented with new genres and forms. Many were particularly interested in producing ritualistic experiences. Shange, for example, recalls that early iterations of her landmark choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, opened with ritual dances composed of "sounds of breath and movement

tracing life from the womb to womanhood before you heard somebody sing a black girl's song" (197). Other narrators share how they likewise became interested in centering music and movement—both with and without text—in their work. For the writer, performer, and composer Grant, this investment led to the creation of several musicals that would ultimately land on Broadway, including *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope*, for which she garnered two Tony nominations in 1973. Reflecting on the project's origins, Grant credits legendary theatre-maker Vinnette Carroll with transforming the material she had composed into a musical event. "She devised a structure and surrounded me with a cast and choreography. In other words: put it in the musical form," she explains (216). Many of the narrators in these chapters note just how influential and invigorating their collaborations with other Black women during the era proved for them both artistically and politically.

In the final pages of the book, Forsgren invites her interlocutors to contemplate their own legacies. Their responses speak to how committed many of them remained to radically remaking the oppressive systems and structures preventing Black people from thriving. That these commitments have received so little attention in scholarly and popular discourse is what distinguishes *Sistiuhs in the Struggle* as one of the most important, insightful, and enlightening books on Black Arts Movement theory, theatre, and performance to emerge in recent decades. With the book, Forsgren beautifully complements and expands on the astute analyses she offers in her earlier study, *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers: Women Dramatists in the Black Arts Movement* (2018), while further explicating the ways Black women served as important agents of social, cultural, and political change during the height of Black Power activism. *Sistiuhs in the Struggle* provides a superlative model for how to pursue and produce scholarship that is at once diligent and deeply attuned to Black women's aesthetic and intellectual traditions.

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STAGING LIVES IN LATIN AMERICAN THEATER: BODIES, OBJECTS, ARCHIVES. By

Paola S. Hernández. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021; pp. 228.

For a few decades now, Latin American artists and scholars have been grappling with a shift in creative practices that began at the turn of the century in response to the economic crisis that transformed the political landscape in the beginning of

the 2000s. Many have identified this turn as the development of a new genre, characterized as envisioning "the real" on the theatrical stage. In her book, Paola Hernández seeks to dialogue with the historical trajectory of documentary theatre as it pertains to Latin American and the notion of the real in contemporary performance, a genre Hernández defines as artists using "documentary techniques as a way to explore issues stemming from real events. In doing so, they destabilized fictional settings, and highlighted the possibilities of how the theater could engage with real events in a more direct way, relying less on traditional realism" (1). The author wants to bring forth an understanding of how documentary theatre has evolved in Latin America, the political purpose of this evolution, and the intricate ways in which artists have engaged with this form through theatrical practices, technology, and above all the novel use of objects on the stage. Through her compelling examples, Hernández draws attention to the complexity of this seemingly simple concept through an introduction and four chapters that carefully display the multiple ways in which this term can be used and how elusive the search for a single, stable definition can be. The intended purpose of the book is to understand the nuanced performative practices that very important artists in Latin America have been developing as they relate to a questioning of the relationship between truth and fiction, a realm of increasing importance in a region that continues to grapple the violent historical past that has shaped their histories.

Staging Lives is a major contribution to the fields of Latin American, theatre, and performance studies. Hernández offers a theoretically sophisticated and eminently readable analysis of how the theatre of the "real" comes to embody a broad range of aesthetic positions within the liminal space of fact and fiction. As the author explains, "the real in the theater has emerged as a way to respond to the many ambiguities, doubts and questions people have regarding shifting paradigms of truth, reality, and information" (161). Chapter 1, "Biodramas: Vivi Tellas and the Act of Documenting Lives," offers a brilliant study of this iconic Argentine artist, who is renowned for promoting the investigation of new approaches to biographical and documentary practices onstage to question the conventional theatrical representation. The second chapter, "Reenactments: The Autobiographical at Play in Lola Arias," focuses on the work of this renowned artist, paying particular attention to the active role that photography occupies in the retelling of personal stories in her work. Chapter 3 presents the work of Mexican company Teatro Línea de Sombra and its commitment to human rights through its politically charged work aimed at building memory through