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Mobility, Belonging, and Political Agency

Review of *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration*

Abstract

This review examines *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration*, edited by Yana Meerzon and Stephen Wilmer, and highlights the significance of its historical range, global scope, and methodological diversity for contemporary research on theatre and migration. Based on a comprehensive reading of the volume, the review identifies mobility, cultural belonging, and political agency as three key themes that run through the handbook and uses these to articulate its central contributions to understanding the relationship between migration and theatre. Notwithstanding the challenges posed by the handbook's extensive scope and breadth, its rich archival material, interdisciplinary approaches, and globally diverse case studies offer crucial perspectives for advancing scholarly insight into the cultural and political implications of theatre under contemporary conditions of mobility.

Keywords

mobility, cultural belonging, political agency, migration theatre, transnational performance

Abstrakt

Mobilność, przynależność, sprawczość polityczna: Recenzja *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration*

Recenzja omawia tom *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration* pod redakcją Yany Meerzon i Stephena Wilmera, podkreślając wagę jego szerokich ram historycznych, globalnej perspektywy oraz różnorodności metodologicznej dla współczesnych badań nad teatrem i migracją. Recenzentka wskazuje mobilność, przynależność kulturową i sprawczość polityczną jako trzy kluczowe obszary tematyczne powracające w publikacji i w oparciu o nie omawia jej wkład w zgłębianie relacji między migracją a teatrem. Choć rozmach tomu momentami utrudnia lekturę tematyczną, bogactwo materiałów archiwalnych, interdyscyplinarnych ujęć i zróżnicowanych studiów przypadków z całego świata dostarcza perspektyw kluczowych dla pogłębienia wiedzy naukowej na temat kulturowych i politycznych implikacji teatru we współczesnych warunkach mobilności.

Słowa kluczowe

mobilność, przynależność kulturowa, sprawczość polityczna, teatr migrancki, spektakl transnarodowy

The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration

edited by Yana Meerzon and Stephen Wilmer
(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023)

Who creates theatre, and for whom? These questions recur in contemporary scholarship and practice. In some contexts, theatre remains associated with older and relatively affluent audiences—a playground reserved for the middleclass. Yet theatre, as a medium of embodied and co-present communication, has always fulfilled functions that reach far beyond entertainment or symbolic display. Throughout its history, theatre has never been detached from social reality; rather, it has reflected and responded to the shifting conditions of the societies that sustain it. It can facilitate civic dialogue, negotiate identity and belonging, and engage with publics across social boundaries.

Therefore, in today's migratory and increasingly diverse world, migration theatre has emerged as one of the vital urban cultural forms that reshapes the relationship between performance and society. For instance, in the German context, the social structure of urban life has undergone a profound transformation since the 1970s. The composition of the migrant population has become more stable, largely due to a higher number of immigrants opting to settle in Germany through a family-based form for an extended period.¹ Following the open-door approach to refugees, these demographic and cultural changes have found clearer resonance in the theatre sector since the 2010s. Many theatre institutions, such as Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theater under Shermin Langhoff, Theater an der Ruhr in Mülheim under Roberto Ciulli, and the Münchner Kammerspiele under Matthias Lilienthal, have increasingly developed their artistic programs to reflect and engage with the realities of migration and diversity in contemporary urban society.

The study of migration and theatre has also evolved into a distinct interdisciplinary field over the past two decades, situated at the intersection of performance studies, migration sociology, and cultural politics. Questions of mobility, identity, and belonging have been central to academic discussions

¹ In Germany, the proportion of women among the foreign population increased from 37.8% in 1970 to 45.5% in 1985. Between 1990 and 2011, the proportion of women increased from 44.8% to 48.8%. See *Statistisches Bundesamt: Ausländische Bevölkerung*, Online-Datenbank: Fortschreibung des Bevölkerungsstandes (as of 08/2012), <https://share.google/6jvHf0gRNB88tmFiH>.

since the cultural turn of the 1990s.² Scholarship in theatre and performance has contributed to this debate by exploring how embodied practices negotiate displacement and hybridity.³ Building upon these foundations, key monographs such as Emma Cox's *Theatre and Migration*⁴ and Yana Meerzon's *Performing Exile, Performing Self*⁵ established a conceptual bridge between migration, exile, and performance. Within this expanding interdisciplinary landscape, *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration*⁶ stands out as a timely and comprehensive contribution. This volume maps how artistic practices engage with the socio-political dynamics of displacement, transnational belonging, and cultural transformation across diverse temporal and geographic contexts. Compared with earlier studies, such as Michael Balfour's edited collection *Refugee Performance*,⁷ which foregrounds participatory and humanitarian frameworks, or the German-language scholarship on postmigrant theatre by Wolfgang Schneider, Azadeh Sharifi, Jonas Tinius, and Lizzie Stewart (2017)⁸ which theorizes institutional change and cultural policy, the handbook significantly extends the field's conceptual reach and comparative breadth. It thus positions migration theatre not as a regional phenomenon but as a globally entangled practice central to understanding contemporary cultural mobility.

To that end, this handbook adopts broad and inclusive definitions of the concepts of migration and theatre. As the editors note,

when it comes to the term 'migration', we have likewise opted for the most capacious understanding of this word. . . . In this book, case studies refer to numerous variants of peoples' movement and displacement, both in their involuntary and voluntary forms". (7–9)

² See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Stephen Castles, "Migration and Community Formation under Conditions of Globalization," *International Migration Review* 36, no. 4 (2002): 1143–1168, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2002.tb00121.x>.

³ Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999); Christopher Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴ Emma Cox, *Theatre and Migration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁵ Yana Meerzon, *Performing Exile, Performing Self: Drama, Theatre, Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁶ Yana Meerzon and Stephen Wilmer, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). Page numbers of all further quotations from this book are provided in parentheses.

⁷ Michael Balfour, *Refugee Performance: Practical Encounters* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013).

⁸ Wolfgang Schneider, *Theater und Migration: Herausforderungen für Kulturpolitik und Theaterpraxis* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014); Azadeh Sharifi, "Multilingualism and Postmigrant Theatre in Germany," *Modern Drama* 61, no. 3 (2018): 328–351, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/702334>; Jonas Tinius, *State of the Arts: An Ethnography of German Theatre and Migration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Lizzie Stewart, "Postmigrant Theatre: The Ballhaus Naunynstraße Takes On Sexual Nationalism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 9, no. 2 (2017): 56–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2017.1370358>.

Likewise,

the title of the book focuses on the word “theatre”, but the contributions in this volume look at many varieties of performing arts, including puppetry, street and cultural performances, immersive theatres, performance activism, dance, and circus. These performance forms all go beyond the notion of “theatre” as a designated space for the encounter between the stage and the audience. (7)

This review contends that *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration* not only delineates the broader scope of theatre and migration studies but also foregrounds three interrelated dimensions central to the field—transnational mobility, cultural belonging, and the negotiation of political relations—which will be elaborated upon in the following discussion.

Transnational Mobility

In essence, the core of migration and theatre lies in the practice of *doing theatre in another land*. Indeed, the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of migration itself remain contested. As the theatre scholar Berenika Szymanski-Düll argues in her article *Defining the Theatre Migrant: A Concept Developed Through the Lens of Nineteenth-Century Theatre Practices*, the term “migration” must be distinguished from “labor mobility” and “travel”: it entails not merely the crossing of political and legal boundaries, but also involves a change of residence and the center of one’s personal life, accompanied by a profound impact.⁹ Despite such conceptual debates, *mobility* continues to operate as one of the defining conditions and representational cores of migration theatre, offering fertile ground for further inquiry into its aesthetic, social, and historical dimensions.

From a historical perspective, the movement of artists, performances, and aesthetic practices has repeatedly played a decisive role in shaping and transforming local theatre cultures. Building on this understanding, section two of the handbook examines how migratory processes have contributed to the aesthetic evolution of theatre since antiquity. The chapters trace theatrical circulation from ancient Babylon, India, Greece, and Rome to Shakespearean and modern

⁹ Berenika Szymanski-Düll, “Defining the Theatre Migrant: A Concept Developed Through the Lens of Nineteenth-Century Theatre Practices,” in *European Theatre Migrants in the Age of Empire: Personal Experiences, Transnational Trajectories, and Socio-Political Impacts*, ed. Berenika Szymanski-Düll and Lisa Skwirblies (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 15–34.

contexts, addressing the migration of texts, styles, artists, and cultural practices. Collectively, they reveal how migration, exile, and transcultural exchange have continuously informed the historical development of theatrical forms across diverse temporal and geographical settings. If the analysis were extended to a wider geographical range, it could offer deeper insight into how mobility functions as a driving force in shaping global theatre history.

In other words, the emergence of theatrical forms does not necessarily derive solely from endogenous cultural impulses but may also arise from intercultural encounters shaped by processes of mobility and exchange. For instance, the emergence of Peking Opera, China's national art form, was not the spontaneous outcome of Beijing's local culture but the result of multiple theatrical traditions and aesthetic paradigms being reorganized through processes of mobility and migration. Beginning with the arrival of the Anhui Opera Troupes in 1790 to perform for Emperor Qianlong's birthday, the convergence of southern and northern vocal styles, regional performers, and imperial court aesthetics in the capital gave rise to a new hybrid form defined by cultural fluidity and fusion.¹⁰ Similarly, the birth of modern Chinese spoken drama during the May Fourth Movement was deeply intertwined with transnational exchanges of ideas, aesthetics, and education of the time.¹¹ These examples underscore the formative role of cultural mobility in shaping aesthetic development and theatrical innovation.

While aesthetic transformation constitutes one dimension of research in theatre mobility, its social material and institutional conditions demand equal consideration. The handbook addresses not only aesthetic impact but also the historical trajectories and the broader social dimensions of theatrical mobility. This expanded inquiry is undertaken in section six, entitled "Itinerancy, Traveling, and Transnationalism." This section encompasses a range of case studies, from the special status of German theatre in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg to the worldwide tours of puppet companies and Black minstrel troupes, the migration of Marathi theatre and circus artists, and the political strategies of contemporary theatre maker Milo Rau.

Particularly notable are the chapters of the handbook that adopt a historiographical perspective to uncover the material and social traces of mobility. John

¹⁰ See "Anhui Opera Troupes' Entry to Beijing," in *Encyclopedia of China*, 3rd ed., online, accessed October 15, 2025, <https://www.zgbk.com/ecph/words?10=324858&SiteID=1&SubID=157&Type=bkztb>.

¹¹ The May Fourth Movement (1919) was an intellectual and political movement in semi-feudal and semi-colonial China that called for national renewal through science, democracy, and cultural reform. It also catalyzed the emergence of modern Chinese spoken drama (*Huaju*), a dialogue-based stage form influenced by performances of foreign residents and missionary schools at that time, which first appeared in student productions in Shanghai. See "Modern Chinese Drama," in *Encyclopedia of China*, 3rd ed., online, accessed October 15, 2025, <https://www.zgbk.com/ecph/words?10=243611&SiteID=1&SubID=43515&Type=bkzyb>.

McCormick reconstructs the touring routes and living conditions of nineteenth-century French puppeteers through archival records; Jim Davis investigates the economic status, social position, and cross-cultural circulation of immigrant actors moving to and from Britain; and Kellen Hoxworth traces the overlapping global tours of two late-nineteenth-century Black troupes, exposing the racial politics that shaped early theatrical globalization. These studies illuminate how the mobility of performers leaves tangible marks on social history, revealing the motivations, survival strategies, and networks that sustained migrant artists across time and space, while also enriching theatre historiography methodologically by integrating social and archival perspectives into the study of performance mobility.

Cultural Belonging

As mobility gives rise to new encounters and exchanges, it also reconfigures questions of belonging. For immigrant communities integrating into local societies, this process entails navigating transcultural tensions—conflicts, negotiations, and forms of resistance to dominant social norms and cultural hierarchies shaped by differences in nationality, ethnicity, and collective identity.

The opening chapter of the handbook, *The Eternal Immigrant and the Aesthetics of Solidarity* by Silvija Jestrović, sets the main tone for the collection's discussions on the theme of the immigrant. Jestrović discusses Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's model for the sculpture *Eternal Immigrant* and poignantly encapsulates a common condition of migrant existence in one phrase: "neither able to cross over nor to fall back" (31). This predicament typifies the experience of individuals who grapple with the challenge of assimilating into their host societies while concurrently maintaining a sense of alienation from their countries of origin. This predicament is characterized by an existence in a liminal space, a concept often referred to as a "Zwischenraum" in German, signifying an intermediate state between one's place of origin and that of the host society. This liminal space is characterized by a state of flux, encompassing a constant negotiation and re-evaluation of identity and sense of belonging, as the individual attempts to find an equilibrium between the two cultures. This notion of *Zwischenraum* has also been elaborated by Gertraud Marinelli-König and Alexander Preisinger in their edited volume *Zwischenräume der Migration: Über die Entgrenzung von Kulturen und Identitäten*,¹² which understands global migration as a dynamic

¹² Gertraud Marinelli-König and Alexander Preisinger, eds., *Zwischenräume der Migration: Über die Entgrenzung von Kulturen und Identitäten* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2011).

process that produces such interstitial spaces—zones of hybridity, transnational life trajectories, and continuously negotiated identities.

However, the reconfiguration of belonging in migratory contexts is not only confined to psychological or symbolic registers but is also conditioned and reproduced through structural forces of language, race, and cultural capital, as the handbook also demonstrates. In his chapter, entitled *Shylock is Me: Aryeh Elias as an Immigrant Jewish-Iraqi Actor in the Israeli Theatre*, Naphtaly Shem-Tov examines the issue of entrenched casting hierarchies in Israeli theatre, where stage identity remains bound to an actor's perceived ethnicity, skin color, and accent. This means that black actors play black roles, Arabs play Arab roles, and white roles are only played by white actors (321). Through the case of the Iraqi-born actor Aryeh Elias, Shem-Tov exposes how racialized casting practices reinforce social boundaries and restrict the immigrant performer's capacity to renegotiate belonging on stage. Similarly, Art Babayants, in *Emerging, Staying, or Leaving: 'Immigrant' Theatre in Canada*, highlights how linguistic proficiency functions as a gatekeeping mechanism within Canada's cultural industries. Immigrant actors lacking mastery of English or French face not only aesthetic marginalization but also economic precarity, illustrating how language and accent operate as markers of social legitimacy. Taken together, these chapters and studies demonstrate that the redefinition of belonging remains constrained by structural classificatory systems—racialization and accent ideology among them—that translate difference into hierarchy.

Negotiation of Political Relations

Moreover, the handbook builds upon its cultural inquiries by extending its investigation into the political dimensions of migration, demonstrating that questions of mobility are inseparable from the exercise of power. This constitutes the third feature of migrant theatre studies.

In fact, the category of immigrant itself is a product of social and racial construction. Canadian theatre historian Alan Filewod observes that white settlers of British ancestry in Canada rarely perceive themselves as immigrants, even though their presence equally originates in transnational migration.¹³ By contrast, the term immigrant is persistently attached to racialized and accented

¹³ Alan Filewod, "Playing on Indigenous land: Settlers, immigrants and theatre in fictive Canada" in *Theatre and (Im)migration: New Essays on Canadian Theatre*, ed. Yana Meerzon (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2019): 29.

newcomers, whose difference is rendered visible and audible. In other words, accent and skin color function as proxy markers that supersede actual histories of mobility, assigning immigrant status through visible and audible difference rather than through migration per se. As Sara Ahmed argues in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, the figure of the immigrant is not a neutral demographic category but a product of colonial histories that turn movement itself into a mark of strangeness—a sign through which certain bodies become read as “out of place.”¹⁴ This process of racialized perception displaces the lived experience of migration with a socially imposed identity of otherness. Similarly, Stuart Hall’s *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* notes how visible and audible bodily characteristics and racial differences constitute core elements in the construction of the other and occupy a central position within power analyses.¹⁵ This persistent misrecognition confines migrants to a symbolic position as perpetual outsiders, even when their artistic and social practices seek to renegotiate the very boundaries of national identity and participation.

Across the middle chapters of the handbook, the contributors trace how theatre engages with the politics of sovereignty, the afterlives of colonialism, and the precarious conditions of refugees and the forcibly displaced. Drawing on case studies from Argentina, Israel, Canada, and beyond, the handbook shows how theatre functions as a contested arena in which migration, citizenship, and national identity are publicly negotiated. At the same time, the handbook documents how artistic practices perform alternative forms of belonging and solidarity. Theatre emerges here as both a space of representation and a practice of resistance—one that transforms displacement into visibility and gives voice to those rendered stateless or silent.

Summary

The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration distinguishes itself through the remarkable breadth of its scope—historically, geographically, and methodologically. Spanning from ancient to contemporary contexts and across Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas, it brings together discourse-based, historiographical, and practice-oriented approaches to map the diverse intersections between migration and performance. This breadth, while one of the handbook’s major

¹⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 8.

¹⁵ Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Thousand Oaks, 1997).

strengths, also constitutes its main limitation: the vast range of materials sometimes challenges thematic coherence and analytical depth. Structured around six thematic clusters—conceptual frameworks, antiquity, nationalism, colonialism, refugees, and transnational mobility—the volume reads less as a single argument than as a compendium of perspectives, offering a panoramic terrain of inquiry in the field of theatre and migration.

As a comprehensive contribution, this handbook deepens our understanding of how mobility, cultural difference, and political agency shape theatrical practice across time and space. This review has therefore approached the volume through these three interrelated dimensions—mobility, cultural belonging, and political power—each essential for grasping migrant theatre as both an aesthetic practice and a form of social action. In an era marked by intensified global displacement and cultural polarization, this volume stands as a timely reminder that theatre not only mirrors the movement of peoples but actively participates in shaping the ethics and imaginaries of coexistence.



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