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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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PETER ECKERSALL*

Monica Cristini, *La MaMa Experimental Theatre – A Lasting Bridge Between Cultures*¹

Abstract

This review essay discusses the monograph *La MaMa Experimental Theatre – A Lasting Bridge Between Cultures* (Routledge 2024) written by Monica Cristini. This book gives an account of the early days of La MaMa Theatre in New York and the dialogue with avant-garde theatres in Europe that was forged in an era spanning 1961-1975. La MaMa founder Ellen Stewart is discussed as a pioneering figure not only in her founding of this off-off Broadway theatre in the East Village New York, but also as a keen supporter of artistic exchange between experimental theatre makers in New York and western and eastern Europe. Stewart termed this exchange “cross-pollination”. Cristini’s book is an exhaustive history of the fruits of this, seen principally in the rise of a visceral and intimate avant-garde performance style that transformed the contemporary theatre landscape. Cristini’s work explores the constellation of artists coming from the United States and Europe – some well-known, some who have remained in the theatrical underground – who were important in the development of the multifaceted experiential theatre of the 1960s and 1970s.

KEYWORDS: La MaMa Theatre; avant-garde theatre; Ellen Stewart, Tom O’Horgan, Andrei Serban, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook

1. La MaMa Experimental Theatre and the Rise and Fall of the Intercultural Avant-Garde

The La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club (La MaMa) was founded in 1961 by Ellen Stewart (1919-2011) and was at the center of the 1960s off-off Broadway theatre scene in New York. La MaMa began with staging small café-style performances consisting of freshly written one-act plays that were performed by non-trained actors in tiny spaces converted from shopfronts. Audiences and actors were so closely situated that one could barely tell who was doing what. That was precisely the point, and the theatre gradually became the gathering place for a new generation of a new kind of theatre artist. These artists did not so much eschew the mainstream theatre as they barely acknowledged its existence. The East Village was a long way from

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Broadway in those days and the off-off scene certainly didn't respect the modern canon of American plays by Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and others. Many participants and audiences (often one and the same) came from backgrounds where they had little or no theatre experience or training and the café theatre that evolved was more connected to street poetry, monologues, and a DIY aesthetic that turned a generally impoverished means of production into a house style. Although not particularly political in its outlook (and Stewart funded the theatre from her work as a fashion designer), La MaMa grew in stature and became a place for radical theatrical experimentation.

As Monica Cristini shows in her book, *La MaMa Experimental Theatre – A Lasting Bridge Between Cultures* (Routledge 2024), this was a model for theatre as a laboratory forged from a series of interventions and exchanges between artists in New York and parts of western and eastern Europe. As Cristini argues, in the period spanning the mid-late 1960s, through to the mid-1970s, La MaMa became *the place* for the wider dissemination of the nascent ideas and theatre craft of Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook and the International Centre for Theatre Research (ICTR). Brook's theatre was based at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris but was working on the ground in Africa and the Mideast and touring everywhere. Likewise, in the 1970s, Grotowski and Barba travelled from Europe to the US at the invitation of La MaMa and Cristini's book charts an emergent transnationalism that was not only an aspect of experiential performance but in some ways came to define it.

Unlike other notable 1960s theatres in the United States, such as the Living Theatre or the National Black Theatre (NBT), the cultural political background of La MaMa's founding was not so much the civil rights movement or new left, anti-Vietnam war protests, although these movements did have some connections with many people working at the theatre (that are discussed briefly in the last chapter of Cristini's text). By contrast, Cristini's study highlights La MaMa's role as a nodal point in a growing transnational theatre movement. Adding a new perspective to other studies on the history of La MaMa and the New York downtown scene, Cristini, who is an Italian theatre historian working at the University of Verona, explores in close historical detail the theatre's leading role in intercultural bridgebuilding. Thus, she draws out Stewart's notion of theatre as a space for "cross-pollination" and dialogue, that in many ways remains La MaMa's legacy until today. Ironically, (although not surprising to people already steeped in the European postwar avant-gardes), the evolving "dialogue" that is explored in the book is not in respect of drama, but of performance. The theatre that evolved aimed to question the logocentric structures of modern drama and wanted to shift theatre away from an emphasis on dramatic dialogue. Seeking to look beyond Aristotelian dramaturgy, it looked to the unconscious and experiments in embodied presence as alternatives to established aesthetic models and

forms of theatrical communication. It was decentered, impressionistic, and intentionally opaque. Also ironic is how Cristini's book charts an era when theatre looked to encounters with other cultural practices as a way of searching for a universal or transversal means of communication. Spoken language was not the primary syntactical form of dialogue; in its place were invented gesticulations of the voice and the body of the actor.

La MaMa Experimental Theatre begins with a discussion of the rise of theatre in the East Village, that in the 1960s was a neighbourhood of immigrants, many of whom came to the US after experiencing poverty and political turmoil in their homelands. The East Village had cheaper rents than Greenwich Village and other more salubrious areas of Manhattan, and, to this day, La MaMa still owns and occupies several buildings in East 4th Street and Great Jones Street and regularly has two theatres showing work from a variety of local and international artists and groups. Cristini explores the transience of the early days of this movement, when performances took place in churches, cafes, apartments, and lofts, and when artists came and went with "the blink of an eye" (2024, 7). She mentions the wider activities of the postwar scene in New York, an inspiring time for all the avant-garde arts ranging from the Beats, John Cage and Black Mountain College to Warhol, The Velvet Underground, and the Judson Church. To revisit this history is to revisit a remarkable era of interdisciplinary arts practices, although often strikingly insular, and perhaps now over-extended in the histories of the New York scene. In a time when NYC is more complicated and when the downtown avant-garde (as much as remains) plays its productions at high art venues such as the Park Avenue Armory, what new can be said about this earlier time and the productions that happened then?

Cristini considers this question in her opening chapter, and she convincingly argues that the importance of La MaMa was not only as a site of the American avant-garde, but as a center for its entree into the wider world. As she writes, it is the "network of relationships . . . that would prove to be fundamental in developing the Avant-garde itself, in Europe as in in the United States, where artists from different cultural backgrounds . . . discovered a common identity" (55). Cristini shows how the early sense of transience and the performances of one-off plays shifted towards an idea of theatre as a workshop-based laboratory for a new kind of transcultural future. With Stewart at the helm, and her fundraising skills and her goal to unconditionally support the work of artists, La MaMa became both an organization of permanent theatres and rehearsal studios (first in New York, and then later, in Italy), and a transnational network of actors and experimentalists who worked to make theatre something more like ritual practice. Of course, this was not the only version of La MaMa's history, but Cristini sees this as the gap in our understanding of the 1960s theatre and she credits Stewart with the

recognition of the need for bridgebuilding and the fortitude to make this happen. As a scholar from Italy, who undertook her research in NYC on a MariBet fellowship, she has fresh eyes on the archive and is not nostalgic for the 'good old days' of New York.

The most important discoveries in *La MaMa Experimental Theatre* lie in the details about who, where, and when these transatlantic exchanges took place. In tracing the interest in Grotowski, for example, we see how this was not only a movement directed to new forms of theatre training focused on corporality. It was also aligned with a grab-bag of non-western theatre practices directed towards rethinking theatre in terms of ritual.

The work of La MaMa directors Tom O'Horgan, and Andrei Serban who pioneered forms of ritual theatre is discussed at length in several chapters. In chapter 3, Cristini documents the tours to Europe by the La MaMa Repertory Troupe that was led by O'Horgan. They performed at the Spoleto Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe among other places. While on tour, the processes of cross-fertilization continued to evolve; tours fostered the exchange of information and new actors sometimes joined the company along the way. Cristini describes O'Horgan's theatre as "a total physical theatre that involved the audience with a rhythm marked by sound from the movements of the actors . . . [and] included animal cries, noises, and shouts" (74). She discusses the infusion of these influences, while also noting that O'Horgan was feeling his way and the company found their own approaches to artistic choices; actors wore rag-tag everyday clothes, and their performances enhanced the sensuality of their bodies (ibid.). There is also a discussion about the proliferation of styles at La MaMa during this period such as connections with the Open Theatre, and with Richard Schechner who held a Grotowski seminar at New York University in 1967 (87). Cristini makes the point that from 1968 to 1973, the key texts of this movement were published (115), principally, Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*, (1968), Brook's *The Empty Space* (1973) and Schechner's *Environmental Theatre* (1973). Indeed, each of these texts offer viewpoints on the centrality of the actor, of forging new relationships with audiences, and on theatre as a place almost of mystical communion. Such theatre aimed to reset what Brook called the "deadly theatre" – to reawaken the human spirit, and to resist the rationality of modern drama.

The work of Serban and the influence of Brook is discussed in chapter 5. Serban worked with Brook on the latter's famed production of *Orghast* in 1971. Made from improvisations and using experimental sounds composed by the poet Ted Hughes, the piece was notable for its experiential and expressively physicalized dramaturgy. Serban brought these techniques to La MaMa in the 1970s, working with Stanley Rosenberg, Elizabeth Swados and others. His leadership of the Great Jones company at La MaMa is described

as bringing theatre closer to the “realization of Artaud’s actor shamans” (132). Cristini’s point is that during this period La MaMa was the center for the development of the poor theatre-Brookian theatre in the United States and from there, its influence spread into theatre training programs, theatre workshops, and into the work of other companies. We don’t hear much about these artists in connection to how La MaMa is remembered today and yet Cristini shows how the work of O’Horgan, Serban and their collaborators was, for a decade or more, at the core of the artistic vision and repertoire of the company as a whole.

Another important aspect of the book explores how the artists developed friendships with Stewart, and, like so many other artistic and cultural organizations in the city, personal relations and personal taste informed La MaMa’s development. There is a Latourian sense of network in these personal connections that meant that things could be done quickly and with a fresh artistic vision. The avant-garde thrives on such a burning sense of vibrancy in the moment. On the other hand, these are not transparent organizational models for sustaining artistic institutions; they are precariously dependent on one’s connections to people with access to private money and on the personal taste and continued vibrancy of one’s leadership. The downside of this is seen in how the experimental theatre in New York is now full of fossils and there is very little attention given to supporting the next generations. There are exceptions to this such as the work that the Wooster Group did to assist and develop a new generation of artists in the 1990s and 2000. But these are exceptions to the rule and experimental venues such as La MaMa have become more niche and parochial, less innovative.

A focus on the idea of work, of labor, in the attention given to theatre as place for workshoping and training is compellingly developed in Cristini’s book. On the one hand, La MaMa becomes the crucible for the theatre as laboratory; of process-as-outcome, and viscerally physicalized theatre forms. It is one of the beginnings of “impulse” acting techniques and improvisations that explore Jungian notions of the archetype and utilize the unconsciousness and breath as a basis for acting. It is also the beginning of the era of intercultural theatre. Barba moves forward to develop his theatre anthropology – a kind of universal register of equivalence and not something that sits well with the multi-media and self-indexical aspects of contemporary performance today. Grotowski, who was perhaps the true innovator of this transcultural group, eventually ended-up in Italy. Cut off from eastern European audiences who were skilled in reading the avant-garde and could appreciate the liturgical-corporeal essence of his work, he ended his career leading self-awareness workshops in para-theatre settings that became synonymous with the personal growth movement and new-age capitalism. After the 1970s, ritual performance easily becomes

commodified in a world of healing circles, full moon dances, ayahuasca rituals, and fake shamans. Certainly, this is not La MaMa's fault, but the lack of a dramaturgical awareness, the resistance to criticism, or maybe the self-centeredness of how these forms became more about one's "personal journey" and self-identity is disappointing.

Cristini shows how the influential strand of the America theatrical avant-garde connected to Barba and Grotowski was fostered through La MaMa. But it is also interesting to see how disconnected the theatre itself was from the next generation of experimental artists. There is no postmodern La MaMa, no indeterminacy, and no new aesthetic forms after the 1970s. And while one of La MaMa's intercultural pathways leads in part to Turner-Schechner Performance Studies, that too is curtailed in the way that La MaMa resists change and doesn't develop an effective dramaturgical consciousness.

Finally, while Cristini's text is an exemplary history of La MaMa, closely detailed and rigorous, it also tells a history that is somewhat haunted by the Cold War. Grotowski came from Soviet Poland, yet his work never fit the model of Marxist critique. Barba did in fact establish the Odin Theatre as a live-in community along with the International School of Theatre Anthropology, in Holstebro, in a remote town in northern Denmark, but he was never critical of western society and his theatre anthropology was naïvely essentialist. American organs of State, in the 1960s, while often conservative at home, supported international cultural exchange as part of a wider expression of soft power.

This is not to detract from the importance of the movement that this book traces, merely to give another perspective on its context. In the radical sixties, the theatre often rejected postwar Marxist politics and artists in the United States, perhaps, less consciously than in Europe or Asia, struggled to make a new theatre that was in dialogue with the political ideas and variants of praxis after 1968. Other theatres, (in the legacy of the Berliner Ensemble or the cultural revolutionary opera in China, for example), showed strong political inclinations. And the influence of "new dramaturgy" was seen in the emergent postmodern theatre in the 1970 and 1980s and beyond. Yes, La MaMa was at the center of the development of a new kind of theatre that was expressively connected to the body of the actor. It searched for a theatrical imagination drawn from the idea of archetypes and Jungian unconscious impulses. It developed training practices and workshop techniques that were "pre-expressive" in their application of sound and voice. There was a new form of politics being forged here, but not an ideological one. This movement fed the idea of performance as transforming the senses and later as intercultural theatre and performance anthropology. What it could not do was effectively respond to new forms of political power or the critique of interculturalism.

And where have these avant-garde theatre practices gone? Grotowski

was almost a compulsory inclusion on the curriculum of the drama training programs of the 1970s, but there is little interest in his work now. The impulse behind this interest, was, of course, Artaud. And while many examples of works continue to struggle with Artaud's extraordinary provocations, it is no longer with reference to Grotowski or Barba. Instead, we see Artaud's shadow in the work of Sarah Kane, Jan Fabre, Romero Castellucci, Back to Back theatre, and so on – all theatre's that have deeper dramaturgical awareness, work on the senses, and grapple with the contemporary world. Meanwhile, Peter Brook's works that were drawn from his trips to Africa and India all but disappeared in a storm of Bharucharian postcolonial backlash. Brook's last work before he died, called *Why* (2019), was an exquisite ode to Vsevolod Meyerhold.

In closing, *La MaMa Experimental Theatre* charts the development of training as a basis for creativity. There is both a sense of working the body and psyche and of finding new ways of placing bodies in spaces on the La MaMa stages that was transforming. Perhaps another "bridge" then, developed in the book, is the linking of the older version of La MaMa with the future of theatre. The book shows the way that the kinds of theatre that La MaMa pioneered and supported were influential in contemporary practice. But then their influence waned. The fact is that the venue itself now seems anachronistic and struggles to maintain upkeep and interesting programming. The spiritual age of La MaMa is well over.

Cristini's book is excellent for the way that it shows how all this came to be and how it ended. There is value in exploring the past, as well exploding some of its myths. Not for a long time has La MaMa been at the center of theatre and those spaces and that beautiful main theatre on East 4th street are much underused and this is a great shame. Every time I see a show there, I leave wondering what it could be. And maybe this is also true for the wider theatre scene in the United States. With a few heroic exceptions, it is rarely experimental, not structurally or dramaturgically political, and no longer avant-garde. Cristini's book reminds us of a time when – for a moment at least, and in particular historical circumstances – that was not the case.

