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Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror: "Whatever It Takes"

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Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror: “Whatever It Takes.” By Sara Brady. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 224 pp., illustrations. \$90.00 cloth.

Within the growing body of work dedicated to the performative underpinnings of the “war on terror,” including the “Forum on Theatre and Tragedy in the Wake of September 11, 2001,” commissioned by David Román for *Theatre Journal* (2002), Jenny Hughes’s *Performance in a Time of Terror: Critical Mimesis and the Age of Uncertainty* (Manchester University Press, 2011), and Jenny Spenser’s *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11: Patriotic Dissent* (Routledge, 2012), Sara Brady’s excellent book stands out with its brilliantly drawn connections across genres and its analytical range. The war on terror involved a conflation of politics and theatre that performance scholars are uniquely capable of articulating and examining.¹ Brady points out that the

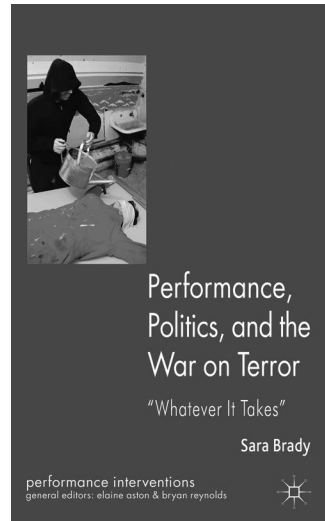
1. Brady chooses not to capitalize “war on terror” in this book, which I believe reflects both the political nature of punctuation, and the fact that this “war” was not a specific war, but rather a performative state of exception, the inauguration of an indefinite crisis that the Bush administration used to justify rendition, black sites, torture, and the invasion of two countries.

war on terror broke with the traditional, conscious agreement to suspend disbelief made between the performers (in this case, the Bush administration and its surrogates) and the audience (the public). Rather, the war on terror kept the audience in the dark about the highly crafted scripts and improvisational performances that created and sustained military actions and a culture of fear. Her investigation ranges from performance art and protest performance, to military training exercises and video gaming, to documentary and reality theatre. She incorporates rich performance analysis and empirical data about the number of protests in the United States and worldwide against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, she draws from her personal experiences as a traveler witnessing military stopovers in Ireland's Shannon Airport, and as an undercover observer at the Army Experience Center in a mall outside Philadelphia, a sweeping installation dedicated to educating the public about the military. Her source materials come from both the archive of government policies, codes, and public statements, and the repertoire of rallies, performances, and simulations.

Brady begins and ends the book by focusing on Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, whose administrations engaged the vocabulary and tools of theatre and performance to initiate and conduct military action. These chapters demonstrate that while “Buchismo” and “Obamania” might be distinct in their characteristics, they both created a cult of personality that enabled the public to willfully blind themselves (36). Brady deploys Diana Taylor’s term “percepticide” to elucidate the public’s refusal to see “the erosion of civil rights, the cost of permanent war, and the reality of violence both committed by and victimizing military, paramilitary, and civilian populations” in the aftermath of 9/11 (40).

In the chapter “Protests Visible and Invisible,” Brady argues that demonstrations against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were better organized and attended than those against Vietnam, but were misreported and underplayed in the media, which treated them as nostalgic revivals of Vietnam protests. Brady links the invisible aspects of the war on terror—rendition, the personal cost to those serving in the military, and so forth—with citizens’ willful determination to remain blind to these realities. In so doing, her book makes visible the protests and dissent that the media sought to hide or discredit. Looking specifically at performances by Rimini Protokoll, Coco Fusco, and veterans of various military conflicts, Brady examines how anti-war performances employ markers of “reality theatre.” For example, she traces the complicated association of camouflage with visibility and invisibility, pointing out that soldiers use camouflage in the field to mask their presence, but veterans use it in Rimini Protokoll’s *Resist, Refuse, Rebel* to lend their performance more *gravitas* and authenticity.

In “War, the Video Game,” Brady delves into the military’s reliance on representation—television, film, pop culture, fiction, and in particular, gaming—to recruit public support and trained fighters. This military-industrial-entertainment complex, which uses performance to educate and train civilian and military populations alike, creates incursions into everyday life until war becomes everyday culture. The insidious nature of war-as-culture represents, as Slavoj Žižek might say, non-ideology, or ideology appearing as its opposite; in the case of gaming, for example, war appears as recreation (71). Distinguishing war games from war *as* a game, Brady finds that perpetual rehearsal and simulations create a space for mundane violence such as prisoner abuse. While players of war games might get to choose which camera view they prefer—either an arm holding a gun in the immediate foreground or an over-the-shoulder view from slightly behind the protagonist—and whether they want to play as an American or as the enemy, these games ultimately create “a sociocultural anxiety that speaks to the breakdown



between civilian and soldier, real and virtual, agent and event that corresponds to a digital generation who plays games within and outside theatres of war” (84).

“Torture Simulated and Real” discredits the “ticking time bomb” scenario and its prevalence in arguments that attempt to legitimize torture. In 2001, Karl Rove led a Beverly Hills Summit that outlined for Hollywood elites how they could best support the war on terror, including giving the war effort “a narrative that should be told” (112). Reaching out to Hollywood for the inverse reason in 2006, Human Rights First put together The Primetime Torture Project, which detailed examples of military personnel replicating in the field what they saw on Fox’s *24*, specifically the protagonist Jack Bauer’s violent methods of acquiring information from suspected terrorists. The Primetime Torture Project chronicled the material effects of the violence produced on *24* and pointed out the pervasive influence of Jack Bauer’s approach to torture on military policy, the torture debate, and the mentality of US soldiers. Brady elucidates the ways in which torture relies on the visual and sensory realms of performance, arguing that it is important to maintain the distinction between reality and fiction when it comes to counter-intelligence and counter-insurgency.

Sections of the book get weighed down by litanies of performance examples, and would be better served by a more in-depth look at fewer protests, games, or theatre pieces. Still, Brady draws beautiful and haunting connections across performance genres, questioning their aesthetic evolutions, efficacy in the political realm, and invasion into daily life. The personal narrative of her visit to the Army Experience Center, in particular, stands out as an excellent blend of visual culture, gaming, and performance analysis in order to reveal the propagandistic operations of immersive military education.

This book is a must-read for anyone interested in how war has become performance, and how the government has deployed the tools of theatre to justify acts of violence.

—Lindsey Mantoan

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