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Reviews

HERBERT BLAU. *Reality Principles: From the Absurd to the Virtual.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011. Pp. 292. \$85 (Hb); \$35 (Pb).

Reviewed by Sarah Bay-Cheng, University at Buffalo-SUNY

In "Auto Archive," an essay included in the recently published *Reality Principles: From the Absurd to the Virtual* (2011), Herbert Blau recounts an observation made by his friend, the late critic Ruby Cohn, who responded to his autobiography then in progress (now published, *As If: An Autobiography*, Vol. 1 [2011]): "What are you doing that for," she asks, "you're always writing autobiography" (qtd. on 265). Cohn's statement might very well serve as an appropriate epigraph for Blau's latest collection. First published in *Theatre Journal* (2004), "Auto Archive," with its reflection on Blau's tendency toward the autobiographical, offers a fitting conclusion to his latest collection, which includes a range of ruminations on theatre, modernism, and postmodernism from 1969 to 2009. To read this book is to revisit many of Blau's most well-known obsessions at the intersection of theatre and theory, where he boldly encompasses politics, higher education, and performance art and offers his witty assessments of mainstream American theatre. Deeply felt, both charming and strident, and written in his inimitable and sometimes inscrutable prose, Blau's essays here suggest – by way of his extraordinary career both in the theatre and as a theorist, though not, as he frequently points out, as a theatre scholar – a movement from the modernist absurd to the virtual postmodern. Many of these essays have already been either published or presented as talks, and they cover ground familiar to readers of Blau's other books, to which he frequently refers.

Very few people writing on theatre and performance today possess Blau's remarkable breadth of experience, either historically or professionally. Drawing upon a career at the leading edge of American experimental theatre (with his Actors Workshop of San Francisco and, later, his KRAKEN theatre), all too briefly as the head of Lincoln Center, and in a range of positions in academia (founding Provost of CalArts, for example), Blau returns to the question of theatre's role and relevance in culture: What is theatre? How do we know? Why does it matter? He resituates his questions within the contemporary environment of what he terms the "dromoscopic, simulacral, hyperdigitized world" in which the performing body appears to be a hindrance (9). "Why theater at all?" he asks. Suspicious of cultural studies and the appropriation of theory to expedient ends, he focuses our attention

upon questions of ontology. Examining (and re-examining) theatre as a form of illusion that nevertheless draws upon materiality to demonstrate reality's illusion, Blau asks, "[I]f all the world's a stage or life is a dream or an insubstantial pageant fading, what's not theater?" (131). This question – Blau's key "reality principle" – unites the essays through diverse analyses of life both inside the theatre, most notably in his writing on modernist playwrights and "The Emotional Memory of Directing," and outside it, in considerations of 9/11, media politics, and recent American culture, particularly in his "Art and Crisis: Homeland Security and the Noble Savage" and "Ground Zero: The Original Vision (May 16, 2008)."

Reality Principles is often engaging and occasionally frustrating. Blau is most convincing in his argument for modernism's, most especially Beckett's, legacy in the twentieth-century avant-garde. His "The Commodicus Vicus of Beckett: Vicissitudes of the Arts in the Science of Affliction" (2004), for instance, positions Beckett's theatricalizing of nothingness as a critical fulcrum linking Proust and Eliot to conceptual art and Robert Smithson to contemporary playwrights such as Sarah Kane and digital artists. Deftly deploying Beckett's writing within the context of critical theory and often as theory itself, Blau finds evidence of Beckett everywhere in the latter half of the twentieth century. Digital projects such as *Remote Host* by Katya Davar are rendered in a "Beckettian landscape" (151), and Marina Abramović and partner Ulay become, in their *Relation Works*, "the seeming binary of the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*" (159). While Beckett is not the only modernist figure Blau engages – Eliot, Strindberg, and Brecht feature prominently in other essays – he is certainly the key figure on whom all other arguments hinge and the epitome of Blau's ontological focus: "As for the subjectivity in Beckett, sure it's ontological, and no mere 'subject position' (defined by race, class, gender, ethnicity), as in cultural studies today" (189).

This notion of a thoroughly Eurocentric (and masculine) modernism as common, essential, and constitutive of the very ontology of contemporary culture informs Blau's more political writing as well, as in his "Art and Crisis: Homeland Security and the Noble Savage" (2003). Considering art in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks, Blau contends that "very little of [the common outrage to 9/11] has found its way into art" (203). Weighing various responses – including Amiri Baraka's incendiary description of the attack as part of a global Jewish conspiracy and Fiona Shaw and Deborah Warner's *Medea* as an attempt to remind audiences that plays were once "places of real debate" (212) – Blau calls for a kind of performance that brings attention to "the conundrum of commitment itself . . . demanding that you think or do what you never dreamed before" (212–13). Although there is much to debate in this and similar essays, and many, I suspect, will vigorously refute Blau's conclusions (not to mention his rhetoric), his queries are compelling. What is art's response to global atrocities, and how

might one stage a conversation that doesn't resemble the screaming heads of political television? Increasingly displaced by other forms of media, how does theatre assert its role in contemporary culture? Blau's provocative essays rarely provide answers (although many imply that more Beckett would help), but their questions are undoubtedly vital to anyone invested in theatre scholarship or practice today.

Somewhat less compelling is Blau's engagement with digital culture and virtuality. Despite the book's title and recognizable cover art (a time-lapse photograph of Stelarc's Third Arm in action), only two essays – "The Human Nature of the Bot" and "Virtually Yours: Presence, Liveness, Lessness" – explicitly address questions of digital culture and performance, although he refers to media more generally in several of the essays. Blau more often uses the term "virtual" as the common adjective for *almost* than as a specific mode of digital engagement, and he tends to cast digital art as another (inferior) form of theatre. In response to Slavoj Žižek's "How Real is Reality?" Blau contends that "the more you look the more it looks like theater" (227). In response to Philip Auslander's oft-cited argument about liveness, Blau draws analogies to modernist arguments of transmission: "[S]ome who see liveness alive and well in media . . . are essentially making a defense of another kind of presence, an electronic presence, as we pass to the Internet, where, instead of metaphysical coming through the pores, as Freud and Artaud thought, it comes in rather, in bytes" (250). If for Auslander everything live is already contained within the economy of mediation, Blau argues that everything mediated is already and inseparably dependent on life: "[W]hat can liveness really mean in the absence of a subject for whom what's real, what's not, is of inarguable consequence on existential grounds" (245). Further, Blau argues that, if virtuality has its basis in material performance, it is either a pale copy of what the modernist theatre offers ("there seems to be – except for incompetence on the computer – no digital equivalent of the Alienation effect" [251]) or else still ignorantly dependent on the performing body: "[D]ematerialized figures are unthinkable without the bodily presence presumably vanished, nothing occurring in cyberspace that isn't contingent on that which, seemingly, made it obsolete" (260). As one might expect, Blau eventually follows this line of argumentation back to canonical modern drama as evidence of cyberculture's innate deficiency. Concluding his essay "Virtually Yours" with references to Woyzeck's sense of the world's hollowness and the dripping in Hamm's head, Blau writes that the "liveness of that drip, of the hollow, whatever it is that's moving, it can't be remediated . . . because, moment by moment, right before your eyes in the becoming of theater (even if you could hear the heartbeat), it's inevitably something less" (261).

Blau's argument here and elsewhere will be familiar to those who have followed the liveness debate for more than a decade now, but he does not

really address the many ways in which artists working at the intersection of performance and technology have and continue to challenge these questions about the body within the multiple spaces of contemporary performance. Notions of mediated presence may be grounded in embodied experience, but for audiences who increasingly experience the world in and through mobile digital devices, the delineations between virtual and actual presence appear increasingly indistinct. At the core of his argument, Blau reiterates the primacy of an ineffable, bodily quality: “no videation or instant replay can ever get at that, what’s there indubitably but invisible, right before your eyes” (260), a familiar refrain for the ephemeral, magical co-presence of theatre. Blau is so skilled and so knowledgeable throughout the rest of the book that it’s disappointing to see him return to such a familiar celebration of the intangible “it” quality of live performance.

But perhaps it is unfair to judge a book that so openly embraces the autobiographical and retrospective by its failure to look further into the future. Blau’s insights and arguments throughout the book provide more than a few provocations and a few essential considerations of the role of theatre in contemporary culture, and his unique insights into the realities of academia and American politics as performance are well worth reading, even if one disagrees with them. His is a unique perspective and still an original voice in the American theatre; and in the end, that may be the only reality principle one needs.

WORK CITED

Blau, Herbert. *As If: An Autobiography*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011.



GEORGE CRAIG, MARTHA DOW FEHSENFELD, DAN GUNN, and LOIS MORE OVERBECK, eds. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941–1956*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. 866. \$31.50 (Hb).

Reviewed by Enoch Brater, University of Michigan

The recent publication of the second instalment in the four-volume edition of the letters of Samuel Beckett covers the years 1941–56 and continues the ambitious work Martha Fehsenfeld and Lois Overbeck set for themselves in a landmark project initiated some three decades ago. For the massive undertaking, made possible by generous support from Emory University and several granting agencies, most notably NEH, the halfway mark is now at hand and provides the Beckett specialist with an extremely useful cache