

Introduction

This book investigates particular modalities of theatre practice developed by three artists who both write and direct their own work: Richard Foreman, Jenny Kemp and Richard Murphet. Each artist grew up and came of age in the decades following World War II, and their signature artistic practice developed over two decades from the late 1960s to the late 1980s and continued into the twenty-first century.

The prevailing dramaturgical form at the time each artist began their practice was dramatic realism, spanning six decades, from such plays as Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) through to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Realism provided an ongoing critique of the deleterious effects of the industrial capitalist society upon the individual citizen. It gave central focus to the actions and sensibilities of the middle-class citizen marginalised in classical drama. However, realist drama had been, since the 1960s, increasingly viewed as representative of a narrow bourgeois worldview that focused more upon the traumas of the individual and less upon wider social concerns. In the mid-sixties, Miller himself criticised Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* because it 'gets deflected onto a question of personal neurosis' (1966, online article). It was a view echoed at the time by several contemporary artist-theorists such as Karen Malpede, who attacked the narrow focus of the 'bourgeois realism' in the works of Williams and other like-minded playwrights (1972). Over thirty years later, Karen Jürs-Munby saw what emerged in the mid-century as 'a discrepancy between the self-contained absolute form of drama with its interpersonal emphasis and the new social, politico-economic and philosophical subject matter which transcends it' (2006, 3). Jürs-Munby's comment comes from her introduction to Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006). Lehmann's book provides a poetics for the late-twentieth-century postmodern turn in theatre. The postdramatic artists sought to revoke the central tenets of dramatic theatre, in order to create performances that responded to contemporary society. Lehmann considers the ways in which postmodern dramaturgy has developed 'a changed perspective on human subjectivity.' He argues that we should not grieve over the 'lack of an already defined image of *the* human being' in these texts, because they have discovered 'new possibilities of thinking and representing the individual human subject' (18. Emphasis in the original). Postmodern performance has challenged the depiction by dramatic realism of a coherent social structure expressed through dramatic story, narrative and plot, and its dependence upon an illusion of fictional reality seen in the representations character and setting.

The work of Foreman, Kemp and Murphet discussed in this book expresses a social and artistic unease with bourgeois modernity and with the limitations of the forms of dramatic realism. However, it occupies an intermediate stage between two dramatic modes: realism and postmodernism. It is not that this intermediate stage simply provided a stepping stone across which theatre must travel in order to move from one form to the inevitable outcome of the other. Rather, the work of these artists and other practitioners who occupy similar territory has its own integrity based upon distinct conceptual objectives. However, their theatre practice consciously sits between these two possible paths: it seeks to retain the remnants of the dramaturgical devices that drive realist drama – character, illusion, story, plot and the aim of coherence – precisely in order to critique them and the belief systems they reflect.

I devote space further on in this Introduction to my use of the term 'late modernism' to describe the theatre of Foreman, Kemp, Murphet and their peers. For now, I wish to avoid the trap that faces all writers who attempt to distinguish clearly between modernism and all its offspring: late-, post-, post-post, and so on. There are no clear distinctions: the lines of interconnection are constantly productive. These three artists consciously utilise elements from the 'modern' dramatic realist theatre we are subverting; moreover, elements of the subversion are influenced by the high-modernist, anti-realist experiments in art, literature, film and theatre from earlier decades. In turn, many of the ingredients that I am labelling late-modernist theatre are shared with (have perhaps influenced) the postdramatic theatre with whom our work has been largely concurrent: the questioning of character and the nature of modern subjectivity, the interrogation of story-telling and dramatic suspense as an escape from the present-ness of experience and the overriding belief that the promise of cohesion is possible in a fragmented contemporary world. These are among the qualities of a postdramatic dramaturgy discussed by Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006). It is significant, however, that Lehmann barely mentions Foreman in his comprehensive study, discussing him primarily as part of the prehistory of the postdramatic, connecting Gertrude Stein and the 'landscape play' with the use of theatre as a 'speaking space' (2006, 31 and 63).

From an historical perspective, the work I am covering here is late-modernist, because it can be understood more clearly in the context of the art arising in the decades immediately following World War II. As Fredric Jameson has argued, 'modernism in the 1950s and 1960s, seemed to touch a kind of limit and to have exhausted all available and conceivable novelties' (2002, 152). This was, he asserts, 'a moment of late modernism' (151), which is 'a product of the Cold War, but in all kinds of complicated ways' (165). However, although it is a period that we may call late modernism in theatre, this act of periodisation is as