

Rezension zu

Ric Knowles: International Theatre Festivals and 21st-Century Interculturalism.

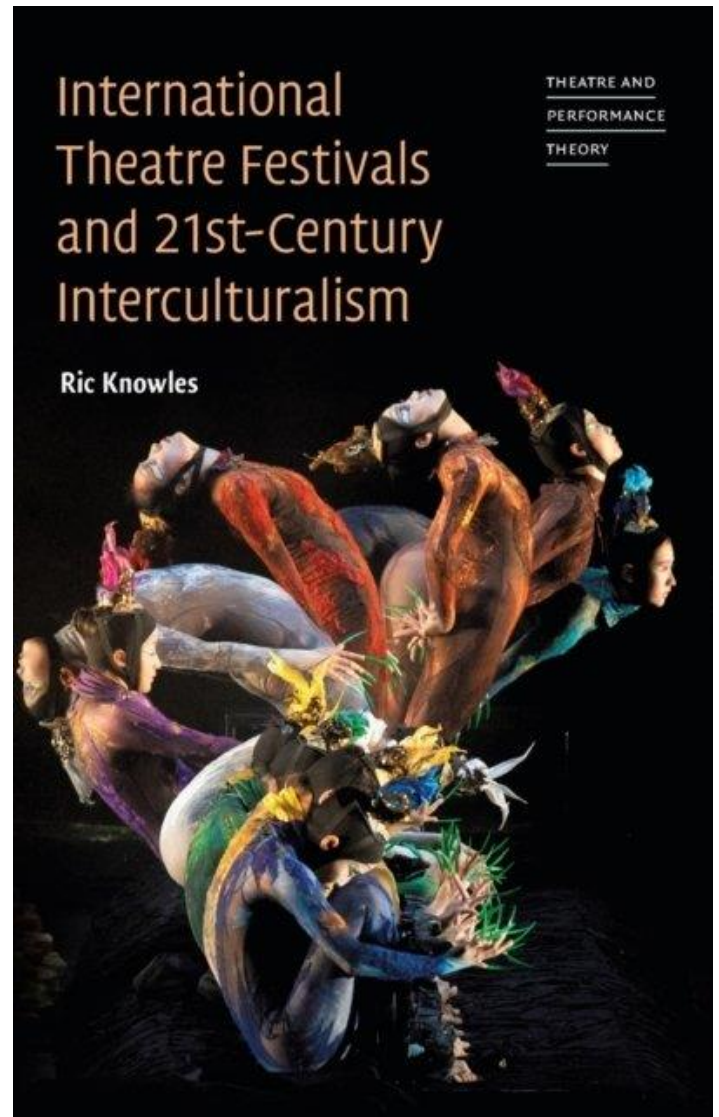
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von **Hanna Huber**

Ric Knowles starts and ends his examination of international theater festivals in the twenty-first century with the slightly regretful remark that his publication seems to have become a "history book" about the first two decades, (p. ix and p. 230) given the fact that the global COVID-19 pandemic brought a hiatus in the performing arts sector. I would argue that the enforced pause in 2020 incited theater practitioners and festival organizers to rethink cultural and economic modes of operation at present-day festivals, who can thus profit significantly from Knowles' in-depth investigation of a pre-COVID status quo. Besides, issues and strategies discussed in *International Theatre Festivals* seem to be just as relevant today, in light of recent festival editions of 2022 not having shown as much change as we might have expected.

By outlining a "loose classification" (p. 20) of five different festival types, Knowles places a particular focus on the role of international live arts festivals as key sites for intercultural communication, representation and negotiation. Thereby, the publication explicitly seeks to "displace the destination festival as the gold standard, and the fringe as the only alternative," (p. 26) still dedicates two chapters to these types, but then proposes new festival genealogies and epistemologies.

While Western world researchers oftentimes view the origins of theater and festivals within the "competitive framework of ancient Greece," Chapter 1 suggests to understand festivals as having begun in the "relational frameworks of Indigenous communities globally." (p. 30) Throughout the book, Knowles is particularly sympathetic towards Indigenous-run theater and per-



formance festivals, highlighting their way to promote "performative negotiation and constitution of identities," (p. 64) to create "deeper aesthetic, technical, political, and cultural exchange" among artists through intensive workshops, (p. 69) and to constitute festival visitors as "guests, participants and witnesses." (p. 70) Although I would not romanticize Indigenous culture either, this renewed perspective reminds us to prioritize mutual celebration and transnational exchange over culture consumption and detour profitability.

Destination festivals, like the Edinburgh International Festival and the Festival d'Avignon, both founded in 1947 to rebuild a European cultural identity after the Second World War, moved away – as Knowles argues in Chapter 2 – from their mission to "shore up European (high) culture [and] civilization" (p. 73) to "serving primarily as international marketplaces for the exhibition and exchange of cultural capital." (p. 74) By presenting large-scale productions, destination festi-

vals attract visitors to host cities and, thus, contribute to tourism and city branding, which in return legitimates their funding through public subsidies. Knowles justly criticizes that high ticket prices limit the festivals' accessibility and foster an upper and upper-middle class audience "for whom the experience of festivalization is as much about being seen as seeing, and more about cultural consumption than intercultural communication." (p. 74)

Chapter 3 examines curated live-arts festivals having emerged in the turn of the millennium as interdisciplinary, socially activist, artist-run festivals. The emergence of curated live-arts festivals goes hand in hand with a conceptual shift away from festival programming to festival curation. While the programmer "travels to festivals around the world to choose 'the best' of what is on offer", the artist-curator "travels to make connections" and foregrounds "opportunities for communication across difference." (p. 113f) Keren Zaiontz speaks of "second-wave festivals" to mark their renunciation of neoliberal policies at destination or fringe festivals, and stresses their close relationship with local host cities as a defining feature (Zaiontz 2020). By staging site-specific work, targeting local audiences, involving theatrical and non-theatrical spaces, and fostering dialogues between visiting and local artists, festivals like LiFt in London or PuSh in Vancouver have an impact that extends beyond festival time.

As contrasting examples, open-access fringe festivals were mounted in protest on the periphery of "élite" destination festivals as anarchic, counterculture alternatives, until they "had succumbed to the pressures of the neoliberal marketplace, its rebellious artists were transformed into entrepreneurs, and their defiance into precarity." (p. 158) Researchers like Jen Harvie and Sarah Thomasson have problematized the collateral social damages due to neoliberal policies and practices on these competitive theater markets (Harvie 2020; Thomasson 2019). Chapter 4 ends by discussing counterfestivals, microfestivals and manifestivals that form an opposition to the increasingly commercial fringes, like FESTA in Bogotá, the Free Fringe and now suspended Forest Fringe in Edinburgh, Montréal's Edgy Women Festival, Toronto's Hysteria and others. Interestingly, Knowles underlines that the "most inter-

culturally generative" festivals that he encountered were "in no real sense open-access," (p. 234) which confirms that neoliberal policies at open-format fringes entail a dominance of market trends and, in further consequence, a standardization of artistic forms.

Under the heading "The Intracultural Transnational," Chapter 5 explores festivals from one cultural, regional or language community transcending national borders. Festivals like BeSeTo, RUTAS and the Kampala International Theatre Festival seek to negotiate "new and emerging relations across what have historically been virtually impenetrable borders." (p. 215) Knowles therein views an emerging new festival paradigm that attempts to "forge and negotiate solidarities and cultural identities within transnational communities," (p. 228) to overcome fractures by historical imperialism and neocolonial economic policies. In order to counteract the risk of language-based festivals in francophone and lusophone countries of being dominated by "the interests of the European colonizing nations," (p. 206) in particular when the work of artists from former colonies is assimilated or decontextualized, Knowles suggests placing festival curation in the hands of those having been "subjected to colonization." (p. 212) All in all, Chapter 5 gives a positive outlook on intracultural transnational festivals functioning "less as global theatrical marketplaces than as sites of *intracultural* negotiation, exchange, solidarity, and identity formation across *international* differences." (p. 194)

As a complementary read to these five festival types, I would suggest the *Cambridge Companion to International Theatre Festivals*, edited and published by Ric Knowles in 2020. Structured by host country or continent instead of festival type, the *Cambridge Companion* includes chapters on destination festivals by Erika Fischer-Lichte, fringe festivals by Jen Harvie, indigenous festivals by Ric Knowles, second-wave festivals (equivalent to curated live-arts festivals) by Keren Zaiontz and selected examples of intracultural transnational festivals like the BeSeTo Festival by Hayana Kim and others.

In the conclusion of *International Theatre Festivals*, Knowles argues that COVID-19 might serve as "an

opportunity to pause in what had been an exponential increase in the pace of festivalization." (p. 230) Obviously, it is too soon to discuss long-term effects of the pandemic on the performing arts sector. What we can notice so far is that the enforced digitalization due to the closure of cultural institutions and the cancellation of large events has made theater practitioners and festival stakeholders rethink their work practices and audience relations. While the turn to set up exclusively digital festivals apparently remained a temporary measure during the pandemic, Knowles views the recreation of live arts festivals in the post-COVID era as a chance to erect "spaces of intercultural negotiation and exchange." (p. 231) The optimistic outlook on the future of festivals invites readers to continue observing the ongoing development with curiosity.

Knowles' reflections on "wise practices" provide useful input for festival organizers: Itinerant festivals like BeSeTo, CARIFESTA and Theater der Welt prove that regular changes of the host city allow "more flexibility in programming difference and engaging with local cultures" (p. 235) instead of primarily serving tourism and city branding. A change in leadership and/or the involvement of guest curators, as it is the case at Progress in Toronto or the Ruhrtriennale in Germany, help to avoid "the endless reproduction of limited, quixotic, or coercive worldviews over time." (p. 234) A temporally condensed program not only creates a festive atmosphere, but also allows visitors to stay for the entire duration and creates "ideal conditions for debate and exchange." (p. 237) This experience is amplified by the curator not just compiling an excellent festival program, but also staging dialogue between artists and their audiences by means of conferences,

panels, post-performance discussions and workshops. Knowles further emphasizes the importance of a well-conceived contextualization of artworks, the just remuneration of all artists as well as economic, physical and linguistic accessibility to the festival.

All in all, *International Theatre Festivals and 21st-Century Interculturalism* not only provides a methodological toolbox for festival researchers by outlining a loose classification, but also incites fruitful discussions on how to reconceptualize present-day festivals as "intercultural mediators." (p. 232) Frequent references across chapters create a more interwoven argumentation and also blur the boundaries of the five festival types, which Knowles himself calls a "loose categorization." (p. 20) Apart from that, numerous performance analyses and experience reports of specific festivals all over the globe guarantee a compelling and lively reading experience.

Literatur:

Harvie, Jen: "International Theatre Festivals in the UK: The Edinburgh Festival Fringe as a Model Neo-liberal Market." In: *The Cambridge Companion to International Theatre Festivals*. Ed. by Ric Knowles, Cambridge University Press 2020, pp. 101-117.

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Publikationen:

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