

Theatre as a space for negotiation and co-creation of knowledge

Reviewed Book

PARRY, S. (2020)
SCIENCE IN PERFORMANCE: THEATRE AND THE POLITICS OF ENGAGEMENT
MANCHESTER, U.K.: MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

Reviewed by

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Abstract

In an increasingly rich and abundant context of publications on science and theatre, Simon Parry's *Science in performance: theatre and the politics of engagement* stands out for its multidisciplinary perspective on the topic, focusing on central issues in the field of science communication. Based on a detailed and dense analysis of a selection of theatre performances about science, Parry supports theatre as a space for negotiation and co-creation of knowledge.

Keywords

Public engagement with science and technology; Science and technology, art and literature

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'Science theatre', 'science-in-theatre', 'science plays', '*teatro científico*'¹ (science shows) and now 'science in performance'. New terms have appeared to name or define the various forms of interactions between science and theatre which, although they emerged a long time ago, have intensified and developed over the recent decades, thus gaining increasing attention from the world of academia.

If, on stage, Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, published in 1998, is regarded as one of the contributing factors to the boom in theatre plays engaged with science, one of the milestones in scientific literature — just to mention another term —, was the publication of *Science on stage*, by Kirsten Shepherd-Barr [2006], which is one of the main references in the field. In 2020, Cambridge University Press dedicated a volume of the "Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Performance" collection to

¹Translator's note: the term '*teatro científico*', widely used in both Spanish and Portuguese, is rather generic and there is no consensus on its definition yet, as it may refer to science plays as well as interactive science performances. The translation 'science shows' is broad enough to cover the areas in which both types of activities take place.

the theme of science and theatre, edited by Shepherd-Barr, consolidating both the vitality of the phenomenon and the author's expertise in the field.

Between one Shepherd-Barr publication and another, other books have been published within the science-theatre framework, documenting the prolific expansion of this subgenre, and analysing it from different areas, views and clippings. For example, they show great interest in how theatre dialogues with and represents specific scientific disciplines and in certain historical and geographical contexts. *Science: Dramatic. Science plays in America and Great Britain 1990–2007*, by Sabine Zehelein [2009], and *Performance and the medical body*, by Alex Mermikides and Gianna Bouchard [2016], are references in these niches — just to name a couple.

In this increasingly rich and abundant context of publications on science and theatre, it is worth highlighting the book *Science in performance: theatre and the politics of engagement* by Simon Parry, released in 2020 by Manchester University Press. This is because, despite belonging to the theatrical field — where a substantial part of the literature on the subject comes from — Parry approaches “science in performance” from a multidisciplinary perspective, focusing on central issues in the field of science communication.

By taking a quick peek at Parry's CV it is possible to understand where his work comes from. With a Ph.D. in drama, the author works as a Senior Lecturer in Drama and Arts Management and is an Associate Director for Social Responsibility in the School of Arts, Languages and Culture at the University of Manchester. However, an important part of the research he carries out results from his experience working with theatre professionals in various contexts. Particularly crucial for his book was his work at The Wellcome Trust charity, where, between 2002 and 2009, he developed programmes aimed at public engagement with biomedical research, including some that have art as a driver.

Since then, Parry has been collecting cases of “surprising, moving and sometimes disturbing” encounters — in his own words — between science, theatre and education, involving different institutions, subjects, audiences and knowledge. In his book, he presents a careful selection of these cases, examining them from different angles, based on different theoretical perspectives, which combine contemporary research in theatre and performance studies and key concepts of social studies of science. In addition, he offers a broader commentary on theatre as a form of public engagement with science.

Without the ambition to define or characterise this theatre or even the set of practices presented, Parry emphasises less what they have in common and focuses more on what is original and challenging, presenting a rich and diverse range of plays and performances that dialogue with science through different genres. His selection ranges from educational theatre to experimental contemporary performance and opera, including Somali poetic drama and grime video and includes work by pioneering theatre companies such as Gob Squad, Headlong Theatre and Y Touring. The author dedicates an entire chapter to Y Touring, highlighting the dramaturgic process created by the company — known as Theatre of Debate — which, for 25 years, has been performing in U.K.-based secondary schools, engaging young people in debates on controversial scientific topics and related ethical issues.

The sciences represented in the selected productions are equally diverse, with a predominance of emerging themes, such as genetics, climate change and artificial intelligence, which have great social impact and raise awareness about features that go far beyond purely technical aspects and feelings of all sorts. Despite the discomfort generated by some of these topics, Parry argues that it is not only possible, but also politically desirable, to laugh at them, as in the case of the opera *My Square Lady*. Resulting from a two-year collaboration between the Anglo-German collective Gob Squad, a neurorobotics laboratory, and a Berlin opera house, the show stars a humanoid robot trying to pass himself off as human, with a somewhat unpredictable — or rather improvised — performance, with laughter from the audience.

Among the examples presented in the book, there are also topics with less obvious scientific bias, such as skin colour, forcing the reader to see them in a more complex and pluralistic way. In this specific case, the author tells the unusual story of how grime MCs and dermatologists ended up making a film together in Birmingham, England. Other surprises arise from unprecedented reviews of box office hits such as *Wicked* and *Urinetown*, showing how even Broadway musicals can trigger deep reflections on the relationships between science and society.

Detailed and dense, Parry's analyses range from the production process of the plays and performances, emphasising the collaborations between the subjects involved, up to their staging, and, sometimes, to the reaction of the audience. Distancing himself from a content analysis of the works, which tends to favour the text and the inclusion of science in it, and from evaluations that seek evidence of its efficiency and its success, the author pays special attention to the aesthetic and political issues that they inspire. In this movement, he values aspects that tend to be excluded both from the general theatre criticisms and the studies on science and theatre initiatives carried out in the field of science communication, highlighting how a deeper theoretical dive in the literature of theatre and social studies of science can enrich the debate on the topic.

Particularly from the point of view of science communication, it is interesting to note Parry's efforts to avoid the commonplace of valuing science in performance as a way of communicating or aesthetising established scientific facts. The author defends the practices presented in the book as forms of knowledge negotiation and co-production of new knowledge, aligning himself within a vision of dialogical, inclusive and democratic science communication. However, by giving materiality to a vision that often sticks to discourse, he shows the potential of this theatre — regardless of how it is named — to establish new ways of knowing and of being in the world, a world in which science plays a central role, but has no answer for all things.

In times of intense polarisation, Simon Parry's book shows that there are possible and interesting paths between destructive criticism and the blind defence of science, between conflict and passivity, and theatrical performances are one of them. Far from being a light reading, due to the complexity of the concepts introduced and the density of the analyses carried out, his book is extremely relevant for those who want to take a deeper dive into the science-theatre phenomenon considering the context of science communication.

Translated by Sabina Brusemini

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