

Review of *Theatrical Worlds*

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Mitchell, C., Hayford, M., Browne, K., Mallet, M., Calloway, S., Djuren, K., Davis, J., Fiebig, J.,
& Butler, M. (2014). *Theatrical worlds*. University Press of Florida.

Wealthy, white communities have dominated the legacy of arts patronage. Because of this, many economically disadvantaged people have not experienced the transformative alchemy of live theatre. Over the past few years, we as theatre artists have had difficult but needed discussions on how to support all communities with our artistry, not just those who can afford the full price ticket (and parking.) We are now having these same discussions within educational systems: how can we open the Academy to everyone seeking to learn? Therefore, I am thrilled to see educators creating open-source textbooks. This is an exciting contemporary tool for communities and individuals who see a physical textbook's retail price as a barrier to that learning. However, open-source should never default to lesser quality. Initially produced in 2014, Charlie Mitchell's *Theatrical Worlds* has great ambitions to provide clear information on theatre arts. Mitchell writes that the book "seeks to give insight into the people and processes that create theatre." He discusses how they aim to strip away the "magic" one feels when experiencing live performance and replace it with "wonder for the artistry that makes it work." (Page 4.) By this, Mitchell's book does precisely what he proposes in the introduction, a look at theatre's historical and current applications through these different topics. However, it lacks nuance for contemporary readers in both the language used and the presentation of information.

Various theatre professors provide a chapter in their area of specialization. The book begins with an introduction titled “Mapping Realities,” written by Mitchell and Michelle Hayford. The following section is Theatre Production which goes through a range of theatrical disciplines by chapter: Acting, Directing, Set Design, Costume Design, and Lighting Design. I was slightly disappointed there were no chapters on playwriting, dramaturgy, or stage management; they detailed sound design through an interview with Richard Woodbury at the end of the Set Design chapter. However, I found all the chapters on design very engaging, especially the historical sections. Notably, Mark E. Mallett’s writing on set design. Mallett explained the evolution of scenography, basic visual components of design, and technical direction effectively without too strong of didactic undertones. All the design-oriented chapters provide a robust overview of what they do from beginning to end in production. The third and last section goes through Genre, Shakespeare, The American Musical, and World Theatre. Jim Davis’ chapter on Genre was an excellent addition as it contemplated the notorious “ism” within dramatic criticism and classification. The book's structure is strong; it provides a comprehensive overview of the major fields within the performing arts.

Despite this broad framework of the textbook, there are critical aspects within those fields that have been excluded. For example, the chapter on acting, which Mitchell also wrote, leaves out large sections of historical and contemporary acting practices. His chapter begins detailing the origins of Western performance, starting from Greek and Roman rhetorical traditions, and then moves to the less-than-subtle acting theories of Delsarte. The remaining chapter goes into lengthy detail on Konstantin Stanislavski’s acting method. Any contemporary performance theorists, which in this case are Meyerhold and Michael Chekov, are left to a concluding paragraph along with Laban, Linklater, and others. Given Mitchell’s earlier “Mapping Realities,”

which professed performance as an all-encompassing aspect of the human condition ranging from the religious rites of ancient Egyptians to video games, to then read a chapter on primarily one specific acting style was unexpected. There is no doubt that Stanislavski's psychological approach to acting has its chokehold on North American training programs. However, to overtly emphasize Stanislavski within their acting chapter feels dated. While Mitchell's desire to narrow in on the most prominent Western acting style is not inherently negative, he leaves out an almost century of progress, theory, and history since Stanislavski's revolution. The Group Theatre, for example, is not discussed besides a brief mention of Lee Strasberg. I found this a questionable omission given The Group Theatre's immense influence on the American acting tradition, both on stage and screen, and how intrinsically Stanislavski influenced their work. This is compounded by the fact they included a Stella Adler quote earlier in the book with the simple title of "actor" after her name.

I also felt that the overall written style of the book would create unwanted conversations during a lecture. There is no doubt that over the last few years, there has been much discourse in reexamining our use of language and its gendered implication. These conversations became more mainstream well after this book was digitally published. However, that does not absolve the many moments throughout *Theatrical Worlds*, which tend to use "he" as the default third person. I feel Kevin Browne's chapter on directing represents this male-centric approach to language the strongest. Browne consistently refers to directors as "he" with the cumbersome "he or she" now and again. Younger readerships are more aware of gendered language, and because of that, I feel that their awareness would discredit Browne's chapter. These conflicting sensibilities would require the lecturer to clarify or qualify the text, which in the end dilutes its authority.

As I read the various chapters, I noticed misspelling after misspelling. In addition, I noticed that many typos were in different fonts and sizes, along with characters not found in English. Given how pervasive these oddities are, I assume something happened during the digitalization of the text. These typos were made especially difficult to read, given the overall less-than-ideal visual aesthetic of the text. While it is a Beta Version, there is little to no design to the information presented, a feature that I feel many would expect from this type of educational material. The entire book appears as a sea of black and white text with pasted images now and again. While a few graphics are scattered throughout, the book presents more like an academic journal than a learning tool. It will not surprise me if students struggle with the readings, given the lack of visual aids. Many of the chapters would benefit from visual assistance to guide the reader from point to point.

Lastly, the book has a complete lack of citations or bibliography. *Theatrical Worlds* has no citation footnotes or even a reading list at the end. The only consistent citations are for the used images and photographs, but those citations vary significantly in style or information provided even then. Educational texts such as this are responsible for providing accurate and fact-based scholarship. Excluding any citations is a disservice to students and us as educators. Any reader wishing to learn more, who might feel inspired, could not pursue further study because they have no sources to investigate. I could not recommend this book for any serious academic setting because of this omission.

Theatrical Worlds is an attempt to provide accessibility to the arts. Theatre is an expression of the human condition and everyone, no matter their background, has the inherent right to explore their artistry. Mitchell's book looks to the de-mystify theatre to open it up for curious minds to better understand its historical, theoretical, and mechanical nature. However,

his book provides an all too narrowed focus that omits core aspects of those fields of study. I feel that *Theatrical Worlds*' sensibilities do not resonate with a more contemporary readership, along with limited visual aids and dated language. Given the lack of citations throughout, *Theatrical Worlds* would work well in an academic setting as a supplement rather than the primary source of study. I would personally recommend utilizing other free resources found online. CrashCourse is an educational channel on YouTube originally created by John and Hank Green. This channel has won awards and has partnered with traditional educational institutions. They have produced a series on Theatre History that provides clear and often entertaining education. For more production-based open sources, I recommend the YouTube channels of professional-producing theatres. The National Theatre in London and Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon have lengthy playlists of videos of their artists explaining what they do and how they do it. The American Theatre Wing also has the video series Working in the Wings, which examines specific national productions or fields of theatrical artistry. These free online resources provide an engaging and contemporary approach to theatre education. Open educational resources are an incredible feature of the all-encompassing digital age. I look forward to seeing how we as educators can use it to create accessibility to the arts.