

BOOK REVIEW

In place of a show: what happens inside theatres when nothing is happening,
by Augusto Corrieri, London, Bloomsbury, 2016, 198 pp., £35.75 (hardback),
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In this charming and unique contribution to both theatre history and the art of the essay, Augusto Corrieri presents us with four wide-ranging sets of meditations on four historic theatre buildings, all in the tradition of the so-called Italianate stage, but widely separated in time and space. The first is the Cuvilliés-Theater of Munich, originally built in 1753, but when threatened with wartime destruction in 1944, painstakingly dismantled into some thirty thousand pieces, hidden away outside the city, lovingly restored and reopened and today essentially a tourist attraction with occasional rental offerings. The third is an even better known historic structure, the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, designed by Palladio in 1580 as the first purpose-built indoor theatre in the West and still intact today, although essentially an empty shell utilized not as an active theatre but as a major tourist destination. The fourth is one of the most exotic and unlikely of any of the theatres in this architectural tradition, the monumental opera built in 1897 in the Brazilian boom town of Manaus, in the middle of the Amazon jungle and probably best known to the public today through the Herzog film *Fitzcarraldo*, inspired by the feverish dream of this strange project.

The second example, unlike these others, is virtually unknown to the public memory, and has also unlike the others disappeared and left not a rack behind. Yet all this makes Corrieri's meditations on what traces still remain all the more moving and fascinating. This was the Dalston Theatre in London, built in 1898, converted into a cinema 20 years later, into a reggae and soul music club in the 1960s and demolished to make way for upscale apartments in the 1990s. Its story is far different from that of its more famous companions in this book, but it is a story of considerable significance to the history of theatre in the West and one almost never given the attention it at last receives in this study, a story centrally concerned with ephemerality and the operations of memory and forgetfulness.

In fact the Manaus Opera, the Teatro Olimpico and the Cuvilliés-Theater are highly unique structures, with highly individualistic histories and associations, which Corrieri sensitively explores. The Dalston, on the other hand was, like any theatre, tied to a specific time and location, but it also, unlike the others discussed in this book, can in fact stand in for hundreds, perhaps thousands of very similar enterprises found throughout the West and together making up a major and almost totally forgotten part of Western theatre history for much of the past century and a half. Their stories have a remarkable similarity – built in the late nineteenth century to accommodate the working class audiences that did not attend the more elegant boulevard theatres and opera houses, deserted by those audiences with the rise of the cinema and many of them converted, like the Dalston, into cinemas. Then further marginalized with the rise of TV and struggling along as a variety of marginal entertainment venues until at last closed completely, to be torn down amid the urban developments of the late twentieth century. So familiar is this story and so humble socially were the vast majority of these ventures that their disappearance has gone scarcely remarked by most theatre historians, and Corrieri's memorial to the Dalston is a rare and moving contribution to a reparation of this oversight. Moreover, his discussion is far from being purely elegiac, but is enlightening and even inspiring in its tracing of the physical and immaterial remains of this apparently obliterated structure, opening up fascinating perspectives on the often unconsidered layering of memory.

While I found this section on the Dalston particularly moving, the entire book operates along similar lines. The student of theatre can certainly find a good deal of objective and often surprising information about the subjects of the study here, but the real delight of the book is in how the author uses the story of the theatres, and in some cases his personal experience in visiting them, to create a series of illuminating and often totally unexpected associations these stories and these experiences evoke in a sensitive and very widely read observer. Physical impressions, wide-ranging literary and philosophical references, and historical minutiae are woven together in a kind of performative writing that both informs and delights as one moves along among its constantly shifting patterns of association. Each section engagingly presents its information, as one expects from a thoughtful and well-crafted essay, but it adds to this the pleasure of unexpected associations and an almost musical flow of discourse.

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