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Imagine a Review

In Praise of Sideways: Storytelling journeys of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group
edited by Adi Chawin and Richard Gough Aberystwyth: Performance
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potential damage that sewer repairs could cause to the tree's roots, threatening to cause it to fall on the house. On this, Cotter states that 'whether we protect it or cut it down, the future impact of that tree on our lives is both inevitable and unknowable' (27). This chronicle echoes some of the play's characters, such as Eva (the first to arrive at the crash scene) and Don Raúl (the officer of Green Spaces) and their perceptions on the potential future relationship between humans and plants: whether as a utopian state of harmonious co-existence, or as a vegetal-dominated world. Similarly, Aloï's chapter 'Vegetal mythologies: Potted plants and storymaking' offers a phenomenological account of

his own relationship with potted plants in his home, while at the same time devising a genealogy of the ethical, political and philosophical connotations of the presence of potted plants in artistic productions. As Aloï describes the interactions with his potted plants, stating that it's hard not to anthropomorphize them (46), we are reminded of Nora, the character in *Estado Vegetal* who shared a similar bond with her houseplants. However, in the case of Nora, this anthropomorphized bond radicalized to the point of willingly submitting herself to the plants' will.

I was pleased to see the book includes a contribution by Chilean artist Sibila Sotomayor from the collective LAS TESIS.

Her text, titled 'Feminist structures: Polyphonic networks', transits between poetry and political manifesto, articulating a meditation on the urgency and disruptive power of feminist and nonhuman epistemologies. If any, Sotomayor's text, along with Mandy-Suzanne Wong's 'Soledad: After *Estado Vegetal*' – a brilliant literary ramification on the play's character María Soledad – made me wish for the inclusion of more non-USA/European authors.

Nevertheless, *Estado Vegetal: Performance and plant-thinking* offers a rich multidisciplinary contribution to the field of critical plant studies and the ontological turn in arts and humanities.

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K F I R L A P I D - M A S H A L L



1. Imagine a review.

Write it.

Write a review you did not imagine.

Imagine a review and do not write it.¹

2. *In Praise of Sideways: Storytelling journeys of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group*, edited by Adi Chawin and Richard Gough, provides a thought-provoking and comprehensive account of the work by the Tel Aviv based Ruth Kanner Theatre Group (RKTG). For more than twenty-five years, RKTG has been known for creating pioneering work in the landscape of Israeli theatre, simultaneously universal and rooted in its locale, anchored in the Hebrew language and unravelling it through unique modes of storytelling.

The book is comprised of

seven sections, some focused on specific works, others organized around an idea, an attitude, a performance-making method. Evocative contributions by a collective of scholars, practitioners, designers, actors – many of whom are Israeli and have personally engaged with the work of RKTG – are carefully curated in captivating design. Aptly, the book presents an innovative approach to storytelling in an academic book.

3. Autumn 2014. I am standing in a bathroom stall at Tel Aviv University. Coming straight from military service to my master's programme in interdisciplinary arts, I make sure to arrive early

¹ Inspired by the experiment 'Imagine a Word' (90).

to Dr Daphna Ben-Shaul's class 'Theories and Criticism: Linguistic approaches.' I take off my uniform and army boots, change into civilian clothes and shove the discarded articles in my backpack. I enter these stalls a soldier, I exit them a student.

4. *In Praise of Sideways* is an object, material, a special artefact. As the book's pages move through my fingers, I feel an urge to play with each page. Going back and forth, my eyes land on a fragmented piece of script, an image, a quote by Kanner or Kafka, a design sketch, a stage plan – all placed within and in between the text. I embrace my reading as being 'all over the place', and I relax into it when being all over the place is praised by Kanner herself (373). Meanings are then assembled, discovered, retraced in fleeting meeting points. Intimations are imagined, invented, and memories are coincidentally conjured. The book is a multi-layered, rhizomatic creation, reactive to its reader: hold it differently, hold it sideways, hold it tomorrow, or when the current cycle of violence between Israel and Gaza subsides, and something else will be revealed.

5. In today's class, Dr Ben-Shaul exposes us to scenes from RKTG's *Discovering Elijah* (2001) – a work on the violence of war. We are confronted by a war machine. We see an Arab actor, Yousef 'Joe' Sweid, portraying the suffering of an Israeli soldier in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. We combat with fragments of text. I feel as if my backpack is about to be set on fire, as if a truth is about to be revealed, as if I am about to be

discovered, as if I stand before a burning bush and all I can do is to take off my shoes and submit to the spectacle.

6. RKTG's work *Tell Me Something* (2021) is described as involving a curation of an 'elusive object: speech itself' (106). It seems that *In Praise of Sideways* navigates a similar process of curation. It assembles forms of doing things with words, of conveying ideas through language: essays, reflections, diary entries, experiments, interviews, recorded and transcribed conversations, play texts, academic and philosophical compositions. A shapeshifter, the book echoes a plasticity with which RKTG approaches language.

7. This book also reassembles histories of a conflicted land. Travelling through RKTG's works, the book covers some of the most formative episodes of the Zionist enterprise – war, violence, political murder, oppression. One cannot but reflect on the devastating atrocities of the Israel–Gaza war following the events on 7 October 2023, resounding, yet again, the same issues that the group ceaselessly addresses: violence, community, disruption, grief, vengeance and justice; that, through observing the role, function, failure, power and responsibility of language (the Hebrew language in particular) and theatre.

8. I am confronted with making sense of why it is meaningful to put such ephemeral objects – the performances of RKTG – into words. While the ephemerality of the works cannot be captured or duplicated, the book's ekphrastic writing provides evidence of the

work, with many texts making visible the invisible processes leading up to it. Such writing also acknowledges the power language holds over culture, echoing the intricate relationship of RKTG with the written word. A tension is heightened in the provocative series of experiments entitled 'Doing Things with Words' presented throughout the book. These experiments move backwards and forwards through ekphrastic thinking, morphing movement to text to performance to transcription to description to listening to listing to ponderance until it collapses altogether. To review this object – a book about the work of RKTG, an echo of an echo of an echo – is to experiment with the limits of the ekphrastic expression.

9. Scholars and performance practitioners interested in innovative approaches to theatre-making – including storytelling, verbatim and community-engaged theatre – will find this book a treasure trove. You might also, on occasion, be left heartbroken.

10. I do not remember what happened when I left the classroom that day; but the uniform did not burn, and the cycle of putting them on and taking them off continued for two more years, until it was too painful, too dissociating, to wear them. Change takes time, and it often, like the works of RKTG – like this book – works sideways.