

BOOK REVIEWS

***Performing Queer Modernism.* By Penny Farfan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 154 pp.**

Reviewed by Stephen Low

In *Performing Queer Modernism*, Penny Farfan charts how queerness was an essential feature of the work of influential modernists and, consequently, was instrumental to the emergence and development of modernist performance. To establish this relationship between queerness and modernist performance, Farfan appeals to close analyses of dramatic texts and accounts of dance performances from the modernist era. She also situates these plays and performances alongside other works of art by the artists considered, artistic responses to the artists and performances examined, criticism of the works analyzed, and contemporary scholarship. Her book provides insight into how queerness helps us better understand modernist art more broadly, and modernist performance specifically.

For Farfan, the productive capacity of “queer” stems from its adjectival power to describe that which disturbs normative regimes. Farfan also employs queer as “a verb that refers to the action or process of unsettling established cultural forms and modes of reception as they intersect with sexual norms and themes” (3). She aligns this conception of queerness with modernist performance when she argues: “if queerness aligned with modernist aesthetics as traditionally understood in terms of formal difficulty and experiment, it was not simply coincident with and analogous to modernism, but also created it” (3).

The opening chapter, “[T]his feverish, jealous attachment of Paula’s for Ellean’: Homosocial Desire and the Production of Queer Modernism,” offers an analysis of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, by Arthur Wing Pinero, that incorporates Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s distinction between the homosocial and the homosexual. This chapter argues that “representations of homosociality on the modern stage could open up space for queer dynamics and desires, both among the characters themselves, and between actors/characters and spectators” (12). Farfan charts how Pinero’s play subverts the narratives that often attend the conventional figure of the “fallen woman” by displacing Paula Tanqueray’s need for attention and redemption from her husband to his daughter, Ellean, who has just returned home from a convent. In so doing, she argues that Paula’s hysterical attachment to Ellean, which is depicted as having the potential to redeem the “fallen woman” through the “love of a good woman,” dramatizes a queer homosocial desire.

In the second chapter, “Fairy of Light’: Performance Ghosting and the Queer Uncanny,” Farfan argues that Loie Fuller’s technologically experimental skirt-dance, *Fire Dance*, was exemplary of queer performance, both in its aesthetic and also in the ways the performance correlates to Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*. The use of modern lighting technology that captured the voluminous fabric of her large skirts in darkened auditoriums made Fuller appear fire-like and ghostly, making her dance uncanny. Farfan aligns Freud’s uncanny with queerness in the sense that both embrace indeterminacy and the unsettling of binaries. Farfan suggest that, by staging Salome’s dance for Herod in her *Fire Dances*, Fuller “ghosts” Wilde’s popular adaptation of the biblical story performed in Paris two years prior, which links her and her performance to Wilde’s non-normative sexuality. Farfan also notes that Fuller, like Wilde, was known to be a homosexual, and her body, which was described as similar to Wilde’s, was queerly masculine. Farfan argues that “*Fire Dance* thus superimposed the image of the

queer feminist heretic onto the traces of the erased homosexual martyr in a layering of uncanny doubles” (35).

“[W]ithout the assistance of any girls’: Queer Sex and the Shock of the New,” the third chapter, provides an analysis of Nijinsky’s *Afternoon of a Faun* to illustrate how he performed queer male sexuality that was neither masculine nor feminine, human nor animal, heterosexual nor homosexual. Farfan states: “the narrative structure of *Afternoon of a Faun* intersected with the ballet’s innovative choreographic style to foreground a dissident male sexuality that disrupted conventional expectations of heterosexual narrative resolution and in doing so contributed to the emergence of new sexual identities and queer spectatorship” (44). She also notes Nijinsky’s disinterest in the female nymphs who appear in his ballet. In contrast to his disinterest in the nymphs, his interest in the scarf left behind by one of the nymphs constitutes an act of autoeroticism. This refusal of heterosexuality is the dominant queer choreographic narrative feature that eschews ballet’s convention to conclude their narratives with heterosexual pairings. This, combined with Nijinsky’s flattened two-dimensional choreographic style—which further queered both ballet and modern dance conventions—establishes this work for Farfan as exemplary of a queer modern aesthetic.

In the fourth chapter, “I think very few people are completely normal deep down in their private lives’: Popular Plato, Queer Heterosexuality, Comic Form,” Farfan charts the influence of Plato’s *Symposium*, specifically the articulation of androgyny, on Noel Coward’s *Private Lives*. Farfan “considers *Private Lives* as another such ‘ghost’ bringing early twentieth-century uses of Plato to advance thinking about queer sexualities into open view on the popular comic stage” (58). Specifically, Farfan argues that Amanda and Elyot, the protagonists, are representative of the androgynous halves of a divided whole who long to be reunited, as described in Aristophanes’ origin story of heterosexual love. Farfan positions her analysis in this chapter as exemplary of how queer sexualities were presented, and commercially successful, in mainstream theatre in the English-speaking world.

Farfan’s last chapter, “What are you trying to say?’—‘I’m saying it’: Queer Performativity in and across Time,” argues that two plays by Djuna Barnes, *To the Dogs* and *The Dove*, which were often thought to be failures at the time of their writing, nevertheless resonate with subsequent non-playgoing audiences (including critics and theorists), and so “continue to ‘perform’ in the present moment” (69). Farfan claims the plays “can both be understood as metatheatrical modernist parodies that self-reflexively replay dominant representational conventions in order to stage queer feminist critiques of representation” (75). For example, in *To the Dogs*, the protagonist, Helena, sits with her back to the audience throughout the play, which, as Farfan argues, is a refusal of the mastering, male gaze. Barnes also eschews conventions of dramatic action, which further queers this work. Farfan argues that in *The Doves*, Barnes incorporates a canonical painting to critique compulsory heterosexuality and normative gender power dynamics, thus also challenging heteropatriarchal modes of representation.

In *Performing Queer Modernism*, Farfan provides thorough research and astute analyses to illustrate how queerness can help us better understand modernist performance. Farfan’s incorporation of critical responses, reviews, and artwork to frame and support her analyses is rigorous almost to a fault; Farfan’s own voice can be lost under the weight of her citations. Regardless, not only would her book be a useful addition to any syllabus on queer performance or modernist art, it should be held up as a strong example of performance and theatre studies scholarship.