

2019

Genealogies of Queerness on the Modernist Stage: But, Where's the Performance?

Joseph Cermatori
Skidmore College, jcermato@skidmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Cermatori, Joseph (2019) "Genealogies of Queerness on the Modernist Stage: But, Where's the Performance?," *Criticism*: Vol. 61 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol61/iss3/8>

Genealogies of Queerness on the Modernist Stage: But, Where's the Performance?
Penny Farfan. *Performing Queer Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

In this slender, frequently handy volume, Penny Farfan charts notable instances of performance from 1890 to 1930 to argue that queerness, broadly construed, was a central, animating force to the broader modernist ethos of the period. At the same time, she also demonstrates that modernist performance helped disseminate queer ideas of gender and sexuality among its audiences, acting as a form of discourse in Foucault's sense.

In under ninety pages, excluding endnotes, Farfan looks at a wide range of materials, including commercial stage plays by Arthur Wing Pinero and Noël Coward, landmark instances of modern dance by Loie Fuller and Vaslav Nijinsky, and less mainstream playwriting by Djuna Barnes. She builds on recent scholarship by Scott Herring, Heather Love, and Nick Salvato, among others, who have sought to uncover queer genealogies of modernist literature and drama. Farfan's desire to focus on performance, however, sets her apart from most of these forerunners, with the exception of Salvato, whose *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance* (Yale, 2010) receives passing mention in a pair of footnotes. Still others have trained a more formalist or conceptual lens onto the relationship between queerness and modern aesthetics—for example, Leo Bersani in his essay "Is There a Gay Art?" and his writings on Proust, Genet, Henry James, and so on. By contrast, Farfan's work is more empirically motivated. She draws on eyewitness testimonies, critical reportage, archival documents, and a substantial, though sometimes unwieldy, amount of secondary criticism.

Full of astute observation, *Performing Queer Modernism* is most innovative in its sections on dance. In a chapter on Loie Fuller's 1897 *Fire Dance*, for example, Farfan attends to Fuller's conspicuous butchness, her unusual upper-body strength, her noted resemblance to Oscar Wilde, her tortoise-shell spectacles, and her "burned-out eyes," damaged by overexposure to phosphorescent lights (37). In this analysis, Fuller's queerness results not so much from her costumes' art nouveau extravagance, replete with "feminized natural themes, sensuous flowing lines, and shimmering colors" (36), but rather from her uncanny ability to inhabit certain liminal spaces, between "the homely and the frightening, the abstract and the real, masculine and feminine, past and present, onstage and offstage" (38). The chapter admirably incorporates Fuller into a larger context of modern Salomes (e.g. Wilde, Max Reinhardt, Richard Strauss, Maud Allan), noting Fuller's special appeal to female and gay male spectators.

Similarly, in her chapter on Nijinsky and *Afternoon of a Faun* (1912), Farfan concentrates on the ballet's final image, in which the titular faun gradually lowers himself onto a scarf he has seized from a fleeing nymph. For other critics, this movement has implied both sexual fetishism and a preference for masturbation over sexual intercourse. Farfan reads it instead, alongside the famous *bas-relief*-style flatness of Nijinsky's choreography, as throwing "autonomous, nonreproductive male sexuality into relief on the modernist stage" (48). Surveying the erotics of Nijinsky's face, eyes, body, and rumored bisexuality, she shows that Nijinsky's performances helped fuel the spread of dissident sexualities in the time of modernism.

These analyses are extensively supported and wonderfully persuasive. The same is true for the chapters on drama, which are also illuminating, though they noticeably deal less with embodied performance in the usual sense. Instead, Farfan borrows W. B. Worthen's notion of "dramatic performativity" (23) to illuminate the ways dramatic texts can enact their own performative departures from heteronormative narrative conventions. As a result, the studies of Pinero, Coward, and Barnes's plays concentrate more on dramaturgy than on how these works transpired physically on the stage. At times Farfan does reconstruct aspects of the plays' onstage lives, though these details are not always foregrounded. For example, with Mrs. Patrick Campbell playing the role of Paula Tanqueray in Pinero's 1893 society drama *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, she touches on a few elements of staging as they were recorded in artist sketches and publicity photographs, noting Campbell's ineffable "aura of fin-de-siècle decadence" (19). She has less to say, however, about how this decadent aura was effected in Campbell's onstage work or offstage demeanor.

The book's erudite, Platonist take on Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1930) meets a similar obstacle. The chapter impressively brings together popular British comedy, modernist scholarship, and philosophical texts on androgyny, linking Coward's antagonists Amanda and Elyot to a refusal of heterosexual social reproduction. It also situates Coward within a richly queer literary context including Virginia Woolf, the Bloomsbury Group, and Radclyffe Hall. Nevertheless, Farfan says relatively little about *Private Lives* in performance, modernist or otherwise. She singles out briefly "Anne Bogart's 1998 production of *Private Lives*'s characters as 'coded performers of homosexuality'" but says nothing more on the subject (68). Of the original actors, she makes only a fleeting reference to Coward's reputed personal and dramaturgical "effeminacy" (67).

Farfan's final chapter — and, at just under ten typewritten pages, her shortest as well — explores metatheatrical parody in Barnes's plays, explaining how the plays respond critically to "dominant representational conventions" (75), but here again, Farfan's interest is in queer performativity rather than queer performance. She does not spend much time with how these plays functioned (or might function) onstage. Admittedly, *To the Dogs* (1923) was not produced during Barnes's lifetime and *The Dove* (1923) was staged only twice, attracting scant attention. The oblivion still surrounding these works is itself a sign of their refusal of normative conventions, and this oblivion in turn poses important methodological challenges to any performance historian who takes them up. Farfan's answer is to emphasize audience reception: she quotes a few, baffled critical reactions to *The Dove*'s one New York performance. Barnes's true audience, Farfan claims, is the robust feminist and queer readership within the academy that returns to these plays in a pedagogical and research context year after year.

It may seem too literal a question, or one that risks reifying an unfortunate text-performance binary, but is it wrong to wish for more attention to performances in a book entitled *Performing Queer Modernism*? Modernist literature can be said, in J. L. Austin's terms, to witness a general shift away from the constative mode of description toward a heightened textual performativity, and so Farfan's focus on the performativity of dramatic texts is by no means unwarranted or undesirable. But one comes away from these chapters

wanting to know more about the queer functions of material bodies and performers in the physical theater, including genders, costumes, makeup, gestures, attitudes, lights, sounds, stage props, tableaux, pacing, proximities, in/visibilities, and so forth. These are not the book's primary concerns, and its inquiry is delimited by the ephemerality of performance. Still, its brevity sometimes forecloses a fuller and more holistic analysis.

Last, it bears observing that *Performing Queer Modernism's* arguments sometimes disappear beneath a mass of citations, as in this short passage from its first chapter, where, sentence by sentence, Farfan's own ideas are repeatedly deferred while others' are mentioned: "Cecil Davies maintains that. . . . As Quigley points out, however, As noted previously, Sedgwick has observed. . . . Elin Diamond has argued that," and then, just a few lines down, "George Bernard Shaw, for example, saw. . . . Similarly, a reviewer in *The Pall Mall Gazette* exclaimed. . . . More recently, Alexander Leggatt has remarked . . . while Judith Fisher has complained. . ." and so on (21–23). Moments like these hamper the book's forcefulness and make it seem more like a cento or compendium, causing Farfan's original insights to fall behind her carefully compiled research. If the book had more space to unfold its own explorations and argument, such heavily citational passages would pose only a stylistic or rhetorical problem for the reader.

Still, Farfan should be praised for advancing discussions of queer modernism, and for insisting on the importance of performance to contemporary modernist studies. Notwithstanding its various shortcomings, *Performing Queer Modernism* will prove a valuable reference to scholars of queerness, theater, performance, and the historical avant-gardes for the foreseeable future.