Review of 'The Dramaturgy of Space'
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Ramón Griffero, the Chilean theatre director and playwright, is known for a body of works that demonstrate political resistance, particularly to the Pinochet dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s. Whist Griffero’s work might usually attract attention because of its politics, his book *The Dramaturgy of Space* (translated by Adam Versényi) offers a discussion of approaches to making work through an exploration of his aesthetics of space. Griffero regards the use of space in performance making as being of equal (or more) significance to the text, which is often privileged in Euro-American theatre. The concept of the dramaturgy of space is described as a ‘spatial construction for dramatic writing’ (p. 3) and a new way of thinking about the theatre as a ‘format for the construction of scenic languages and [...] authorship’ (p. 2). The principles and exercises described in this book make it a manual of sorts for making work, of building the foundations of a performance from spatially focused exercises. It is possible to use these exercises in isolation although, in doing so, the context and philosophical perspectives might be lost. Nevertheless, it is possible to see that the activities described by Griffero could be used effectively and productively as part of a devising, rehearsal, or workshop process.

The book is divided into four chapters, the first of which is quite philosophical in tone which, although interesting, would be better used as a way of clearly explaining the author’s view of space as a central dramaturgical consideration. Most interesting in this first chapter is Griffero’s discussion of the rectangle as a format in the age of social rectangularization. Arguing that rectangles are the global visual format (he cites televisions, pictures, fields, flags, and stages as examples amongst many others), Griffero suggests that the rectangle works in opposition to more natural perspectives of the world as circular. Reading Griffero’s words, it strikes me that the most common use of a rectangle today is in the online worlds of Zoom and Teams, where we are individually framed in our own virtual rectangles. Given the focus of the book on live performance, this digital dimension of the rectangle’s global dominance is not discussed but is perhaps an interesting point of reflection for theatre makers who now operate in online or hybrid capacities. It is also interesting to consider how performance makers working predominantly with space, such as dancers, choreographers, and physical theatre companies might embrace online working practices, whether through necessity or innovation.

The following three chapters are used by Griffero to unpack his concepts around using space as a central dramaturgical feature and, at its most useful, the book offers some examples from his theatre practice (discussed in detail in chapter four) and practical exercises which can be undertaken in the studio. As written descriptions of practical activities, the exercises are open to interpretation which could present a problem to anyone trying to understand Griffero’s way of working. However, all these activities are accompanied by short, filmed examples which are easily accessed when reading the Kindle edition. Whether this would be such a smooth experience, jumping between printed copy and electronic device, I am uncertain. Nevertheless, the film illustrations are a genuine insight into Griffero’s practice and would be highly beneficial to anyone wishing to experiment practically with his ideas.

*The Dramaturgy of Space* was originally published Chile in 2011 although this first English translation (2022) remains relevant, mainly because Griffero is discussing ideas that
transcend time. It is partly a philosophical reflection on space and our relationship with it, partly a manifesto for the potential of theatre to change and transform, and partly an exegesis on how Griffero’s work has been built around fundamental principles of space.

This book is recommended for anyone wishing to explore new perspectives of space, particularly without privileging text and the spoken word. It is not an academic discussion of space in performance; anyone interested in this is advised to look at the work of Gay MacAuley, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Kim Solga amongst others. Griffero’s book, however, provides an important perspective from the Global South that should be part of every discourse and debate in the study and practice of theatre and performance.