

Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance. Cultural Memory in the Present.

By **Freddi Rokem**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, Pb. xii + 227; £18.53/\$20,76 Pb;
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Part one of Rokem's book takes the reader on an explorative journey to investigate four encounters of philosophy and theatre on their constant search for each other, missing half. 'Just as Aristophanes' tale about Eros does' (p. 17).

Rokem's first analysis is devoted to Plato's *Symposium* where Socrates meets two thespians, Agathon and Aristophanes, to eulogize Eros. The competition will show that the philosopher is the better dramatist, because his thespian fellows can only write serious tragedies *or* ironic comedies, whereas Socrates is able to unmask the truth of both. Which is not merely proven by the arguments he presents but just as well through the 'thespian modes of expression' and 'theatrical practices' Plato uses when writing the *Symposium*. Rokem emphasizes the significance of this statement for the current debate on how art could be considered a form of research and philosophy a science with 'intricate performative strategies' (p. 5), in order to match the Socratic idea of philosophy.

The second analysis is devoted to a thinking thespian who almost 'invaded' the territory usually assigned to philosophical thinking: Shakespeare's Hamlet. In this protagonist we find an internalization of the quarrel between philosophy and theatre within a fragmented self that desires to be both 'a philosopher, and a thespian, in one person' (p. 8). But like in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Hamlet's tragedy too is one of a failed philosopher. His individual drama begins with not knowing 'who is there' and who he is.

The third encounter involves the reader into an uncanny matter that Rokem praiseworthily started to research: The Nietzsche-Strindberg correspondence, where each of them stages himself at the borderline of reason, right there where understanding matches madness and philosophy becomes an expression of insanity. In this case it is the philosopher who loses his mind and becomes a thespian himself, by signing his letters in the name of obscure characters like 'Caesar' or 'Der Gekreuzigte', a fact that deeply irritated Strindberg, who insisted in a stricter boundary between staging oneself in the "fictional" and the "real" world.

The fourth encounter deals with the reception of Kafka's text 'The Next Village' by two Jews who met in exile—Bertold Brecht and Walter Benjamin. Kafka's story of a rider who will most probably never reach 'the next village' expressed perfectly 'the state of exile that they were subjected to at the time' (p. 9). It triggered their attempt 'to cross the border between the two

discursive practices by theatricalizing philosophical thinking' (p. 9) and 'exploring the performative dimension of philosophical thinking' (p. 10).

These attempts are discussed in the second part of the book. Street accidents, catastrophic constellations, the messianic promise, all these tropes are now constructed to thought-images (Denkbilder) pointing to a theatre and philosophy to come. Rokem's book is a beautiful index for this promise.

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