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Postmodern Theater & the Void (Conceptions)

William S. Haney II

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Different symbolic traditions have different ways of describing the shift of awareness toward sacred events. While not conforming to familiar states of phenomenality, this shift of awareness corresponds to Turner's liminal phase, Artaud's metaphysical embodiment, Grotowski's 'translumination,' Brook's 'holy theater,' and Barba's 'transcendent' theater - all of which are linked to the Advaitan taste of a void of conceptions. This book argues that, by allowing to come what Derrida calls the unsayable, the theater of Tom Stoppard, David Henry Hwang, Caryl Churchill, Sam Shepard, Derek Walcott and Girish Karnad induces characters and spectators to deconstruct habitual patterns of perception, attenuate the content of consciousness, and taste the void of conceptions. As the nine plays discussed in this book suggest, the internal observer lies behind all cultural constructs as a silent beyond-ness, and immanently within knowledge as its generative condition of unknowingness. The unsayable (and the language used to convey it) that Derrida finds in literature has clear affinities with the Brahman-Atman of Advaita Vedanta. Derridean deconstruction contains as a subtext the structure of consciousness that it both veils with the undecidable trappings of the mind, and allows to come as an unsayable secret through a play of difference. Although Derrida views theater and the text as mutually deconstructing, and claims that presence or unity 'has always already begun to represent itself,' the six playwrights discussed here show that cultural performance indeed points through its universally ambiguous and symbolic types toward a trans-verbal, trans-cultural wholeness.

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