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Recension

Book Review

Striking Performances: Performing Strikes

by Kirk W. FUOSS, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997, 203 p., ISBN 0-87805-913-X (cloth) and ISBN 0-87805-914-8 (pbk.).

Readers who come to this book from a labour relations or labour history orientation hoping to find a book focused on the use of theater as an element of labour conflict will be by and large disappointed. While perhaps a third of the work presents a rather straightforward and richly detailed account of dramatic presentations during two important labour events of the Depression era, the author's purpose is primarily theoretical. The abstract and theoretical nature of the author's concerns is illustrated even in the narrative historical sections of the book where categorical and analytical issues dominate.

Fuoss situates himself in a community of what he labels "performance studies scholars" and much of the book is an academic exercise where various theories are conjured up and affirmed or dismissed. Long pages of prose like the following guarantees the book a specialized audience: "Moreover, while new historicists have popularized the culture-performance dialectic, they have not provided an accompanying analytical framework for particularizing the performance contestation it entails." or "In addition to the macroscopic focus and the use of categories such as escape and engagement, some studies that explore the interface of cultural performance and organized labor in Depression era America engage in a cultural slippage, conflating cultural performances *in* strikes and representa-

tions *of* strikes in cultural performances."

With this understood, the book does contain a fair amount of interesting material. The author's choice for the two central examples of "striking performances" include the well-known Flint autoworkers' sit-down strike and the less known but very interesting unemployed activists' occupation of the New Jersey legislature earlier in the same year of 1936. The focus on the theatrical productions of strikers and unemployed is complimented by a consideration of both events as political theater of a high order. Both occupations took on the aspect of proletarian morality plays staged for a public audience.

One of the interesting aspects of the author's approach of analyzing demonstrations or strikes from the perspective of drama is a realization of the profusion of theatrical metaphors that are typically employed to characterize or discredit labour struggles in the mainstream journalistic media. Strikes are "staged"; one sit-down is a "rehearsal" for another; union leaders are performers or "spellbinders". Even on the part of their organizers, the consciousness of strikes, occupations or demonstrations as public theater was a characteristic of both the upheavals of the 1930's and the 1960's.

The book is enriched with some eighteen photos, all from Flint. They

effectively reinforce the perception of the occupation of the auto plant as an act of public theater. Indeed, the finest parts of the book deal with the struggle of the workers and their allies "to control the meaning and the memory of the social drama." This is a rich and meaty subject, but Fuoss' treatment is oddly a-historical. The two events are described and analyzed without context. There is no discussion of where the strong cultural and artistic aspects of the two events originated. The connection between leftist intellectuals (communist in Flint and socialist in New Jersey) and the workers and unemployed is barely alluded to, yet it is critical for understanding the ideology behind the performances and the theatrical forms that were used.

The book discusses the way that political theater is used to define and articulate the borders of community. Despite a long discussion of the issue, however, there is remarkably little consideration of social class or ideology and its impact on the forms and vocabulary of performance. Again, the failure to look at the rich tradition of agit-prop and the conscious use of culture by left-wing union organizers limits the discus-

sion and reinforces its abstract and a-historical character.

The stated thesis of the book is that all performance is "inherently" political, necessarily a site of confrontation wherein communities with different and often competing interests vie with one another. Certainly, Fuoss chose for his central examples two events which seem to shout a confirmation of his thesis. Perhaps feeling a bit guilty about loading the dice so heavily, at the end of the book he applies his formidable analytic framework to the theatrics surrounding sorority rush at his alma mater. Finding the same insider/outsider dynamic operating among the student Greeks as among the sit-down strikers/unemployed demonstrators, he asserts that "the agonistic analytical framework... has broader applications." Somehow, I find that dismaying.

In summation, this is a difficult work on an interesting subject. While the book may be of interest to "performance studies scholars", labour historians or labour relations specialists will probably judge that the effort required outweighs the return on the investment.

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