

# Review: Body Knowledge Performance, Intermediality, and American Entertainment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century, by Mary Simonson

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*Body Knowledge: Performance, Intermediality, and American Entertainment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* by Mary Simonson. 2013. New York: Oxford UP. 304 pp, 8 music examples, 21 b&w images. \$99.00 hardcover, \$29.95 paperback.

*Rosamaria Kostic Cisneros, Coventry University*

In this book, Mary Simonson examines the American entertainment in the early 1900's, a time of great transformation in which boundaries were challenged and redefined. Her main tool in this examination is "intermediality," a notion which is traditionally found in discussions relevant to media. Simonson argues that intermediality allows one to cast a new look into the past which brings to light things that might have been overlooked. She assists the reader in exploring the interconnectedness between various disciplines, and ultimately enriches the current discourse on performance and musicological values and methodologies. The author highlights that intermediality has often been used to describe new media and postmodernism and in this book she sets out to prove how intermediality lends itself to examining early twentieth-century performances. Simonson's viewpoint offers the reader a bird's eye view on the performers' work in America at the turn of the twentieth century.

Simonson argues that intermediality is a way to understand the relationship between two mediums, whether those are dance and cinema, music and writing, or the performing arts and society. She claims that dance artists reflected values and trends of the time and re-examines the period by investigating the female artists working on various stages and platforms. By using the concept of intermediality to frame the turn of the twentieth-century, the settings are transformed and each chapter is a unique account and a fresh approach to discuss the period. The chapters do not follow a chronological progression but do follow a logical one. Whether it is the Salome dancers of chapter one, the Hellenist subject matter of American pageants in chapter two, or Isadora Duncan and Anna Pavlova being subjected to the gaze of the 'other,' the book offers an intelligent, well-constructed perspective on the subject matter. Simonson's lively accounts bring the past to life and although at first glance the six chapters appear to be content-wise a bit disconnected, there is a flow to the book that in its entirety is a dance of intermediality.

The theme of intermediality emerges in every chapter, more obvious in some than others. As we turn the century Simonson guides us through the times showing us how

intermediality has taken on different shapes and styles. The interrelationship between dance and various mediums is a fresh way to reflect on the period but sometimes Simonson's numerous, vivid descriptions can force the reader to lose perspective on the hypothesis. Her imaginative reconstructions are thorough but an edit might have been helpful with chapter four, which examines Rita Sacchetto's "dancing pictures." There are lovely descriptive passages which frame Sacchetto's work and offer numerous accounts of how her work and its connections between Botticelli or music of the era, but the various descriptive critiques from Sacchetto's contemporaries dim Simonson's own voice. Yet, this attention to detail and Simonson's commitment to bringing the past to life using academic scholarship from the past or reviews from the period are among the strengths of the book. In chapter three "Dancing Music: Isadora Duncan and Wagnerism in the American Imagination," one is transported to an enchanted land not only because of the excitement of the content but also through the way in which Simonson analyzes Duncan's work and her relationship to Wagner's music. There is a nice balance in the chapter between describing audience members in attendance, what the critics thought about Duncan's concerts, and how she "re-wrote" Wagner's work. Simonson comments on how Duncan's work is an entry point to reflect on the beliefs and the perceptions of the American audiences.

In summary, *Body Knowledge Performance, Intermediality, and American Entertainment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* by Mary Simonson is a fantastic book. She connects the female body and the performers in America during the turn of the twentieth-century, arguing how those artists and their approach to working during that period were in fact intermedial in nature. The book is not for the young dance learner or the novice. It may feel a bit heavy and perhaps full of jargon. Given its intermedial essence, any graduate or professional dance, film and media student or even Opera historian might enjoy the read. The author pulls in various elements to highlight intermediality, thus making her writing a new form of intermediality.

## Biography

Rosamaria Kostic Cisneros is a Dance Historian and Critic, Roma Scholar, Flamenco Historian and Peace Activist who graduated from the UW-Madison Dance Program and went on to complete her Master's in Dance History and Criticism from UNM-Albuquerque. Rosamaria is a professional dancer, choreographer, and qualified teacher, who has lived and danced in various parts of the world and collaborated with many Flamenco greats and other leaders in the Dance field. She has taught throughout Europe and the US at places like UW-Madison, UIUC, Boston Conservatory, Brown University and at various other places in Germany, Spain, and Turkey. She is a dance

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writer who makes regular contributions to *Bachtrack Magazine* and *Flamenco News* while also dancing with Protein Dance Company. She currently works at Coventry University's Centre for Dance Research on two EU-Funded Projects, and is the co-organiser of two festivals at Coventry University: Flamenko Coventry 2014 and Romani Week 2015. Rosamaria also works closely with the University of Barcelona's CREA Research Centre and the Roma Women's Association Drom Kotar Mestipen.