

PREFACE

Camera Obscura

I started writing this book alone, mostly at night, staring at a computer screen in a darkened room during the global lockdown of 2020–2021. It took me a while to realize that it was a really a book about another camera obscura: theater. All my life, I have loved “going to the theater”—which is to say the simple, childlike experience of sitting in the dark and staring at some brightly lit stage or spectacle where people pretend to be something they are not—almost irrespective of whatever play I happen to be watching. Yet it took the political and economic prohibition of that particular dark room called “the theater” during the COVID-19 pandemic to make me want to write about it for the first time. To be more precise, this book is about the—mutually antagonistic but also, I shall argue, mutually constitutive—relationship between theory and theater, or, better, between the two rival forms of political vision or seeing (*thea*) they represent. If the global pandemic produced the first closure of London theaters since the Blitz of 1940 in the name of a very real state of emergency, for instance, it paradoxically also presided over something close to the mass theatricalization of everyday life. For Antonin Artaud, theater should famously be like a plague, but here was a plague that was like a theater: our

freedom of movement was “blocked” (in both the normal and the theatrical sense of the word), our gestures were choreographed (wash your hands, keep a safe distance) and everyone was, of course, compelled to wear masks. In the book that follows, I seek to think through the simultaneously suspect, disavowed, prohibited, desired and privileged place of “theater” within our modern political imaginary. What if everything we have learned to call “political theory,” the allegedly rational, disinterested, view from nowhere that is supposedly the opposite of theatrical spectatorship, is itself a form of theater?

To be honest, though, I should confess that my own personal theater, like every theater, was also a deeply communal experience because one of the few pleasures of the almost total isolation of lockdown was the renewed sense of solidarity it brought with many other friends and comrades sitting out there, somewhere, in their own dark rooms around the world staring at their screens. So, I want to thank the many people who contributed in large ways or small to the work presented here and whose (real or virtual) presence have made it a better book: Ian Almond; Bernard Beatty, Andrew Benjamin; Agata Bielik-Robson; Brian Black; Ward Blanton; Peter Boxall; Mladen Dolar; Michael Dillon; Ziad Elmarsafy; Charlie Gere; Niall Gildea; Michael Greaney; Montserrat Herrero; Peter Klepec, Christiane Mossin; Boštjan Nedoh; Carl Raschke; John Schad; Mike Shapiro; Yvonne Sherwood; Elettra Stimilli, and Miguel Vatter. In particular, I want to thank Antonio Cerella for his personal and intellectual friendship over the years. Finally, I must thank (real and virtual) audiences at the following institutions for their generous feedback on my work in progress before, during, and after the pandemic: Columbia Global Centre, Paris; Copenhagen Business School; University of Denver; University of Rome La Sapienza; University of Ljubljana; University of Newcastle;

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In addition, I am reproducing some material that has been published before in different forms: "In the Sovereign Machine: Sovereignty, Governmentality, Automaticity." *Journal for Cultural Research* 22, no. 3 (2018): 209–23; "Za zaveso: od Hobbesa do Deleuza," *Problemi*, 9–10 (2021): 5–28; and "In the Antechamber of Power: Sovereign Divisibility from Schiller to Schmitt," *Political Theology* 24, no. 1 (2023): 98–114. I am grateful to Taylor and Francis for permission to include my work here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/>.

Finally, and as always, my love and gratitude go to my wife, Abir, and our daughter, Aya, for keeping me company in the dark.

