Theatre and Mind is published in the “Theatre&” series which promises to make the complex ideas of philosophical and theatrical theory available to the general reader and the beginning student. McConachie’s book does precisely that: it is possible to read it in one sitting and not be bewildered or baffled by incomprehensible jargon even if one had no knowledge of the advances in cognitive studies and of how they are being applied to the theater. For those that want more detailed information, McConachie provides a manageable bibliography, which of course includes his in-depth study of spectating from a cognitive standpoint, Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre.

The field of cognitive studies is relatively new but has already become fully interdisciplinary, going through at least two major phases; F. Elizabeth Hart identifies these as the Artificial Intelligence phase, where the working of the mind was likened to a computer, and the more recent evolutionary attitude which uses the “more organic metaphor of the embodiment of mind” (315). McConachie aligns himself with the evolutionary cognitive scientists and emphasizes the fact that body and mind are interrelated and that the one cannot perform without the other. His knowledgeability and fluid articulation of basic ideas readily convince his reader that cognitive science has much to offer theater and performance studies; this relatively new field of research and knowledge has been applied to different aspects of literary studies, particularly fiction, but theater and performance studies have been slower to pick up on the new approach—and when this has been done, Shakespeare seems to be the main focus, as in Amy Cook’s Shakespearean Neuroplay: Reinvigorating the Study of Dramatic Texts and Performance through Cognitive Science. McConachie blames semiotics for the belated application of the advances of cognitive science by theater theorists to the field of spectating; he argues that semioticians “unscientifically assume that spectators are primarily engaged in trying to understand the symbolic meanings of a theatrical performance” (57). Prior to this provoking affirmation, McConachie rigorously explains the scientific reasons for the dismissal of the Cartesian duality of body and mind that has dominated the thinking of the Western world for many centuries. The brain is embodied since it is embedded in the body, and we can do nothing, feel nothing, and understand nothing unless the neurons in our brain have made the necessary connections which depend on connections that have been made in the past prompted by our experiences and by the cultural, social, and physical evolution of our species. He also...
takes poststructuralism to task for rejecting evolution and biology and for clinging to a belief in relativism and so refusing to accept scientific breakthroughs which “challenge their assumptions about what theatre is and how it works” (6).

In this volume, McConachie opens up new ways of looking at theater—what it is and how it works—from the point of view of actor and audience and, most significantly, as a complex game that only human beings, of all mammals, have evolved sufficiently to play. It is to this aspect of play that he devotes the first section, in which he clarifies basic concepts of cognitive science, arguing that hominid play led to the development of neo-cortical brains which eventually allowed for survival, the flourishing of the species and the evolution into *homo sapiens*, through the repetition and innovative elaboration of patterns of behavior. Such group play prepared the way for performance and acting, and for pleasure in spectating. It also facilitated the evolution of the mirror neurons which make empathy and so sociability accessible to us through what Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner have termed cognitive blending.

The next section allows us to glimpse to what extent the new knowledge offered by cognitive science can change long established misconceptions on how the actor plies her trade. The traditional duality in programs of actor training, the mental and the physical approaches, which are best known as Method Acting and Physical Theater, no longer hold once we accept that the mind/brain is embedded in the body and that they cannot be separated. McConachie affirms that both Konstantin Stanislavski and Jacques Lecoq understood the relationship between body and mind but were betrayed by language into conventional dualism when expressing their ideas; for example, both recognized that actors had to know how to use their hands on stage. The importance of gesture to the transmission of meaning has now been demonstrated by neuroscientists and a cognitive approach to actor training incorporates gesture into all the phases of an actor’s preparation for a role: initial training, improvisation, rehearsal, and performance. Wooden acting can be corrected by understanding proprioception, perception, gesture, and emotion and by committing to long-term memory actions and feelings that are expressed unconsciously in everyday life.

The last section deals with spectating and easily dismantles Coleridge’s often quoted words on the audience’s suspension of disbelief and need of poetic faith when in the theater. Cognitive studies has shown that the human being is capable of blending or integrating various realities or concepts, and that the spectator, although perfectly aware that she is viewing an individual who is playing a role, unconsciously integrates the two and finds pleasure in the process of blending and the empathy that ensues. In order to clarify his arguments, McConachie uses examples from well-known plays, such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Hamlet*, and *Angels in America*. His analyses of these works offer insights into how the plays work and how audiences react. Particularly interesting is the discussion of multiple casting in *Angels in America* which heightens “theatrical emotion”—a term that McConachie adapts from Carl Plantinga’s “artifact emotions” in his study of film spectatorship.
This short volume is an invaluable introduction to cognitive studies and the application to theater studies of key concepts such as mirror neurons, cognitive blending, proprioception, and others that change how we have thought of acting and spectating. Both actor and audience depend on unconscious neural interactivity in order to play their part, although the actor’s ability to do so is largely learnt through training and repetition, while the audience typically enjoys the result of our genetic predisposition to inventive play that allowed our survival skills to evolve. The volume is a call for the recognition of the importance of evolution and cognition in our study of the theater; the embodied actor and the embodied spectator play together within a cultural and social network that allows new meanings to emerge and be transmitted, thus contributing to the continuous evolution of our species.

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Works Cited