

***Performance in Place of War* by James Thompson, Jenny Hughes and Michael Balfour
(Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009)**

Pip Rundle

In *Performance in Place of War*, Jamal Al-Rozzi, director of the Theatre For Everybody in Gaza, is quoted as saying that the formation of his company 'was the best thing to do at the right time' (74). The same could be said for the production of the book itself. Written by James Thompson, Jenny Hughes and Michael Balfour, *Performance in Place of War* is a long overdue addition to the well-stocked library of war books available on witnessing, pro- or anti-war literature on theatre, performance as propaganda, and plays written about war and wartime. There is often a perception that as war begins creativity ceases; this publication proves that wrong and offers a new response to the often contentious topic of producing performance on, in or around war. As the authors write, 'The book understands how theatre makes war (its inflammatory potential) and unmakes war (its ameliorative potential)' (2). It looks into both professional and non-professional performance and theatre practices in places of conflict from different countries and situations.

The book explores the what-when-how-and-why of what practitioners are doing in contemporary war zones, in such sites as refugee camps, war-ravaged villages, towns under curfew, and cities under occupation. The performance initiatives occur in places such as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Israel, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Sudan and the UK. The authors acknowledge that, along with lives and buildings, 'war destroys and threatens cultural life – language, speech, expression, values, social interaction and activity' (15), and they seek to discover how practitioners have overcome this.

The authors have spent considerable research time on performance practices in times and places of conflict, which is reflected in the knowledge and understanding of the topics raised

in this book. Thompson is the project director of In Place of War, a group that researches performance practice from sites of crisis and armed conflict. It grew from Thompson's work in Sri Lanka with practitioners working with young people affected by conflict, and it now has an active network of researchers, scholars and practitioners who share information, experiences and practice. The performances included in the book took place between 2004 and 2007.

Thompson, Hughes and Balfour have created multiple categories for performance in places of war, such as 'post-war, pre-war, military zone, demilitarised zone, cleared area, uncleared area, no man's land' (22). The phrase 'in place of' in the book title is a clever play on words that encapsulates this structure and provides a strong sense of place. It becomes more than a reference to the geographical sense of place; it becomes a translation of the phrase "instead of". The use of the practitioners' own words, actual experiences, extracts of scripts, photographs and stories are used "instead of" authorial interpretation or review. Understanding of 'in place of' is thus gained through performances that offer relief, recovery or mutual understanding and that support justice, reconciliation and peace.

Performance in Place of War is a self-confessed scrapbook of practices intended to strengthen the reader's understanding of the layers and complexities of creating performance in places of conflict and during times of crisis. The research of this scrapbook of stories and documentation about the theatre-makers and performance artists is contemporary and based on current experience. This immediacy drew me in and left me wanting to witness it for myself, which provides a pleasant contrast to similar contemporary literature which is often more retrospective in flavour. The fragmentary nature of the accounts also means many of the practices overlap or are complementary or contradictory. There is no attempt by the authors to censor these contradictions or overlaps, which is refreshing.

It would be a mistake though to describe this publication as just a mere mish-mash of ideas

– it is far from it. The book is divided into five sections thematically along a line of time and space – In Place, Displaced, In Between War and Peace, Aftermaths and Other Places. Each section begins with an introduction of the performances to follow in that chapter, the themes and issues the works raise and the relevant theory. Most of the examples begin with a short history of the relevant conflict and the history of the performance itself. Throughout, the authors have covered the many and varied aspects of ‘war theory’ in a succinct manner and to an appropriate depth considering the book’s constraints. The theory is laced with familiar faces, including but not limited to, Scarry, Butler, Bauman, Spivey, Nordstrom and Adorno. The extensive list of references also includes new material, and for those whose interest lies in this area it is worth a read.

Reflected in the theory is the authors’ understanding of the politics of representation and the importance of reflexivity. How to represent the testimony of victims (or perpetrators) is a very real consideration for many of the practitioners in this book, whose decision to proceed with their performance may threaten their own life or the lives of others. It is often a misconception of those outside of these situations that these threats will be enough to stop practitioners from pursuing their practice, however often the opposite is true. The authors have been sensitive to the vulnerable and volatile position of those at threat and have edited to suit.

Writing a work like this can come with its own set of issues and complications and the authors were well aware of the limitations and restrictions confining their final selection of examples. They have considered and countered any conceivable criticism from impartiality, the scope of the book, its gaps, biases, ethical and political considerations, country naming conventions, practitioner safety, micro-politics to assumptions of neutrality and power. I understand the need to avert censure, yet, in my view, the introduction’s over-emphasis on these limitations and restrictions becomes a point of distraction.

One of the pleasures of this book is that the performance examples are not ones commonly

documented by the mainstream media or industry-specific journals. There is, for example, an especially compelling exploration of performance in post-genocide Rwanda. For some years Rwanda has been negotiating a nationwide performance of reconciliation. Through different government initiatives, various performance groups have been involved with reconciliation activities. This section of the book concentrates on Hope Azeda who established the Mashirika Creative in 1998. Azeda has been a refugee and returned to Rwanda from Uganda post-genocide. She was interviewed in 2004, ten years after the genocide, and talks about how there is an uneasy fit between wanting to forget the past and wanting to do performance that makes a difference for the community in which she lives.

Azeda's father told her: 'Your history is like your shadow, you cannot run away from it'. It was with this in mind that Azeda created a performance, in partnership with the government, called *The Liberating Truth* aimed at sensitising communities to the Gacaca Court before the court came to a district. The section discusses the difficulties that confronted Azeda and the intrinsic problems faced by a group presenting a performance that is 'emotionally, politically and historically loaded' (223). The authors discuss the problems faced by Azeda with sensitivity and a strong knowledge of the theory. Their admiration of the work that people like Azeda do shows through in subtle ways in their writing.

In what could be a summary of all the practitioners in this book, Azeda is quoted as saying, 'as an artist we are like mirrors of society, what we see is what we do' (226). It is a reminder of the importance and timeliness of *Performance in Place of War* as it reflects the work that continues in places of war and in circumstances that would deter most people from even the slightest creative thought.

This book is an excellent resource for practitioners, theorists, students, researchers and academics. It is pitched at a level suitable for students whilst still offering a high level of academic rigour for academics and researchers. I anticipate this book will become the

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seminal text for studies in this area for many years to come and, in my view, sets a high standard for those books following in its footsteps.

Pip Rundle is an Honours student in the English and Creative Arts Program at Murdoch University, Western Australia and sometime stage manager. Her research interests include theories of pain and violence in theatre and performance.