

Book Review

Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice, edited by Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

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In *Performing Site-Specific Theatre* editors Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins have collected contributions from a range of theorists and practitioners that address critical issues in contemporary site-specific theatre and performance. The volume is broad in scope, offering discussion of site-specific performance as it engages with politics, place, and protest; history, cultural policy, and community art practice; and media, sensory immersion and intimacy. Throughout, the authors of many of the chapters exhibit a shared interest in interrogating the instability of 'site' and 'performance' and the productive potential of site-specific work to destabilise and dislocate spectators. The volume therefore offers a many-voiced critical engagement with the features and function of site-specific performance, addressing issues pertinent to the often-contested politics of site and site work and providing analyses of a range of recent (and in one case, notably historic) site-specific performances.

Site-specificity is a slippery concept, arising, as Nick Kaye observes, 'precisely in uncertainties over the borders and limits of work and site' (2000: 215). Miwon Kwon argues that 'the very term "site-specificity" has itself become a site of struggle' (2002: 2), where critical terms have proliferated as practitioners and theorists have sought to describe differing and contested definitions of 'site' and to model an ever-changing array of relations between sites, artists, works, spectators and communities. Commenting on the sheer range of terms that now exist either to categorise the nature of a performance's relationship to site or to pin down the nature of the specificity involved, Bertie Ferdman suggests that the very term 'site-specific' is meaningless 'due to the sheer amount of work that identifies with it' (2013: 5–6). Given this, it's not surprising that, in her introduction to the volume, Joanne Tompkins sidesteps the issue of defining and categorising site-specific performance practice. Instead, she acknowledges the popularity and robust nature of the genre and its ability to encompass a range of different practices. Tompkins outlines what is a modest aim for the volume, that it serve as 'a forum to re-assess the form' (2) in which the various contributors 'push the form in different directions [...] to argue for new and renewed approaches to site-specific performance' (14). Tompkins' introduction critically contextualises the emergence of site-specific performance via the work of Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks and Nick Kaye and grounds it in a discussion of the related concepts of place, space, site and location. She also offers a 'site-specific performance model', highlighting the importance of the 'host/ghost relationship, audience interactivity, and the significance of affect' (7), against which the approaches and departures of the various contributors can be read.

The volume is bookended by two significant chapters from Michael McKinnie and Sophie Nield. Both focus on particular sites in London, with McKinnie addressing the cultural economics of site-

specific practice and Nield questions of politics, protest and place. What both offer to the field are important critical lenses for re-evaluating how performance functions in its relationship to site. McKinnie's concept of 'monopolistic performance'—'performances that seek to appropriate place wholly within the apparatus of the theatre event and produce value through doing so' (23)—is a timely response to shifts that have occurred in site-specific practice, particularly those associated with the emergence of so-called 'immersive theatre' and, more generally, so-called 'site-responsive' productions. Identifying that site-specific performance '[s]ometimes uses place to privilege performance itself' (23), McKinnie offers a valuable critical tool for assessing the often 'ambiguous spatial politics of site-specific performance' (32). Sophie Nield's chapter, situated at the end of the volume, examines a number of theatrical events in the history of London's Parliament Square, and offers a re-assessment of dominant critical tropes applied to site-specific performance, namely, the metaphors of the palimpsest and that of the 'host' and the 'ghost' (developed by former Brith Gof artistic director Clifford McLucas). Noting the 'troubling temporal hierarchization' (222) implicit in both she instead suggests a Lefebvrian approach focused on spatial production and in particular the concept of a 'horizon of meaning' in which site is re-temporalised; both site and performance emerge as provisional and neither is privileged as stable. Nield's chapter has much to offer the field in terms of the way it produces an understanding of the shared contingency of site and performance.

Against the diversity of the chapters in this volume, a recurrent theme throughout is a concern with the position of the spectator. The chapters by Jane Collins, Susan Haedicke, Lesley Ferris, Keren Zaiontz and Helen Iball all offer critical investigation of how site-specific performance opens up new possibilities for relations between spectators, sites and performers, frequently dislocating spectators and asking them to do the labour of re-locating and re-situating themselves. One key contribution of this volume is the critical focus on what it is that happens to spectators in their experiencing of site-specific performance. Jane Collins discusses her own production (of *Ten Thousand Several Doors*, based on John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*) and describes the way her site-specific staging served to displace the spectator, embroiling them in the moral ambiguities of the performance. Susan Haedicke explores the potential efficacy of site-specific performance to 'create intertextual spatio-conceptual constructions that intervene in larger socio-political discourses' (115), with climate change being a pressing concern in each of her chosen examples. Lesley Ferris explores the oft-noted potential of site-specific performance to blur the boundaries of traditional theatrical space by drawing on Rosi Braidotti's theorising of nomadic subjectivity and the ancient Greek stage machinery of the *ekkeklemma*. For Ferris, the body of the mobile spectator in site-specific performance operates as 'a disruptive *ekkeklemma*' (137). Zaiontz's account of spectatorship in ambulatory performance is particularly helpful in the way she outlines the working conditions of spectators in such work. In Zaiontz's analysis site-specific performance functions to reconfigure interpretation as an act, employing the spectator as an animate element of the *mise en scène* and, more literally, endows them with a role. Finally, Iball's chapter—ostensibly focused on the practice of intimate theatre—suggests that site-specific theatre can enable intimacy between spectator/participant and site as much as it might between spectator and performer (205).

Interspersed amongst these chapters are contributions by Susan Bennett and Julie Sanders, applying the paradigm of site-specificity to an historic theatrical event; Kathleen Irwin exploring issues of consensus and collaboration in community-based performance; and co-editor Anna Birch who explores how the specifics of site shift through the use of iteration and multimedia. Bruce Barton and Richard Windeyer address the potential of sound design to provide experiences of sensory dissensus, vulnerability and negotiation, and Mike Pearson offers his own complication of the host/ghost relationship through an account of his production of Aeschylus' *The Persians* on a British Army training ground in South Wales in 2010.

One difficulty I encountered with this book is precisely the diversity offered by the chapters, which I don't think the generous and intelligent editorial framing is always able to shape sufficiently. Perhaps a more interventionist curating of contributions, coupled with brief introductions to each of the sections, could have provided a stronger sense of direction to the volume. On the other hand, the diversity of contributions also attests to the sheer range of work that now exists under the umbrella of the term 'site-specific'. The volume offers the reader strategies for critically considering the work of site-specific theatre, re-evaluating existing critical frames, and re-examining the claims that are often made about such work. Kwon identifies that one of the significant problems with the term 'site-specific' is the way it is embraced as an automatic signifier of 'criticality' or 'progressivity' (2002: 1). This volume argues the need to examine such claims on a detailed case-by-case basis, and the essays included offer helpful models of how to approach the task of analysing such work from the perspective of practitioner and/or spectator, examining the ideological implications of performance engaging with particular sites and how spectators and participants in performance-making processes might find themselves situated and positioned. The volume identifies key trends in site-specific theatre including a growing use of multi-media, an investigation of mobility, and a playing with the potential for sensory immersion. As an anthology, it offers a valuable snapshot of current practice and a welcome questioning of established critical approaches.

Works Cited

- Ferdman, Bertie. 'A New Journey through Other Spaces: Contemporary Performance beyond 'Site-Specific'', *Theater* 43.2 (2013): 5–25.
- Kaye, Nick. *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000)
- Kwon, Miwon. *One Place after Another : Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002)

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