

Review of *Theatre & series*, edited by Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009-)

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In her contribution to the new Palgrave *Theatre & series*, Helen Freshwater challenges us to rethink a ‘compelling orthodoxy in theatre and performance studies’ - the ‘belief that [audience] participation empowers’ (2009: 56). Via the writings of Susan Bennett, Jacques Rancière and Laura Mulvey, and with due note to the well-established allegiance between participation and a Brechtian-cum-Boalian politics of theatrical practice, Freshwater takes issue with this most basic of home truths: ‘theatre sometimes shows us that much of what passes for participation is nothing of the sort’ (75), and yet ‘most theatre scholars prefer their audiences actively engaged’ (25). Her question: why the presumption that mere spectatorship equals passivity, why this mistrust or even contempt for what so-called passive consumers of theatre bring to viewing a work?

Freshwater’s approach in *Theatre & Audience* is but one in a series that circulates the rough edges between theatre as a historically live practice, and a world which is giddy with the new millennial rites of instability, virtuality and what Dan Rebellato in *Theatre & Globalisation* cites as ‘turbo capitalism’ (2009: 26). What sits underneath Freshwater’s claim is a desire to unrest theatre from some of the yawn-worthy assertions that it, and those of us who write about it, tend to hold close. The intention is not to dispute what theatre has been capable of, but to encounter its full force as performative in a world which, as Helen Nicholson notes in *Theatre & Education*, is increasingly constituted as a ‘performative society’ on its own terms (2009: 58). To understand theatre as performative is to tackle the meta-theatrical meanings that it is producing as an apparatus, and hence to critically reevaluate its role and function in twenty-first century life. This is about how theatre as a mechanism *does* politics, ethics, bodies and global world orders. It is to understand the truth-effects of an inescapably postmodern institution.

Palgrave’s *Theatre & series*, edited by Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato and first published in 2009, traverses topics on the body (Colette Conroy), the city (Jen Harvie), politics (Joe Kelleher), human rights (Paul Rae), globalisation (Dan Rebellato) and ethics (Nicholas Ridout). Promises of *Theatre & Sexuality* (Jill Dolan), *Theatre & Museums* (Susan Bennett) and *Theatre & History* (Rebecca Schneider) are amongst others in the pipeline. Harvie and Rebellato explain that the big intention of these little books is to ‘explor[e] connections between theatre and some aspect of the wider world’, while being ‘readable in one sitting by anyone with a curiosity about the subject’. The contributions work best when provocations such as Freshwater’s drive the framework for the duration of the text. These mini-books are more like lengthy essays on a central set of questions, rather than an attempt to collate a whole theatrical history into a short amount of space. The key is to hone in on what set of questions apply to a twenty-first century theatrical apparatus, and how they might resonate both beyond the scope of the books and theatre itself.

Strains raised in Freshwater’s argument reverberate across the series. For Ridout, the theatre faces us with the prospect of ‘the fragile life of the other’ (8) by summoning a spectatorial subject, who is, by the very act of watching in real time ‘unusually conscious of their own status as spectato[r]’ (15). This duplicity of self felt in the spectatorial premise gives rise to a complex process of recognition and responsibility, which is decidedly refractive: ‘We watch ourselves watching people engaging with an

ethical problem while knowing that we are being watched in our watching' (15). Ridout explains that understanding how theatre produces ethics is to recognise that 'to act' implies both semblance and *doing*. Further, this knowledge of theatre's innate capacity for a double kind of doing explains how it might be an aesthetic exemplar of the 'ethical encounter' by encouraging 'relationships based on openness, dialogue and a respect for difference' (54). A more modernist take on staging ethics as moral instruction here gives way to an appreciation of ethics as always already formulated through, and as, social and cultural relationships. In this, '[t]heatre's greatest ethical potential' is paradoxically achieved 'at the moment when theatre abandons ethics' altogether (70).

If *Theatre & Ethics* convincingly makes clear that 'ethics' might just be theatre's new 'politics', then Joe Kelleher's *Theatre & Politics* illuminates how the ethical doings of certain theatre forms are nonetheless politically inflected, particularly for how theatre constructs itself within a global 'dramaturgy' of traumatically mediated images (2009: 8). Again understanding the contemporary theatrical moment through a Levinasian take on the 'fragile life of the other', Kelleher explains how encounters with otherness are deeply reliant upon stagings of both appearance and erasure. Meeting the other, in this respect, is a project of the cultural 'activities of showing and saying through which some are made visible ... and others get to speak' (68). While discussions of this sort are not new, Kelleher's call to shift from a politics based in relations of power, to a politics of 'non-relation' (64), is an attempt to see how theatre both enables recognition of the other, and produces a kind of estrangement whereby 'we presume to know nothing of each other' and hence 'learn to notice each other ... as if for the first time' (65). This theatre of non-relation is, akin to Ridout's argument, importantly open-ended, revealing how theatre 'still harbour[s] ... the constant promise - or threat - of *another* politics' (Kelleher: 54).

The implications of Kelleher's argument are that shifting to a politics of non-relation can interrupt the appropriative processes of the late capitalist system, which 'fatten[s] itself upon what pretends to threaten it' (50). This idea is deepened in Rebellato's *Theatre & Globalisation*, which positions cosmopolitanism as an intervention into the more rudimentary binary logic of economic neoliberalism and its 'false' opposition: the local (2009: 59). For Rebellato, theatre formally shares much with cosmopolitan appeals to 'universal rights beyond the level of the state' (67), for how it enables the recognition of difference whilst crossing (often literally, as in mimesis) ethnic and geopolitical borders. Rebellato considers an Artaudian-inflected history of interculturalism against theatre forms that today perform themselves through, and as, global capital - namely, the 'McTheatre' musical merchandising franchises of Andrew Lloyd Webber and the like (41). Amidst the pulls of exoticism and commodification, Rebellato resists a call to impossibly return to a golden age of locality, instead insisting that a more critical theatrical apparatus can evade the perversions of global life, whilst still inhabiting its central mechanisms.

Jen Harvie similarly manages to overcome the impasse between local and global, Marxist and capitalist, by arguing for a 'materialist performativity' or 'performative materialism' that accounts for the 'hybrid critical practices' that inform the city and likewise, co-produce it (2009: 72). In *Theatre & the City*, Harvie covers works such as Australia's Geelong-based Back to Back Theatre, the infamous US-based Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping and UK group Blast Theory, to argue that current critical models for understanding theatre in relation to the city either proffer utopian calls to the rights of citizen subjects as everyday social performers (Butler), or reductively demarcate the repressive conditions of the capitalist economic system (Marx). Harvie's method is to attempt to use both together in order to understand how

economic contexts and embodied agency work within the feedback loop that exists between aesthetics, place and an enterprise-based marketplace. Hinting at how social embodiment can be equally tethered and empowered, Harvie's conclusion points to a tempting aporia in theatre and performance discourse that is possibly yet to be more fully unravelled.

Colette Conroy's study attempts to consider the full extent of the plight of the theatricalised body in the high stakes of twenty-first century global life in *Theatre & the Body*. With a foreword by Marina Abramovic, who plainly puts the body at the centre of things - 'Why is it so important to stage pain and danger in the performance?', 'What about risking your own life?' (2010: x) - Conroy's study is decidedly textual, choosing to contemplate how words frame characters and subjects over the function of material flesh and what it might be doing in the theatrical scenario (for both audience and performers alike). With a host of new theoretical insights into understanding practices of embodiment, via theories of affect and/or agency available (see Brian Massumi, 2002, Carrie Noland, 2009), Conroy's study risks losing the body altogether, working more as a retrospective evaluation of semiotic analysis, as illuminated through the canon of recent critical thought, (she covers the uncanny, performativity, poststructuralism, phenomenology, to name a few). In this respect, *Theatre & the Body* works as a successful introductory framework for students new to theatre, more than a premonition of where theatre and its thinking may travel from here.

A similar tendency for retrospection is present in Helen Nicholson's survey in *Theatre & Education*. Less focused on questions of how theatre might metatheatrically engage with different pedagogical paradigms (didactic versus open, for instance) Nicholson charts a particular history of Theatre In Education (TIE) in the UK, against a 'market-led culture of individualism' (12), viewed as responsible for the downfall of state-based education and support in progressive (often Marxist-oriented) theatre workshops. While marking an important history, the hint of nostalgia for the days of TIE might be further weighed by Nicholson against the full range of performative interactions contemporary practices of education can mark with theatre history, both contemporary and traditional. Indeed, the relational intention of theories of cosmopolitanism (Rebellato) or 'materialist performativity' (Harvie) put forward by other authors in the series could afford to be in some way interpolated (even if abstractly) into Nicholson's approach, to enable for a more multifarious viewpoint that extends beyond the specifics of a UK-based system and that recognises when education is performative, and likewise when theatre is educative.

Questions of the role of a city-based ecology of theatre arts and theatre in, and as, education, are reframed by Paul Rae's discussion of human rights, which connects the localised self to the otherness intimated by the globalised world. Theatre's signature ethical impulse is given pause in *Theatre and Human Rights* through an analysis of how a range of cultural, political and nation-State institutions perform doctrines of civil liberty and their respective abuses. Rae traverses the recent plethora of human rights violations (Guananamo Bay, for example) alongside the recent milieu of working practices that have attempted to make theatre one means of redress against postmodernity's crimes against humanity. Rae's discussion is important for how it explains the multiple frameworks for both complicity and resistance that theatre can hold in these contexts, at times becoming the form by which to envisage alternative futures. Rae nonetheless notes with irony that the central impossibility of theatre ever understanding the category of the 'human' is that the 'very process of staging something serves to reaffirm the human as it is already understood' (75).

For those of us interested in the knotty paradoxes that sit at the core of theatre's meta-theatrical truth-effects - an ethics that is no longer ethics, a politics that is political for how it is yet to be imagined, an idea of the human that displaces itself the moment it is performed - these pithy glimpses at the enigma of what theatre might be doing when it *does itself well* are timely engagements with some of the twenty-first century's most pressing philosophical preoccupations.

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Theatre & Globalization Dan Rebellato (Houndmills: Palgrave 2009)

Theatre & Ethics Nicholas Ridout (Houndmills: Palgrave 2009)

References

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