

Review of *To Watch Theatre. Essays on Genre and Corporeality*, Rachel Fensham (Brussels, Bern, e.a.: PIE Peter Lang, 2009)

### Laura Ginters

When your work, just months after being published, is being quoted as an epigram by another writer, you can be pretty certain that you've made an impact. Rachel Fensham's book, *To Watch Theatre. Essays on Genre and Corporeality*, is a fascinating collection of essays which proposes a model of embodied spectatorship located in the complex interactions between genre, corporeality and performance. 'To watch theatre', Fensham claims, 'is then to watch carefully for the remaining signs of a fragile humanity' (23). This quote (which also opens Sylvain Duguay's essay in this year's issue of *About Performance*) is an intriguing one and sets the tone for the book to come. The essays are a privileged window into the mind and imagination of a very skilled theatre watcher.

Following her introduction, Fensham stakes her claim for genre as a critical organising concept in her work. As she notes, genre theory went out of fashion in the 1970s - but then returned as new genre forms (for example, verbatim theatre, post-dramatic) emerged. And genre is a fundamental analytical tool because 'it's critical if someone is to make sense of a textual or performance experience' (27): it helps us 'control the uncertainty of communication' (27, quoting Frow). Our understanding of it is inflected by gender (and vice versa) and this link to corporeality allows her to avoid the pitfalls of a text-focussed semiotic approach to spectatorship. Her analysis is based in a 'corporeal semiotics' - and the bodies she is dealing with are on both sides of the footlights.

The main body of her book is composed of four chapters which analyse in turn: Deborah Warner's production of *Medea* (with Fiona Shaw in the title role); Barrie Kosky's *King Lear*; Anne Bogart's *Miss Julie* and Romeo Castellucci's *Genesi: The Museum of Sleep*. Fensham has selected 'names' which, pragmatically, would entice a publisher, but also have the advantage that some of these productions will have had large audiences across the world. But *have* those audiences all seen the same show? Fensham is careful to point to out to us how, for example, *Medea* in a black dress and cardie in England is read differently from (the same) *Medea* in a coloured sundress in the United States - and how a black actor playing a fool stereotype became 'unacceptable' in New York (and was recast as a redhead). She is alert, then, to the dangers of overgeneralising about what a production 'says' to its audience/s, but simultaneously allows us to revel in thick, juicy description and analysis by the ways she locates the texts and their reception, the artists and companies involved, and the production itself, both historically and within its contemporary cultural context. (It leaves me greedy for more than the flashes of performance that we 'see' through her evocative descriptions and analyses.) In each chapter Fensham draws on a particular theoretical approach or approaches to illuminate her study of each of the productions analysed.

She opens with *Medea* in Chapter 2 and uses the concept of the body double, explored through semiotics, theories of feminine mimesis and feminist philosophy (especially Moira Gatens) to allow us to get at/to, to read, a figure of *Medea* who, suspended in a historical, fictional and mythical web, simultaneously appears before us as a performing body on stage, undoing such preconceptions.

Kristeva's notion of the abject body is explored by Fensham in the following chapter on *King Lear*: Fensham adapts Kristeva's distinction between subject, object and abject to 'invent a semiotic device for corporeal analysis' (83). Her work here is imaginative and creative in a way that academic writing so often isn't and, nodding to her French feminist influences, Fensham creates an il(l), elle (that

it's a small step - and strong association - from 'elle' to 'hell' is obliquely noted) and smell-bodies. She activates these in a brilliant analysis of the male bodies and masculine identities of the play and its production (though I could wish the discussion of the relationship between Edgar and Gloucester, played by Matthew Whittet and Russell Kiefel, had included the correct spelling of their names).

I found her chapter on Anne Bogart's *Miss Julie* less satisfying in parts for reasons connected, in a broad sense, to translation. Fensham did not see a performance of this production; she watched a video-recording of it - something she herself has previously described as a 'different mode of viewing': so she wasn't actually *watching theatre*, theatre had been translated into another form. Her analysis draws on (among other things) Austin's speech act theory, and the performative effect of linguistic utterances is under examination here. What happens, though, if translations aren't accurate? For example, the production concept of a boxing ring, Fensham moots, originated from the stage direction 'she boxes his ears' - and yet the original Swedish has Miss Julie slapping Jean's face. Fensham describes what the actors *do* say and *do* do with the text (and production concept) they have, but it leaves me with a niggling worry about this analysis of 'the play' and what the director and performers are doing with 'the energies of the script' and its 'linguistic obligations'. The other 'translation' slip which stood out was Fensham's uncharacteristically imprecise conflation of character and actor in her analysis (see for example page 124).

The final production she analyses is Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Genesis: the Museum of Sleep*. This chapter finds its theoretical shape through Bruno Latour's 'body talk' and Agamben's notion of 'bare life' (developed in *Homer Sacer*), linked to the company's own explicit engagement with Artaud's 'body without organs'. The only production not based on a (canonical) text, Fensham asks whether this powerful work 'might lack canonicity since its animation depends on the production machinery and the specific bodies of its performers'. She concludes, however, by returning the task of perpetuation to the spectators for '[i]t is the people in the audience who will remember these bodies, these narratives, and these senses of a history that theatre cannot repeat' (164).

Fensham noted earlier that her case studies were all 'end of millennia performances' (21), and took place before 9/11, the war on terror and the escalation of fears of environmental calamity. She concludes this book, however, with a reflection on watching tragedy in the 21st century, and a proposal that 'the aesthetic experience of watching a tragic performance may add to this wider sense of dealing with dark times'. She also outlines a novel take on catharsis and the contemporary spectator (177) when she asks whether 'a reasonable and emotional response to the theatre ought not [...] to include the expulsion of bodily fluids' ('urinating by wetting itself with laughter; or menstruating by bleeding from the heart; or weeping by pouring it all out'). She suggests that '[i]n becoming fluid with emotion, perhaps the catharsis of the spectator can recover from the sealed up, and over-coded, body of a multi-mediated society'. For me this notion of a flow, inwards out, in a counter-balancing response to the performance that penetrates our bodies aurally, visually, even olfactorily (*Miss Julie* again) has great resonance.

A recent renewed interest in audience research is delivering insights from a variety of disciplinary perspectives newly applied to theatre and other forms of live performance - from neuroscience to phenomenology to reminiscence workshops and beyond. Nothing I have read, though, offers this rich assembly of text, context and their interplay with real and imagined (and gendered) bodies. *To Watch Theatre* offers us a valuable, highly specific and compellingly articulated contribution to this rapidly developing field.

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