Book Review

Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror: "Whatever It Takes", by Sara Brady (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11: Patriotic Dissent, edited by Jenny Spencer (London: Routledge, 2012)

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What might 'political theatre' mean in the early 21st century? These two publications, the first a collection of 14 essays, the other a monograph, take up the question, each setting out from the watershed of the 11th of September, 2001. The 'Patriotic Dissent' collection, edited by Jenny Spencer, goes about the task by surveying a range of 'Mainstream' and 'Alternative' theatrical/performance responses, drawn from the North Eastern United States and the United Kingdom, to the new politics of the post 9/11 world. Sara Brady's book takes a different approach, instead interrogating the rubric of performativity in a world that has taken Benjamin's diagnosis of the aestheticisation of politics to a new level, a world in which, as Brady provocatively suggests, 'politics is performance and political theatre is all but irrelevant' (xii).

Brady appears to be entirely at home amidst the hurly burly of 24 hour news cycles and social media: a context in which '[t]ruth has so very little to do with anything' (xii), and where politicians are 'now only worth their weight in performance' (xiii), a status they share with the punditry and stars of the blogosphere; where pundits and politicians alike 'aim to reach a level of naturalism that Stanislavsky's students could only dream of' (xiii). Indeed, reading the book feels like a few hours spent on the intertubes, flicking between fevered blogs, hitting all the red buttons. Or just reading *The Huffington Post*. (And, with that, the familiar, uneasy sense of being the choir to which the sermon is being preached). In the first two pages we get media personality Colbert (rendered here as 'Stephen', the very evocation of the false intimacy engendered through a life plugged into the electronic media), Obama, Bush, Gingrich, Žižek in conversation with Assange; Anthony Weiner (of genital selfie fame), Bradley Manning (perhaps a later edition will catch up with that particular gender reassignment), Rupert Murdoch and more. The prefatory argument—that we are all snowed by the duplicity of bad-faith performativity into a state of 'denial'—is sealed with reference to Brady's being reminded of 'the Mafia': 'the essence of corruption … the criminal who can go to church on Sunday'. Except it is not really the Mafia of whom she is reminded: it's 'Christopher, the infamous solder of the *Sopranos*' who can lie about his girlfriend's death with a straight face (xiv).

Brady's book is, however, an intense, brilliant evocation and incantation of the performance of politics in the contemporary United States. It's pretty bleak stuff, book-ended by performance analyses of George Bush Jr (the soft target), and of Barack Obama. Bush is placed in the context of the post 9/11 system-wide production of a 'truth desired' (15), the ideological investment in which is framed by considerations of both a turn to documentary theatre as a tactical attempt to recoup

some notion of objective factuality, and, in counterpoint, what Brady calls 'wikiality' (32): the creation of a vast consensual reality based on Google searchability. We get a chilling account of the ways in which Michael Moore's 2003 Academy Awards acceptance speech, in which he observed that 'we live in fictitious times' (16)—a moment of potential disruption—was cut short by a swell of orchestral music and a commercial break.

The final chapter charts the dramaturgy of Obama's presidency, from beacon of liberal hope to 'Barack the badass' (155), or as talk show host Bill Maher observed, his reinvention as 'one efficient, steely-nerved, multitasking, black ninja gansta president' (158). In the final pages of the book, Obama is pictured, hard-faced and pensive, in the White House Situation Room as an assault team assassinates Osama bin Laden on a real-time video feed, performing 'a certain kind of Americanism that plays well, especially around campaign time' (159).

Between these book-ends Brady builds a compelling, appalling litany of rendition and secrecy; of protests and the logics of 'percepticide' (40)—the tactic of ignoring protests, 'relegating them to invisibility' (43)—of the mobilisation of military uniform in protest movements; interventions such as Joseph DeLappe's *dead-in-iraq*, in which the names of American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan are typed onto and into the screens of players—including active troops—engaged in the multi-player on-line game *America's Army* (62–64); or the outrageously disturbing 'Coney Island Waterboarding Thrill Ride', in which passers-by peer into an animatronic rendering of state-sanctioned torture. Here, Brady argues, we apprehend the potential of the performative experience to cut across and through (mere) discourse and political sophistry, to 'disengage textual rhetoric about definitions and justifications' (138).

Nothing in the book, however, is more chilling or compelling than the chapter devoted to Brady's undercover ethnography of the US Army's (since closed) Army Experience Centre, deep in the bowels of a shopping mall in suburban Philadelphia. We are brought, in these exceptional pages, to the ground zero of what Brady calls the 'military-industrial-entertainment complex' (66), and what we see is mind-bendingly horrific: a brutalising, desensitising, dehumanising theme park devoted to the creation of child-solders, a thematic developed in the subsequent chapter, in which the blurring of 'real' and 'pretend' war through the medium of various digital platforms is concerned in distressing depth. This is an angry, aggrieved, testy book, tersely pervaded by a tone of (justified) indignation, but throughout scholarly, intelligent and well-argued. But above all, angry.

On the other hand, in the Introduction to her edited collection, Jenny Spencer performs a kind of nostalgia, on the one hand, for a time when political theatre was *really* political, and on the other, a leap of faith in advocating for the maintenance of political theatre—and 'the scholarship attentive to it'—even in the absence of any demonstrable (political) outcome as a gesture of 'hope', a hope that is (simply) 'more necessary than ever' (13). It is an interesting argument. Spencer observes that the 'sampling' of work analysed in her collection 'explicitly emerges from anger, sadness, and dismay over a post-9/11 course of events' and aligns that work with 'older forms of political theatre', the artists concerned sharing an intention to 'activate their audiences and to intervene in the current state of the world' (12). Post 9/11, however, 'performance emerges from a less rational, more complicit place within a social moment already characterized by polarizing political discourse' (12). She continues: '[i]n the face of heightened anxiety and escalating state violence, an aggressively confrontational political theatre practice seems counterproductive' (12). There's the nostalgia: the politically engaged theatre-maker had it much easier in the olden days, before there was such an excess of anxiety and state violence.

Then the hope: the emergence of 'fact-based, open-ended' theatre suggests a recasting of the political theatre project, pointing to the prospect of 'a fully informed electorate, meeting together in a public space, can agree on politically charged issues and collectively demand social change' (12). This Spencer dismisses as a bridge too far, however, partly on the grounds that the intended audience for such a rational theatre does not feel any need to actually go to the theatre to feel informed: the twenty-four hour news cycle and the 'politically energized blogosphere' (12) have that covered. Indeed, Spencer concedes, 'the fictional space of theatrical re-enactment cannot be expected to redress the injuries and situations it belatedly sets out to expose and explore, or even to unify an audience in its version of truth' (12–13).

Instead, Spencer proposes more realistic (?) aspirations for political theatre: '[i]t can … help change and extend the public conversation, break down unhelpful social dichotomies, offer alternative viewpoints, expose political collusion, and provide more nuanced political analyses of complex situations' (13): a kind of watered down Habermasianism. The proof offered in support of this contention left me unconvinced, if not cold: the 'active responses' of politically-engaged theatre makers 'mitigated against the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness that afflicted so many British and American citizens during the Bush-Blair years' (13), constituting 'an emotional investment' that paid out in 'sustaining and unifying a progressive audience, an investment that helped unseat Blair in 2007 and elect Obama the following year' (13). And a peroratory rallying cry: even though these electoral changes did not deliver on all their promise, '*a shift of some kind was beginning*' (13; emphasis added). From the perspective of an Abbott Government in Australia and an unholy Coalition led by arch Tory David Cameron in the UK, this looks like wishful thinking at best. I am left with an uncomfortable apprehension, too, of hemispheric chauvinism: history is unfolding around a centre somewhere in the mid-Northern Atlantic, with the rest of us, I suppose, following in its wake.

The thematics of hope and investment in an aspiration for theatre to facilitate better public discourse recur throughout the essays of the first section of the book, titled 'Mainstages'. The readings of individual productions are engaging and strong; less convincing are the claims to political impact. Indeed, nowhere is there any attempt to set a benchmark for what might constitute political engagement or outcomes from involvement in these productions, either as producer or as audience, beyond the most general aspirational statements.

Stacy Wolf, for example, claims to outline a method for 'analyzing the Broadway musical as a political project' (21), setting out from the hardly novel premise that 'a musical's meaning … is thoroughly embedded in its moment of reception' (20). The method relies on the observation that although the timelines of staging musicals necessarily involve a significant lag with reference to political events, 'their presence [at all] proves that, in spite of its escapist reputation and undeniable commercial need to attract large audiences over a period of years, the Broadway musical is a political theatre' (21). (I recall Peter Cook's sardonic take on his plans for his Establishment Club in London in the 1960s: that it was to be modelled on the political cabarets of Berlin in the Thirties 'which did so much to prevent the rise of Adolf Hitler.')[1]

Three case studies follow. First, *Avenue Q*, which, in a *Muppet Show* revue format 'presents stereotypes to take a politically progressive position' (26). Its 'power' lies in its 'interpolative strategies borrowed from educational television', inviting 'the audience to sing along, and in doing so, to voice the musical's political perspective' (27). *Wicked*, by contrast, is 'serious, determined, and earnest … contrast[ing] good and evil and set[ting] up two political perspectives in struggle' (30). *Caroline, or Change* 'is intellectually and emotionally provocative, teaching painful lessons about history with ambivalence and contradictions' (31). On criteria such as these, it is hard to

conceive of any theatre that might not be defined as 'political'; at the very least, 'political' starts to lose any analytic bite when the definitional threshold is set so liberally. The essay concludes, unconvincingly, and without any evidence, that '[m]usical theatre communicates viscerally as well as intellectually, keying into a different, perhaps deeper level of involvement than nonmusical theatre' (34).

Joshua Abrams takes up the meme of the 'ubiquitous' Guantánamo Bay orange jumpsuit as it appears in three productions—Peter Sellars's Paris *The Children of Herakles*, and recent London productions of *Hair* and *Measure for Measure*. Abrams' conclusion again turns to (hyperbolic) 'hope': '[t]hat a space of dissensus could arise from the theatre's use of contemporary photographs is an incredibly hopeful thought' (50). But again, there is little evidence to support any claims to actual political effect: '[p]erformances such as these *may* challenge the audience to begin to reimagine the founding of the public sphere' (50; my emphasis). Sure, but *do* they, and how would we know? Similarly, Amelia Howe Kritzer's reading of Caryl Churchill's *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You* ends speculatively, rather than conclusively: '*one must assume* that by the play's end Guy [the protagonist] and the audience are united by a desire to end the madness … *Perhaps* Churchill intends the play to give the audience a taste of the hopeless frustration that could lead to acts of terrorism' (61; emphases added). The generation of shame in Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*, Jenny Spencer suggests, 'can activate a desire to change the situations, governments, and ideological perspectives that produce shame, in the "real world"' (76). Arguably it can; to me the compelling questions for scholarship are, however: does it, and how could we tell?

An audience response actually appears in Marcia Blumberg's skilful analysis of the Scottish National Theatre's *Black Watch*, in which a veteran's letter to the director is reproduced, vouching for the impact and verisimilitude of the production. At the same time, Blumberg highlights the 'problematic politics' of the production, set against spectators' being 'continually amazed at the creativity and innovative spirit evoked in this hybrid, multidimensional, and multifaceted collaborative theatre' (90). The result is a representation of 'both a passionate patriotism and a clear political critique' (90), a performance of the 'unraveling' of the (any?) soldiers' dilemmas and 'patriotic dissent' (91).

The final essay in this section is the most sophisticated, and the most willing to take on the question of just what the aspiration for a purportedly political theatre might be. In taking up various manifestations of documentary and oral historical performance, Ryan Claycomb disturbingly, and courageously, wonders whether 'the Western stage' is formally and ideologically fated to the unrepresentability of subaltern speech (105). And again, the conclusion turns to hope: 'I remain' he concludes, 'more hopeful about oral history performance' (106), with its potential to reframe monologic speech as dialogue, modeling a dialectics with which to pry apart complacent common sense, and calling out an attentive listening to the Other.

At the heart of the second half of the book, titled 'Alternative Spaces', is Larry Bogad's outstanding essay—the pick of the collection—focussing on 'the art/activist genre of tactical performance', with examples drawn from ('the happily defunct' [194]) Billionaires for Bush, the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army and the Oil Enforcement Agency. Here we move away from the politics/poetics/aesthetics of mimetic theatricality, and the dry, rather abstracted evaluation of the worthiness of representation per se, into those of the event. Bogad concedes the difficulty of 'measur[ing] the efficacy of tactical performance' (204), but provides compelling and convincing evidence—rather than conjecture or hope—of exchanges in which work 'calls on the

unsuspecting passersby to decode, engage, and actively get the joke—and maybe even banter back' and thereby 'answers hegemonologue with dialogue' (204).

Events, however, are vulnerable to the logics of the demagogue, as Jennifer L. Chan considers in her analysis of the 2001 *Concert for New York*, an event designed to bolster patriotic identification in the wake of 9/11, and featuring 'a selection of aging, white, and well-paid rock stars' (209). The gig, Chan argues, 'exemplified' the 'fantasy that links agency through performance to democracy' (212); and yet, in the middle of the carefully stage-managed production of national (affect) belongingness, an impromptu performance by a fire fighter, Michael Moran, constituted 'a significant disrupting of the concert's metanarrative' (213): a radical self-identification and throw-down to Osama bin Laden. Seizing the microphone, Moran shouted 'I live in Rockaway and this is my face, bitch!', a moment, Chan argues, marking 'a major shift' to a post-9/11 world 'characterized by terror and compensatory obdurate strength' (214). Chan then traces the ways in which, for the official DVD of the event, Moran's 'leap' towards the 'Althusserian hail' (215) is airbrushed into the smooth space of regulatory force, 'transformed from a source of ideological disruption into an iconic symbol' (216) of patriotic resolve. We are reminded, in this moment, of 'performance's subversive possibilities', even if only held open for an instant, even 'if the moment is eventually lost to the cutting-room floor' (216).

The collection, then, canvasses a range of scholarship of contemporary performance, through which we might be able to draw something of a through-line: a kind of pulse-taking of post 9/11 theatre in the Anglo-American hemisphere, a significant proportion of which adopts something of a politicised posture in response to what are broadly conceived of as dark, dark times. Less convincing is the argument that this work constitutes anything more than gestures in a very particular economy of representation, contributing to the maintenance of a(n equally) broadly conceived political agency, offering little more than (thoughtful, reassuring) whistling in the dark. It is very hard to discern, in most of the work discussed, a political program or aspiration beyond a liberal—as distinct from a radicalising—consciousness-raising. Perhaps that is the best for which we can hope.

Notes

1. My quick search cannot dredge up an original source for this line; the best bet is John Bird's obituary for Cook in *The Independent*, January 10, 1995; http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-peter-cook-1567341.html

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