

***Contemporary Theatres in Europe: A Critical Companion*, eds. Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).**

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In their incisive introduction to this richly polyphonic collection of essays, editors Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout describe the authors' contributions as 'reports from travellers' on encounters with European theatres that have 'provoked, troubled, intrigued or enchanted' (1). Written predominantly by British-based scholars, curators and practitioners, the essays seek neither to build a comprehensive survey nor a canon of practices. Thanks to the diversity of the authors' journeys, the collection engages with an excitingly broad range of events, particularly with regard to national and spatial locations, form and content, makers and target audiences. Admittedly, most of the essays focus on recent experimental theatre and performance companies, as well as neighbouring practices, ranging from postdramatic productions, to dance theatre, dance performance, and post-operatic musical theatre. The volume does occasionally address quotidian forms too, and in so doing further enriches this book's contribution to current debate about the nature of theatre. One of the many other features I enjoyed during my journey through the varied chapters of this book was the way it challenges the widespread tendency to reduce the 'contemporary' to the world of adult, professional and new 'alternative' practice. For instance, it contains several essays which adopt a careful and caring attention to theatre by and/or for children and young people, and, through the inclusion of Mike Pearson's commentary on the Marshfield Mummers' annual Boxing Day ritual, reminds us that traditional street performance can also be a current source of 'alternative' energy and form.

The volume's nuanced approach to contemporaneity is also expressed in its attention to performances, which illuminate the contemporary European moment as a complex negotiation of past and present. A number of essays explore the way that negotiation is influenced by a typically European interest in the legacy and memory-work surrounding troubled histories. In her account

of Israel's Acco Theatre Center's *tour de force* piece *Arbeit macht frei MiToitland Europa* (*Work Liberates from the Deathland of Europe*), presented in Germany 1992-6, Heike Roms lucidly outlines how a group of performers with mixed ethnic backgrounds activated debate about issues such as: exclusive ownership of the memory of the Holocaust by those who experienced it; and the necessity and implications of secondary witnessing in a context where the number of living Holocaust survivors is rapidly diminishing. Nicholas Till also addresses work grappling with difficult legacies in his appraisal of experimental German and Italian music theatre artists, Heiner Goebbels, Christoph Marthaler and the Italian company *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* (SRS). Till argues that the artists' subversive re-engagement with forms of nineteenth-century opera constitutes an attempt to move beyond the nightmare of a nationalist and fascist past through a process of re-membering.

The existence of widely divergent ethnic histories and sources of oppression within the European Union, and the way an encounter with foreign troubles forces the traveller to re-think her viewing positions is thoughtfully addressed in Sarah Gorman's reflection on her experience at the 2003 *Mladi Levi* international festival in Slovenia. At the end of her interpretation of a British/German, a Dutch, and a Spanish performance, Gorman concludes that all three pieces were marked by a discourse of 'harm', with the Northern European groups focusing on oppressive self-policing and internalisation of ideology, and the (for her relatively foreign) Southern European work presenting harm as the result of sexual predation and capitalist commodification. Gorman admits that her opposition of artistic communities is arguably reductive and comments that a potentially more useful finding is her realisation that both 'presuppose a position of fundamental physical "safety" from which to speak' and as such could be understood to be similarly 'foreign' to Slovenian spectators given their recent experience of the violent bodily harms of civil war (83). Performance deeply informed by familiarity with bodily harm is the subject of Marin Blažević's analysis of postdramatic performance in 1990s Croatia. Blažević attributes this familiarity both to the totalitarian regimes of an authoritarian state and of the 'theological stage' of mass media,

theatre, and political spectacles where the ‘living bodies of actors can be imprisoned by lifeless symbols and turned into living corpses’ (91). He contends that many of Croatia’s new theatres resist literal and symbolic death by experimenting with actions that stress both the body’s vitality and vulnerability, thereby foregrounding its potential to resist oppressive regimes and refuse the role of agent in any signifying practice.

As well as exploring the familiar European territory of troubled histories and harm, this collection also addresses an emergent cultural concern about the security, agency and precious otherness of the child. In her essay on the staging of fairy tales for young audiences by Western European companies, Bridget Escolme investigates how these theatres seek to enable children to both cope with and interrogate their world. In particular she focuses on experimental disruptions of the storyteller’s control of the tale designed to foster the children’s own meaning making capacities. In their separate essays on two intriguing pieces by the Belgium company Victoria, Adrian Kear and Andrew Quick eloquently reflect on how these performances speak to adults about the vulnerable and radical otherness of children. Kear’s psychoanalytical analysis of his visceral encounter with a 1997 London performance of *Bernadetje* explains how episodes such as a confronting catwalk-cum-striptease performed by adolescents, and a strangely ecstatic rave dance by a young girl in white communion dress which fails to translate the enigmatic sexual meanings of the catwalk she has just observed, all provide a condensation of the dynamics of childhood seduction as theorised by Laplanche. Kear views these condensations as a ‘profoundly *ethical* revelation of the temporal and spatial fissure between adult and childhood frameworks of understanding’ (114), one that exposes the mechanisms of child abuse. Andrew Quick’s enchanted response to the improvised gestures of the young performers in a 2003 performance of *Übung* (*Exercise or Practice*) celebrates the revolutionary potential of child’s play to put pre-established rules and adult orthodoxy to the test. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s idea that the ‘otherworldly’ gestures of the child are often the consequence of judgements unsullied by the adult regime of intention, prediction and authoritarian rule, Quick interprets the performers’ partial

mimicry of a group of adults in a black and white film projected on a large screen, *and* the indecipherable moments when they seem simply to be walking through possibilities, as instances of a type of playful ‘practising’ which threatens to unfix the rule-bound adult world.

Adrian Heathfield’s lyrical musings on Pina Bausch’s dance theatre and La Ribot’s ‘new minimalist dance’ also address a type of resistant play that opens up alternate orders. For Heathfield, Bausch’s late 1970s *Café Müller* suspends the predominant cultural orders of time – the linear, progressive and accumulative – and plunges the spectator ‘into the suppressed orders of temporality in contemporary Western capitalist cultures: time as it is lived in felt experience, in the folds and flows of phenomenal relation’ (192-3). The strategies he pinpoints as crucial to the reinstatement of the suppressed include the application of emotional and sensory logics of causality and the orchestration of an errant tempo, ‘alternately volatile and slow, persistent and inconsistent’ (192). Heathfield argues that Bausch’s experiential time-space configuration is founded on the flows of desire and characterised by ‘returns of attainment and loss within a descending trajectory’ (198). Hence he describes its shape as cyclical or spiral, and memorably suggests that this shape is echoed in *Café Müller*’s somatic trope of the falling woman – lifted repeatedly into the outstretched arms of a male partner who always fails to hold her. While Bausch’s experiential time is an alternate model, it nonetheless is based on a belief in time as continuous. By contrast, Heathfield finds La Ribot’s subjection of the bodily image to duration – which brings about the interplay of movement and stillness, and causes past and present to lose their distinction – to be an expression of uncertainty about the continuity of experiential time.

When discussing dance theatre’s trope of falling, Heathfield also raises the issue of an instability in the structures of belonging, an issue arguably of some relevance in a Europe subject to the forces of globalisation. Heathfield interprets the falling (and the failure to hold) as an instance of a dysfunctional erotic relation. He reads this and the numerous moments in Bausch’s work when figures are caught between desire for and fear of amorous connection,

as symptomatic of a ‘social and cultural milieu that increasingly values transient connection over long-term bonding’ (190). According to Heathfield, Bausch converts the European café from a scene of social exchange to an evacuated space of failed interaction that reflects ‘the fragmentation and declension of the social sphere, in a culture increasingly obsessed with the force of individualism’ (192). While *Café Müller* presents belonging as a predominantly interpersonal question, Sophie Nield’s discussion of the theatrical ‘appearance’ of the border-crosser who, like an actor, is simultaneously what they are (material body) and what they are representing themselves to be (a refugee worthy of protection), explores the issue of belonging in relation to the new Europe and global subject. Those who cannot successfully perform belonging as demanded by the border encounter, not only expand Europe’s refugee camps – the ‘holes in the fabric of the union of nation states’ (68) – but also expose the performative and provisional nature of the insider citizens’ state of belonging.

Many of the contributors enact a type of belonging to Europe by demonstrating an affinity with continental traditions of thought, an affinity foregrounded through the placement of two philosophical essays – the opening piece by Kelleher and final chapter by Simon Bayly – at either end of the collection. After introducing Europe as not only a messy geopolitical reality but also an imagined life, Bayly enacts an attachment to the mental landscape of his neighbours by engaging with the thought of French dramatist and philosopher of the event, Alain Badiou. Kelleher places the objects of his study and his own scholarship in proximity to the thought of Giorgio Agamben, Martin Heidegger, Bruno Latour, and Slavoj Žižek. Other authors draw on Walter Benjamin, Julia Kristeva, Jean Laplanche, Jacques Lacan, and Brian Massumi. In her foreword to the collection, Janelle Reinelt presents the deployment of continental philosophy as a trademark of British/European theatre and scholarship. From my own experience of that scholarship, British deployment has been less intense, which is one of the reasons why *Contemporary Theatres in Europe: A Critical Companion* strikes me as an extra-ordinary marker of current trajectories on both stage and page. While the text is marketed as an introduction for not only scholars but also students

and theatregoers, I suspect that its serious engagement with these philosophical traditions, together with its necessarily condensed presentation of continental ideas, will present considerable challenges for many of these readers.

The volume also offers numerous insights into the current state of play with regard to ancient aesthetic concerns such as the nature and purpose of imitation. As the editors point out, most of the authors 'uncover all sorts of ambivalently imitative acts – a range of mimetic doublings that seem to unsettle, even as they constitute, the very substance of the contemporary "here and now" (14). In his examination of the 2003-4 programme of Latvia's Jaunais Rigas Teatris (JRT) and of *Homo Egg Egg* by Norwegian company Baktruppen, Kelleher observes a return to experimentation with pretend that is accompanied by an anthropological focus on how humans and non-humans struggle 'over the ways in which their representations will count as real' (22). In the case of the JRT, the intense experiments with mimesis were sparked by a desire to counter the new 'monopoly' on imitation by television 'reality shows'. In a bid to take these shows on at their own game, the JRT actors worked on producing reality portraits with a twist. For example, in the *By Gorky* project their strategies included mixing 'post-modern' self-imitation of everyday activities in a Big Brother glass room, with the reading of text from Maxim Gorky's naturalist play *The Lower Depths*, written at the dawn of Russian socialism. For Kelleher the mixing of different realist rhetorics seemed to encourage the historical agent, living in the twilight of Communism, to 'conceive its contemporaneity in relation to the compromise of utopian hopes *in the past*; conceive itself indeed as the "outcome" of those "crushed potentials"' (26). Kelleher presents *Homo Egg Egg* as a theatre of the hyper-familiar rather than the hyper-real, where the main spectacle is a series of video projections of middle-aged Norwegians (i.e. Baktruppen) examining findings – including hazel leaves, mud, water and urine specimens – from their trip to the Neanderthal valley near Düsseldorf. Throughout the presentation of the video images, live performers – situated for the duration of the performance under the audience seating – simultaneously provided humorous commentary on their pretend investigations. Here and in the JRT

work Kelleher sees a use of mimetic technology to generate a ‘historically informed engagement with the ways in which the human animal has been “made up”, and “makes up”, with the others – not least the whispering dead – whose worlds impinge on ours’ (32).

Quick’s fascination with the partial and stop-start imitations of the young performers in *Übung* continues a Benjaminian interest in interrupting those types of imitation that tend to duplicate oppressive orthodoxies. By contrast, according to Nicholas Ridout, the contemporary theatre company most commonly associated with the anti-naturalist European *avant garde*, Italy’s SRS, display a paradoxical devotion to ‘the old theatrical “magic” of mimetic representation’ (178). Ridout presents the powers and deceit of representation as a central concern for the company, and argues that one of their trademark artistic practices is to generate a sense of the ‘real’ by means of theatrical illusion. Ridout describes ‘magical’ images which make spectators feel they are experiencing a reality rather than a representation – such as the screen image of a male actor’s vocal cords, produced by the endoscope he inserts through his nostrils, which gives some audience members such a strong sense of being in the presence of the real vocal cords they can barely look at it. In a parallel move, SRS play with the difficulty in the theatre of telling the real from the copy. One vivid example of this strategy Ridout provides is the singing of a lament by a young male whose voice seems to come both from him (according to his naked torso it is indeed *his* breathing and vocal apparatus that is creating this song) and from elsewhere (the voice is amplified in an almost undetectable way and, more disconcertingly, it is a soprano voice). Even when we know the singer to be an endocrinological castrato for whom this body-voice match is very *real*, it is difficult to decide whether he is *really* singing this high pitched lament or miming/copying it. Throughout this volume, the exploration of diverse representational acts returns the reader again and again to the pleasures and difficulties of truth telling in the make-believe spaces of theatre.

How these representational acts are (or could be) re-presented through writings is another performance studies issue given thoughtful exploration in

this text, particularly in Susan Melrose's chapter on ways of assuring the survival of Ariane Mnouchkine's work with the Théâtre du Soleil company. As Melrose points out, in the university context the 'performance-continuity', or survival as shared knowledge, of professional performance practices tends to be assured mainly by writing, and less frequently through professional documentation or co-operation with practitioners. Melrose demonstrates how certain common practices of (academic) writing endanger rather than ensure the continuity of performance process. For example, an emphasis on signature (e.g. 'Ariane Mnouchkine's work') reproduces a misrecognition of the collaborative multi-participant nature of performance. Melrose also argues that by its very nature writing – even multi-vocal writing which mixes explanatory, technical, popular and anecdotal registers – is an insufficient vehicle for ensuring the survival of multi-modal performance work. This is in great part because writing performs a backward-looking ontologisation whereas performance practice process is characterised by a continual becoming and a *looking forward with curiosity* to a future event. Melrose proposes that performance survival requires 'processional theorisation'. Drawing on the usage of 'theoria' in ancient accounts to refer to the procession of ambassadors who publicly performed acts of observation and contemplation for their listeners, Melrose conceptualises 'theory' as a knowledge-practice that involves mixed-mode performance and encourages a receptiveness to every kind of mental and sensory experience. Hence her argument that Darmon and Vilpoux's 1997 video account of Theatre du Soleil's *Tartuffe* better 'theorises' Mnouchkine's work with the company than does any published written account.

One of the striking aspects of Melrose's chapter is the way it functions as a type of metacommentary on the nature and limitations of most of the authors' endeavours in this collection. While Reinelt introduces the volume as 'an opportunity to see how British theatre scholars have been developing their own version of Performance Studies' (xv), Melrose raises the issue of whether the performance writing in this book is more accurately described as 'spectator studies'. Indeed most of the essays are devoted to reflection on a single expert spectator's experience of an event, rather than on practitioners'

processes. Paradoxically Melrose's piece – a timely reflection by an expert spectator on the writing and theorisation practices of other expert spectators – provides a key instance of the type of study that she questions. The notable exception to the 'spectator studies' tendency is Mike Pearson's dialogue with the Marshfield Mummers, which reveals both their and his interest in reorientating 'the enquiry of performance studies from spectatorship' towards a closer listening to 'what practitioners themselves perceive that they are doing' (147). For me the losses that result from the focus in *Contemporary Theatres in Europe* on the spectator's encounter are more than adequately offset by the gains. Yes, at times the emphasis on articulating viewing positions frustrates the attempts of the (geographically removed) reader to picture these theatres. However, the rigorous and imaginative grappling with experiences of recent performance sustained throughout this book is also immensely productive, generating both a multitude of new insights into European cultural performance and a richer understanding of the philosophical and political art of spectatorship.

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