

## Book Reviews

*Post Dramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance* editor(s) **Karen Jurs-Munby, Jerome Carroll and Steve Giles, (2013)**

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 312 pp. (softback)

By Sam Haddow (Central School of Speech and Drama)

The consolidation of a new critical entity – be it a term, trend, method of categorization – requires a degree of elbow shuffling amidst the corpora of existing discourses. Tensions arise as neophytes fight their nascent corner and stalwarts of existing entities worry about the effects of the interloper on their own fields of study. In recent years, Hans Thies-Lehmann's 'postdramatic theatre', an aesthetic vocabulary for contemporary performance practices that resist the conditions of a 'dramatic' sensibility (plot and character, building and environment, actor and spectator, etc.), has sparked this exact process. In response, there have been some ferocious criticisms, with perhaps the loudest being voiced by Elinor Fuchs:

If in fact the 'dramatic' is destined [...] to be erased like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea, then all social and political theorizing of the past quarter century so notoriously absent in his [Thies-Lehmann's] essay could be seen as mere flotsam on the ineluctable tide of an aesthetic life expectancy. (32)

Fuchs' attention is not so much on the contemporary as its anterior: if postdramatic theatre becomes a pre-eminent form of critical interpretation *now*, then what implications does this have for *before*? Her argument recalls the canon formations of T.S. Eliot, who famously sought to formalise the radical 'new' by demonstrating

its perpetual reliance upon pre-formed traditions. For Fuchs, recent 'social and political theorizing' has been built upon explicitly dramatic principles and the eradication of the 'dramatic' in performance scholarship dislocates the political dimension of performance itself. This book seeks to prove Fuchs wrong by rethinking the political dimension of performance in a way that subverts, defies or avoids the dramatic tradition altogether. Emerging from a conference in 2011, it contains an introduction and 12 chapters. For the most part, these are case-studies into specific examples of practice that are used to open up broader critical questions, and contributors range from established scholars such as Thies-Lehmann and Karen Jürs-Munby, to (then) PhD candidates such as Michael Wood and Antje Dietze.

The groundwork for the project has been pretty well established elsewhere. Brandon Woolf's chapter, which asserts a political quality to the aesthetic, essentially rehashes a truism from literary studies. David Barnett looks back to Brecht in order to denounce the contingency of postdramatic theatre upon the conventions of Epic Theatre, but his argument is familiar via the work of Heiner Müller. The strength of Barnett's chapter is his analysis of Michael Thalheimer's version of *Mr Puntilla and His Man Matti* where historicist readings of Brecht's text are subordinated to eventual relationships forged in the instance of performance. This pushes towards a key principle of 'postdramatic theatre', which as Jerome Carroll states elsewhere, identifies a 'situation in which the production of meaning itself is *shared*' (252). The democratic production of meaning has its own varied and complex lineages, recalling the 'empty mechanisms' of which Derrida was so fond (and it's no accident that Thies-Lehmann draws deeply into Derrida's ideas). But the contributors to this volume, inevitably, are more interested in establishing the political dimensions of postdramatic theatre in

precisely those areas claimed by the dramatic. In his own chapter, Thies-Lehmann provocatively goes to drama's most jealously guarded corner and ponders 'A Future for Tragedy?':

Tragic experience is bound to a process where we are taken to the edge of the normative and conceptual self-assurance, and this process cannot be achieved by purely theoretical subversion but by the uncanny mental and physical experience of entering the twilight zone, where the substantiality of the cultural norms which we adhere to is put in doubt. (99)

Thies-Lehmann affirms the *transgressive* nature of tragedy at the same time as historicizing the dramatic as a crystallization of principles emerging at, and for, a given juncture. Since he follows Nietzsche, Artaud and Benjamin in reading the tragic as the 'destabilising of the basic grounds of our cultural existence, even a blurring of the boundaries of the self', he concludes that the dramatic cannot achieve this objective *now*. Thus, the dramatic no longer serves the function for which it was intended – we need new ways of 'entering the twilight zone'. Ironically, of course, this further locates postdramatic theatre within a very well-established lineage of dramatic iconoclasm. Karen Jürs-Munby highlights this in her chapter 'Parasitic Politics', where she observes the predations of postdramatic theatre not only upon the 'cultural norms which we adhere to' but specifically the *dramatic* traditions within those cultures. She focusses on the work of Elfriede Jelinek, whose 'secondary dramas' dismantle and reshape famous parent texts in fragmented readings. Jelinek's outspoken affirmation of the necessities of *this* context come across as a sort of strategic credulousness: 'I staple myself firmly to reality as it is offered to me, filtered through third party opinions (and, by contrast, to a proper filter, which is

supposed to take these out, fortified with poisonous matters, to which I add some more, as I need something juicy for my writing)' (216).

What Jürs-Munby finds here, building on Thies-Lehmann's provocations, is a willful embrace of the collapsed boundaries between text-worlds and reality-effects as the conditions of the contemporary, thus the arena in which new forms of politics and political engagement must be sought. Here, postdramatic theatre is properly historical as both an emergence *at* and response *to* a given context. The tricky part is the historical and political consolidation of a set of principles that explicitly contest these axioms, a consolidation which this book sets out to *begin*. At the end, Fuchs' attack probably provided convenient access to the arena in which postdramatic theatre's legitimacy would always have had to be fought for. This book is likely to be the first of many such projects, and whilst there is some fascinating work in development here, one is left with the sense that the best is yet to come.

***Performance Studies in Motion: International Perspectives and Practices in the Twenty-First Century* editor(s) Atay Citron, Sharon Aronson-Lehavi and David Zerbib..**

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014, 401 pp. (softback)

By Benjamin Fowler

This sprawling survey of contemporary Performance Studies (PS) gathers contributions from a 2010 conference held at the University of Haifa in honour of Richard Schechner. Schechner's border raids into Anthropology and the Social Sciences established performance, from the 1970s onwards, as both an object of study and a theoretical lens through which to examine diverse social practices. Accordingly, this collection reflects Schechner's

‘broad spectrum’ approach to PS, which he describes—in his own contribution to the volume—as the ‘ultimate disciplinary bricoleur’ (48).

In the first of three opening theoretical essays, David Zerbib establishes a synergy between Schechner’s PS and post-structuralism. He recounts a 1966 literary criticism summit at John Hopkins University, where a precocious young Schechner tried to “inject the side issue of the embodied performance” (25) into a panel discussion between Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes. Zerbib then links Schechner’s theorisation of performance as “restored behaviour” (“repetitions with no original. . . or the indeterminacy of a centre of intentionality and identity”, 25) with the dynamic energy released by the “free play of the sign” (23) in post-structuralist philosophy.

Henry Bial’s particularly engaging contribution further elaborates this dynamic power of “play” by modelling PS on a computer operational system and its multiple releases. Bial’s analysis reveals performance as a kind of world-making that “nearly always tends towards the utopian” (41). Schechner’s own essay corroborates Bial’s analysis. As PS unfolds into the future, Schechner posits a new politically, economically, and spiritually non-aligned “Third World”, led by performance theorists and artists who relate on a “performative” rather than an “ideological” basis. The remaining 19 chapters—highly specific case studies of phenomena viewed as or through performance, rooted in local contexts—broadly support a notion of performance that stresses its utopian political credentials.

Louis Holzman and Dan Friedman discuss how a series of ‘Performing The World’ conferences in New York have recognised performance as a transformational practice “allow[ing] human beings to develop beyond instinctual and socially pat-

terned behaviour” (280). William H. Sun and Faye C. Fei outline the development of a ‘Social Performance Studies’ in China that collides Schechnerian PS with management discourse, helping businesses ready employees for a service economy in a culture unused to such performative demand suggesting, for this reader, how PS’s emphasis on flexibility and fluidity occasionally sees it veering uncomfortably close to the ideological imperatives of globalised neoliberalism, troubling Schechner’s insistence that the ‘performative’ is able to slip free from ideology.

Two contributions make striking departures from the collection’s utopian orthodoxy. Annabelle Winograd analyses two World War One photographs that apparently depict a “soldier-victim” forced to perform before a group of off-duty combatants. She perceives “no soldier downtime theatrical, but performance retaining its power and danger to wound, to terrorize, even to kill” (189), thus suggesting the ambivalence of performance’s transformative potential. Dariusz Kosiński’s argument that “Polish culture is best understood through the lens of performance” (159) submits the year of public ritual and ceremony following in the wake of 2010’s presidential plane crash to a dramaturgical analysis, ultimately regarding performance as “a weapon of conservative restoration” (170). These are welcome counter-perspectives to the largely unchallenged assumption elsewhere that performance’s benign ontology offers a paradigm for utopian social relations. Indeed, only Kosiński engages Jon McKenzie’s provocative claim that “performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth”, identifying “perform, or else...” as the mantra of contemporary power and authority (*Perform or Else: from Discipline to Performance*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, p .18).

Many contributions offer case studies of performance

as activism, including Eva Brenner's account of her community-based Viennese group *Fleischerei*. Grappling with contemporary performance discussions whose roots lie outside of Schechnerian PS, Brenner bases her activist manifesto on a critique of Postdramatic Theatre as theorised by Hans-Thies Lehmann. In stressing "aesthetic instead of social concerns" (174), the post-dramatic paradigm, for Brenner, reflects artistic confusion, angst, and loss of hope, consonant with a neoliberal economic structure that unleashes "startling states of economic crisis, social downgrading and cultural lack of innovation" (174). Brenner's call for a return to political activism through performance that addresses local concerns is answered in the work of the *Tul Karem-Tel Aviv* theatre group. Chen Alon's chapter documents this community of Palestinians and Israelis who use non-violent performance techniques (based on Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*) to resist the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Jennifer Herszman Capraru outlines the links between theatre, ritual and catharsis in the work of her company *Isôko Theatre Rwanda*, aimed at "rebuilding civil society" (208) through indirectly addressing the pain that still haunts the country since the 100 days of the 1994 genocide. Daphna Ben-Shaul pursues the critical value of performance in the work of Israeli group *Public Movement*. In their re-enactments of military ceremony and state of emergency rescue routines, Ben-Shaul sees not the aestheticization of the political, but "the political aestheticization of ceremonial codes and their crucial connection to crisis" (119).

Despite the editors' attempt to organize 22 essays into seven broad "motions", their sheer variety of topics and contexts resists neat thematic analysis. This very heterogeneity, however, is the volume's chief pleasure. As well as providing a platform for practitioners and scholars working at the bleeding edge of

performance, adapting theory to real world contexts and reflecting on issues raised by practice, the editors have collated truly international perspectives. Israel is strongly represented—Atay Citron’s stand-out essay charts the “audacity and insane courage” (261) of the Israeli Dream Doctors emerging from the Medical Clowning academic training programme Haifa, led by Citron himself—but the collection’s geographical reach embraces Jazmin Badong Llana’s discussion of the dotoc religious performances in the Philippines and Liora Sarfati’s evaluation of authenticity and technology in contemporary Korean shamanic ritual. That I have been unable to reference every contribution speaks of the collection’s length, but its eclecticism results in chapters that also feature *Théâtre du Soleil*, Warsaw’s *Museum of the History of Polish Jews*, Rabih Mroué, and a reading, by Klaas Tindemans, of the “democratic self-destruction of Belgium as a nation in performative and theatrical terms” (148). According to the editors’ desire to offer “a concrete and pragmatic view of current research and objects of study” (1), this succeed. In characterising performance as a utopian, ideologically untainted methodology, too many of the perspectives gathered here reflect the collection’s blind spot: exactly whose future this utopia figures, an important question in light of the central role that performance has placed in many radical authoritarian regimes.

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***Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* by Jen Harvie**

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 240pp. (softback)

By Matthew Midgley

Jen Harvie's latest monograph is a timely evaluation of socially-turned art and performance in the UK. It provides a cautious but incisive contextualisation of trends in this type of art from the mid-1990s to the present, a period defined by neoliberal political economy that includes the legacy of Margaret Thatcher, the rise of New Labour, and the current Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government. The term neoliberalism has entered popular discourse in recent years but those looking for a theoretical definition of the term will not find an evolutionary one here. Harvie has followed David Harvey in recognising supreme market freedom and 'diminished state intervention' (12) as defining facets of neoliberal capitalism. While there are legitimate questions to be asked as to whether the neoliberal state intervenes less than a social welfare state (performing fewer social welfare functions yet increasingly intervening in the interests of business or 'security', for example), Harvie's multidisciplinary and cultural materialist approach rightly focuses on the art and the specific contexts in which it is created.

Harvie sets out clear terms for the scope of the book in the introduction, citing multiple aims. By delineating the pressures exerted by neoliberalism on all spheres of life (not just politico-economic ones), Harvie seeks to contribute to the understanding of socially-turned art and the debates surrounding it, interrogating the artistic responses to these pressures in order to 'find in them models of fairness and constructive social engagement' (25) able to resist and challenge neoliberal capitalism. She argues convincingly for the almost exclusive focus on social-

ly-turned art and performance in London on the ground that the city is, rightly or wrongly, the fulcrum of artistic activity of this kind, as well as the place most acutely influenced by neoliberal capitalism within the United Kingdom. The book is arranged into four chapters, each covering a crucial sphere in the arts ecology: labour, 'artepeneurialism, space and public-private capital. In each the potential benefits and risks to the arts are considered in relation to socially-turned artworks. Each chapter encounters one or more social problems that have arisen out of neoliberal policies, from flexible labour to gentrification, which artists are negotiating, challenging and, perhaps, perpetuating or normalising.

While *Fair Play* is one of the first books to document art and performance's relationship to neoliberalism specifically, others, including Harvie 2005 work in *Staging the UK*, have authored similar accounts of the influence of politico-economic ideologies on the arts. Baz Kershaw has been particularly outspoken on the commodification of theatre by market-centric governments (*The Radical in Performance*), and the Thatcher years inspired numerous works documenting artistic responses to neoliberal changes in labour, housing, and spatial relations (see Peacock, *Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties* and McGrath, *The Bone Wont Break: On Hope and Theatre in Hard Times*). Harvie's contribution does much more than re-tread this old ground. The strength of the book lies in its balanced approach to artists, arts administrators and cultural producers who engage in socially-turned art. For instance, unlike Kershaw, Harvie acknowledges the potential harm as well as the potential radicalism in these performative models of social relations. The analysis of Kate Bond and Morgan Lloyd's *You Me Bum Bum Train*, for example, concludes that while audience participation in such works may allow active engagement and creative opportunity, it may also facilitate

exploitation of unpaid labour whilst providing merely the illusion of individual agency, subordinating amateur spectator-performers to a professional elite (28-29).

That neoliberalism has become the dominant force in politics is not up for debate: rather, Harvie analyses how neoliberal political economy is changing labour, fostering entrepreneurialism (or artpreneurialism), utilising space and encouraging public-private capital partnerships within the arts. Using a handful of examples from theatre and performance art, Harvie explores the potentials and dichotomies at play with an even hand. Few would disagree that many artists have genuine social concerns, but the problem raised by Harvie, following Foucault, is that they do not always recognise how their own practices can help to naturalise socially destructive neoliberal economic and cultural mechanisms.

This naturalisation is at its most insidious and perhaps its most radical when artists themselves are internalising and practising the enterprising, efficiency-pursuing mantra of the creative economy, whether knowingly in order to challenge, or unknowingly (with the risk of normalising such discourses). Harvie considers and frequently questions the efficacy of disseminating such doctrines. For example, while Michael Landy may successfully bring the 'human costs of creative destruction' (91) inherent in market capitalism to the attention of his audiences by reproducing its effects upon himself or others, works such as *Uninvited Guests*' *The Good Neighbour* may contribute to norms of unpaid or delegated labour (43).

The art and performance works documented in the book are by their very nature ephemeral, and especially in the case of immersive or one-to-one theatre there is a limit to the range of examples any one author could draw upon. Given the London focus and the challenges posed in documenting relational art and

performance, Harvie's work serves as a consciousness raiser for artists and researchers, who can draw upon the ideas in the book to interrogate how neoliberal hegemony influences their locality, their work, and (if so inclined) how they might challenge or resist that hegemony. At times the reader, sensing that Harvie is tempering her criticism of the art or policies that she is discussing, wills her to drive the point home. In never overstating its claims *Fair Play* ultimately offers fewer attacking opening to opponents, which given the ubiquity of neoliberal thought in government, aspects of arts administration and higher education, is perhaps prudent. Harvie is careful not to attack artists who may, knowingly or otherwise, sustain elitism in the arts via the neoliberalised practices explored in the book.

The success of the book rests upon how the war against neoliberalism should be waged; quite often more polemical attacks fail to rouse the moderate majority. Harvie seems to have instead opted for guerrilla tactics, challenging neoliberal hegemony with sustained, intelligent and well directed criticism. *Fair Play* is an important refutation of the neoliberal orthodoxy that threatens to overwhelm many aspects of our society.

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***The Feminist Spectator in Action: Feminist Criticism for the Stage and Screen* by Jill Dolan**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 221, (softback)

By Stephanie Tillotson

*The Feminist Spectator in Action* addresses current concerns about the relevance of the politics of feminism to contemporary cultural practice. It asks a provocative and increasingly widespread question: 40 years after the potent acme of the Women's Movement, why should the consumer or the creator of culture care about a feminist perspective on the arts? Jill Dolan's magnificent book offers an answer in the most practical form available to the feminist critic. It is a collection of essays that reviews diverse expressions of contemporary culture, with a sharp and primary focus on representations of, not only gender, but also class, colour, ethnicity and sexuality. It builds directly on her work in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (to which its title pays homage) and is the encapsulation of a critical practice developed throughout her 35-year career as a theatre and performance studies scholar, feminist thinker, writer, teacher and avid consumer of cultural events. Moreover, it is a celebration of the artistic work of women, and men, working in North American; and to some extent European; theatre, television, film and performance art.

The referential nature of the title suggests that the reader of *The Feminist Spectator in Action* requires an acquaintance with Dolan's earlier philosophical work. This is not necessarily the case and though her analysis is theoretically rich, this latest book may be enjoyed as an engaging collection of independent phenomenological responses to wide-ranging events, from Broadway productions to the avant-garde, from local experiences to film and television series consumed as mass entertainment. Scholars

and students will find much resource material for examination, augmented by Dolan's expertise in interpreting how socio-political contexts, design, composition, spaces and technologies produce meaning in performance. Her dramatic criticism works in partnership with her academic work, where she rejects absolutely a feminism that applies a 'monolithic approach to politics and culture' (*Spectator as Critic*, xv). She has argued instead for the parsing of feminism into taxonomic genera. These 'discourses of feminism' she defines as: Liberal Feminism, based on the premise that, within current social systems, women should receive equal treatment on the same terms as men; Cultural Feminism that demands a different social structure, one that prizes female-derived ideology over so-called male culture; and lastly Materialist Feminism, which Dolan herself advocates (xv). This latter classification does not incorporate the gender essentialism of Cultural Feminism, giving precedence instead to the critical study of 'deeper ideological scaffolding of forms, contents and modes of production ... aligned with a materialism linked to Marxism, and to theories of social constructivism derived from Foucault and ... Judith Butler' (xvi). These precise distinctions inform Dolan's writing, which is characterized by a close reading of the material conditions of theatre, performance, film and television events that feature significant contributions by women.

The book is chiefly dedicated to the reproduction of 34 reviews originally posted on Jill Dolan's blog, *The Feminist Spectator*. Two-thirds of the book's reviews are taken from her entries for 2011 and 2012. That her blog received the 2010-11 George Jean Nathan Award in Dramatic Criticism is testimony to the quality of her writing. The book conserves the non-linear structure of the blog, leaving the reader free to navigate a personal route through the narrative, aided by the Appendix which points to distinctions

of theme (e.g. adaptations, Shakespeare, mothers and daughters), genres and venues (Broadway, the West End, Hollywood or Indie films) or of authorship (people of colour, gay practitioners, or women as writers or directors). Dolan covers a huge range of texts, from the films *Mamma Mia*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *The Social Network*; to theatre, *Clybourne Park*, *Hair*, and *Death of a Salesman*; to television series, *Nurse Jackie*, *Homeland* and *Girls*. She has, however, imposed a subjective structure on her material by gathering her essays into four main sections: Advocacy, which includes writing about women artists whose work has been or might otherwise be overlooked by the conventional critical establishment; Activism, 'demonstrates how feminist critics might promote media literacy'; Argument, which 'describes films and productions that resonate with social issues' and finally Artistry, which 'discusses films and theatre productions that I found particularly moving and resonant'. These distinctions, however, she describes as 'specious. I use them merely to highlight some of the essential feminist critical tasks', a statement that registers a further and fundamental element to Professor Dolan's practice – her ardent belief that feminist criticism is pedagogical (*Spectator in Action* xvi). Her purpose is instructive; her goal to galvanize a plurality of voices whose objective is social transformation.

In the Introduction, Dolan makes clear her intention to inspire 'a community of feminist spectators, critics, readers and writers', that she hopes 'will include people of all genders, races, ethnicities, classes and ages' (*Spectator in Action* 194). Her ambition is that others will embrace the popular critical possibilities of the Internet as one site where ideology may be re-written. In addition to the reviews, therefore, Dolan has included a 'How-to Guide' and 'Further Reading' section specifically to encourage and enable individuals to develop a personal praxis based on the

paradigm of ‘critical generosity’ (*Spectator as Critics* xxxvii). In this model –with Dolan’s book as an exemplar –the reviewer is asked to engage with the cultural event in a spirit of knowledge, courtesy and respect. Feminist criticism, she writes, ‘strives to consider what theatre and performance might *mean*, what it might *do*, how it might be *used* in a world that requires ever more and better conversations about how we might imagine *who we are and who we might be*’ (xxxvii). Reviewing the drag artist, David Alexander Jones, Dolan describes his work as ‘a lovely, loving and lived-in performance that lets him revel in his adornments and use them as a vehicle for *affect* more than *effect*’ (*Spectator in Action* 172). This is a pertinent epilogue for *The Feminist Spectator in Action* itself, a channel for Dolan to create an affect for tangible change. This is a fascinating book that upholds the feminist perspective on the arts as one with the potential to empower social change, committed to nothing less than economic as well as gender and racial justice.

### **Works Cited**

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