

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rachel Clements

doi:10.1017/S0266464X17000707

Daniel Schulze

Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make it Real

London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. xii, 284 p. £64.99.

ISBN: 978-1-3500-0097-1.

This latest contribution to discourse on the real in theatre offers a bold rejection of postmodernist orthodoxy. The author's contention is that post-modernity has been superseded by a new 'structure of feeling' (borrowing from Raymond Williams) that oscillates between cynicism and a desire for 'genuine' authenticity.

Drawing on work by Wolfgang Funk, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker, Schulze argues that audiences of contemporary theatre – mostly twenty-first-century British – are now more alert to and fed up with the pervasiveness of fake and simulation 'in a world that is increasingly perceived as mediated, fake, or mendacious', and as a result are more willing to draw a sense of the authentic from contrived situations. Furthermore, for Schulze, such theatre – spanning durational theatre, one-on-one theatre, immersive theatre and documentary theatre – 'knows and serves an audience member's hunger for authentic experience'.

This study is most successful when it focuses on specific strategies that theatre makers use to elicit an ambiguous sense of authenticity in work by Forced Entertainment, Ontroerend Goed, Punchdrunk and others, succinctly described at one point as 'absolute fakes' that promise to deliver 'the real thing', and intelligently complicated by analyses of reality effects and 'aesthetic facts' in documentary performance.

However, the writing is less persuasive when it shifts attention to audience desire. Rather than sticking with an approach that focuses on how engagement is invited, and aside from illuminating thick descriptions of the author's own experiences, the book often has recourse to more general theorization of the audience condition. Here, the reader has to make leaps of faith between some fascinating conclusions about 'metamodernism' as a new cultural paradigm, and claims about the metamodernity of audiences who the author suggests both seek and perceive authenticity in diverse theatre forms.

This is also where greater recognition of theatre's participation in the commodification of authentic experience would have proved useful,

and indeed it is hard not to draw a parallel between this book and Andy Lavender's monograph *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (2016). While no doubt published after submission of Schulze's manuscript, the latter gathers a more comprehensive breadth of highly relevant theatre and performance scholarship to inform analyses of the real, authenticity, post-postmodernism, immersion, and the experience economy in the kinds of theatre explored by Schulze. I also wondered how his argument might read in a postcolonial context, where the concept of authenticity has played such an important role. Nonetheless, authenticity has also accrued significant timeliness as an issue in an era of 'fake news' and political controversy, which – alongside a provocative challenge to post-modernism – makes this book a useful touchstone for both students and scholars of contemporary theatre and performance.

ADAM ALSTON

doi:10.1017/S0266464X17000719

Trish Reid

The Theatre of Anthony Neilson

London: Bloomsbury, 2017. 220 p. £75.

ISBN: 978-1-4725-7030-7.

Anthony Neilson, as a dramatist, has existed at something of a right angle to the development of British theatre from the 1990s to the present. It's not simply that he was slightly too old to be fully incorporated into the same generation as Kane, Ravenhill, and the other in-yer-face dramatists. Nor is it that his collaborative playmaking process is unusual in a theatrical environment where the figure of the lone writer still has something of the cultural cachet it enjoyed from the 1950s through to the end of the twentieth century. Nor is it that he is a Scottish theatre worker, with a keen awareness of Scottish popular theatre traditions and styles.

Rather, it is that his theatre is contingent, to an extent not found elsewhere on the British stage. From *Normal* onward, Neilson's work operates on the principle that no set of theatrical relations should be left undisrupted. Whether through the intrusion of unpredictable characters (as in *Penetrator*), the staging of taboo behaviours (*The Censor*), time frames that are initially hard to disentangle (*Stitching*), the irruption of bizarre, surreally comic, fantastic or horrifying elements into the onstage world (*Hooverbag*, *The Wonderful*

World of Dissocia, Realism, Narrative), Neilson has crafted a series of performance texts that are impossible to predict. It is a measure of the atmosphere created in his productions that the second act of *Dissocia*, which is scrupulously realistic (almost to the point of dramatic inertia), feels as uncanny as the dream logic of the play's first act.

In this, the first full-length monograph devoted to Neilson's work, Trish Reid succeeds in providing a context for perhaps the most protean playwright on the contemporary stage. The book follows a very rough chronology, from Neilson's early, tense explorations of power, sexuality, and trauma in *Penetrator, The Censor, and Stitching* through to the complex interrogations of the nature of performance in recent plays such as *Narrative* and *Unreachable*. In doing so, she remains alive to the theoretical and cultural questions that Neilson's work poses. As she points out, he interrogates certain key assumptions that audiences, critics, and academics make about performance.

She argues that the central fact of Neilson's texts is that they simply will not settle – that they aim to disrupt a simple mapping of the events staged on to contemporary debates about identity. It is this, Reid argues, that makes Neilson's work political, at least in its effects. The characters in his work can't be read; they do not yield up any fixed meanings; and as such this implicitly argues for an idea of identity which is radically fluid (even for characters who seem rooted firmly in quotidian reality, such as Stuart in *Realism*).

Reid's discussion is well supported by short essays from Gary Cassidy (on Neilson's working practices), Anna Harpin on the complex relation between theatricality and realism in the plays, Mark Brown on Neilson the Scottish theatre maker, and by an interview with Neilson himself. This is a very strong, comprehensive introduction to Neilson's work, and a thought-provoking examination of a playwright whose place in discussions of contemporary performance should, by rights, be far more secure than it currently is.

DAVID PATTIE

doi:10.1017/S0266464X17000720

Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty, ed.

Culture, Democracy, and the Right to Make Art

London: Bloomsbury, 2017. 280 p. £75.

ISBN: 978-1-474-25835-7.

This is a vital collection for those among us undertaking, teaching, and researching a whole range of practices that are descended – directly or indirectly – from the community arts movement. It offers welcome reminders of what motivated a key period of innovation – ideas of how art could stand for things by standing *with* people, in their communities. For those, like myself, who started

out inspired by these practices but arrived too late, it clarifies what changed and how.

It's a tale of highly committed people, excited by the potential of a new way for art to play its part in political change, discovering allies within and between the communities they invested themselves in, and becoming a movement. The movement writes its manifestos and has its disputes, formalizes and improvizes, and gleefully bites the hands that feed it. The Arts Councils of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland step in and out, out and in, until ultimately it's Thatcherism that does for the resources that have allowed community arts to grow.

The unresolved issue of the book, and the field of practice, is the mutation from commitment to professionalism, the changed basis on which artists, in most cases, now create work with non-artists. Work is now led by the priorities of funders, enlightened or otherwise, but susceptible to impact-focus and target-chasing, and organizations whose priorities lie in more conservative aesthetics take a share of the work and the money that comes its way.

The mood is often melancholy about the drift away from explicit political commitment under multiple political and cultural pressures, and about the move from *cultural democracy* to the less radical *democratization of culture*. The distinction is made, quite forcefully, between community arts and participatory arts, on the basis of the key principle of shared authorship. The later chapters hold intriguing theoretical interventions – Sophie Hope on the 'aesthetic third', for example, the object that takes the space between artists and people they work with, and Owen Kelly on the 'dividuality' (as opposed to individuality) of the human subject, as a conceptual basis for the interdependence that community arts sought to celebrate and stimulate. In the conclusion the editors offer hope that the revolutionary impetus of community arts has not been lost, but lives on in a persistent spirit of dissent.

GARETH WHITE

doi:10.1017/S0266464X17000732

Tony Fisher

Theatre and Governance in Britain, 1500–1900: Democracy, Disorder, and the State

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

282 p. £75.

ISBN: 978-1-107-18215-8.

Fisher seeks here to 'describe a discourse on the theatre that began to emerge in the early modern period and whose aim was nothing less than to bring the stage within the orbit and sphere of government'. His argument astutely observes the gradual formation of the (modern) practices of governance from the 'theatre of the multitude' of