

**Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age.** By John Fletcher. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2013; pp. x + 399, 4 illustrations. \$70 cloth, \$60 e-book.

**Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America.** By Jill Stevenson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2013; pp. viii + 317, 18 illustrations. \$60 cloth, \$50 e-book.

doi:10.1017/S004055741500040X

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John Fletcher's *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age* and Jill Stevenson's *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* are two welcome additions to current scholarship in performance studies and American Evangelicalism, each presenting careful analyses of the presentation and reception of religious messages in contemporary culture.

Fletcher, a theatre historian self-identified as aligned with Left-progressive activism, examines the evolving evangelical strategies employed in the United States in terms of the challenges mounted by an increasingly pluralistic society and "the solutions, innovations, or compromises [evangelicals] create in response to these challenges" (5). Chapter 1 presents a case for the study of evangelical practices as activist theatre scholarship rather than religious sociology or cultural studies and identifies a tripartite heuristic of oppositional-agitational, community-based, and facilitated-deliberative performance activism that will ground his subsequent discussions. Chapter 2 provides historical, sociological, and theological contexts from which to understand contemporary practices of evangelical outreach in what Fletcher characterizes as a pluralistic, rather than secular, society. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on "kerygmatic" and "meta-kerygmatic" (8–9) modes of conversion, comparing door-to-door proclamations of the Gospel to Daniel Ball's theory of stasis and intrusion as a model of Western drama, and identifying less confrontational modes of persuasion that seek to understand better the worldview of the uninitiated. Both chapters thoroughly review the evangelical figures and strategies predominant in twentieth-century North America and the styles of performance activism they represent, concluding with brief commentary on how the progressive Left might learn from the successes and failures of such activist performances.

Chapters 5 and 6 present detailed case studies of large-scale, more traditionally "theatrical" evangelical performance. Focusing on "what are known variously as 'hell houses' and 'judgement houses'" (9), Fletcher links these interactive eschatological performances with much earlier traditions such as medieval morality plays and eighteenth-century fire-and-brimstone sermons in their utilization of a dramaturgy of countertastes—"imagining what a community ought *not to be*" (174)—as well as the variable perception and understanding of their message by differing audiences depending on their insider–outsider status. Fletcher's discussion of the Answers in Genesis (AiG) Creation Museum also recognizes the differing messages communicated and received by believers and potential converts,

focusing on the activist intent of replicating commonly accepted and expected performative and rhetorical conventions utilized by contemporary museums. In both chapters, Fletcher directs Left-progressive activists to the utility of recognizing and understanding the position of the opponent as well as their own when crafting their message.

Chapter 7 focuses on current trends among conflicting philosophies of worship design as performed by megachurches that seek to appeal to newcomers, but that use tiered levels of engagement to counter any perception of watered-down theology among committed believers—another familiar challenge for activist performers. Commenting on the necessity of marketing for both “seeker-sensitive” (10) churches and Left-progressives, Fletcher notes: “Part of the reason why so much activist performance involves preaching to the converted involves the fact that only the converted would consent to a performance where they know they’ll be preached to” (260). He thereby calls on performance activists to recognize and consider the potential benefits of doctrine-lite points of entry into Left-progressive worldviews as well.

In the final chapter Fletcher shifts his definition of performance from “expressive enactments for an audience” to performative acts, understood to be “conscious habits of thought and action intended to alter or produce a reality” (264) and undertakes a survey of evangelical *conversion therapies* and their ongoing evolution. While acknowledging that the undertakings of many evangelical sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) “have been harmful personally and politically to LGBT people and their families,” Fletcher also admits surprise at the degree to which “SOCE ministries are willing to engage in non-dismissive ways people they consider political and cultural enemies” (301), implying that this is perhaps the most striking lesson to be learned by Left-progressive activists.

Fletcher’s “Conclusion” reflects on the tensions implicit to the insistent presumptiveness of evangelical proselytization in a society that promotes tolerance and plurality. Far from embracing a position of tolerance for tolerance’s sake, in religious or other matters, the author hopes to encourage the progressive Left to learn from recent shifts in evangelicals so that “more performances . . . share affirmative visions of How Things Ought To Be or What Is To Be Done in ways that audiences not already on board with activists can hear and be persuaded by” them (314). In all, Fletcher contributes a balanced perspective on the intentions and methods of evangelical performance and encourages the study of their successes and failures by others hoping to persuade via performance.

Whereas Fletcher studies evangelical acts with an eye toward how they might inform other performance activists, Stevenson investigates the duality of contemporary religious spectacles in their ability to raise religious issues and/or act religiously. She, like Fletcher, remains alert to how such evangelical performances are likely to be interpreted by audiences, be they insiders or outsiders. Stevenson’s analysis of various genres of popular contemporary Christian media—“contemporary Passion plays, biblical theme parks, Holy Land recreations, creationist museums, and megachurches” (4)—seeks to reveal strategies employed to “reconfigure aesthetic information in ways that will support certain evangelical Christian epistemologies” (3) via what she calls “*evangelical dramaturgy* . . . [which] assumes certain

interpretations of representation, realism, enactment, spectatorship, and presence, in order to achieve particular aesthetic, ideological, and experiential effects” (4). Prior to discussing the dramaturgy of various genres of religious spectacle, Stevenson presents an overview of evangelicalism in the United States as well as the theoretical approach utilized in her exploration of the performative dimensions of this religious tradition. A brief discussion of links among evangelicalism, American identity, and personal behaviors lays the groundwork for the introduction of cognitive science and embodied perception, as well as phenomenology, as theoretical frameworks from which we might better understand how audiences create meaning from performance, thereby challenging a long-held binary relationship between mind and body. Stevenson recognizes the roots of the affective nature of contemporary Christian media date to the Middle Ages, a time in which meditations on Christ’s Passion resisted modern attempts to separate mind, body, and emotion. She posits that artifacts of medieval piety may provide insight to scholars of contemporary evangelicalism in their shared use of many similar “iconographic, spatial, aesthetic, and performative tactics” (19).

In Chapter 1 Stevenson reviews the cognitive and embodied elements of evangelical dramaturgy, which serve to shape the interaction “between performative event and believer-user so that it supports certain ideologies and cultivates particular religious beliefs” (25). Characteristic of evangelical dramaturgy is the reappropriation of popular, secular media in ways that foster religious resonance. Subsequent chapters analyze a variety of contemporary evangelical performances in which the author observed/participated as an audience member. Chapter 2 focuses on strategies employed by performers to engage the audience in reexperiencing events depicted at Holy Land Experience (HLE), a Christian theme park in Orlando, Florida, designed to guide participant-visitors through a variety of biblical reexperiences. Stevenson’s approach combines phenomenology, cognitive and psychophysical acting theories, as well as empirical observation in her analysis of the effect of HLE on its intended audience. A historical overview of commercial passion plays in the United States contextualizes Stevenson’s analysis, in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, of actor–audience interaction both at HLE’s production of “Behold the Lamb” and at the “Great Passion Play,” staged annually in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. Recognizing the self-selected nature of both performers and visitors, the author illustrates how simulation and conceptual blending serve to reinforce participants’ shared values.

Conceptual blending also informs Stevenson’s exploration in Chapter 5 of the effects of appropriating presentational space and paradigms associated with secular museums to reformat the communication of religious ideas. Her visits to the AiG Creation Museum inform a discussion of the response of both believers and skeptics to the guided narrative and kinetic experiences afforded to visitors. The final chapter focuses on megachurches as a performative genre geared toward the commoditization of religious knowledge and ritual. Again, Stevenson’s analysis represents a dual perspective informed by theory and empirical observation. Performance elements such as staging, music, choreography, and scripting of the worship services contribute to a sense of branding that attracts contemporary Americans. Being careful not to overstate a correlation between Christian

evangelicalism and political conservatism, Stevenson reflects in the “Coda” on connections that can be drawn between the dramaturgy of the evangelical performances analyzed and the performative promotion of the Tea Party movement as a means of creating resonance for Americans seeking to reexperience a particular historical narrative.

Each text merits praise for its respective author’s extensive research and personal fieldwork. In addition to providing comprehensive notes, bibliographies, and indexes, both books are complemented by the inclusion of black and white photographs depicting elements of evangelical performances and spaces. The books stand in dialogue to present scholars and students of performance theory and religious studies a proactively objective view of evangelical practice, performance, and spectacle in an increasingly secular society. The authors are successful in their conscious efforts to maintain scholarly objectivity while retaining what Fletcher terms a “critically generous” (10) perspective toward the audiences and performances they observed personally.

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**Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation.** By Gareth White. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; pp. vii + 224; \$95 cloth, \$29 paper, \$29 e-book.

doi:10.1017/S0040557415000411

Reviewed by Becky K. Becker, *Columbus State University*

Gareth White’s *Audience Participation in Theatre* joins an ongoing conversation exploring theories of audience in contemporary theatre. As such, it is a thoughtful addition alongside such works as Susan Bennett’s *Theatre Audiences* (1997) and Bruce McConachie’s *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (2008), among others. White’s contribution to the dialogue is painstakingly focused, yet “epistemologically promiscuous” (116) in its effort to identify and describe the aesthetics of audience participation. Although audience participation may appear to be an inevitable quality within live performance, White defines it more narrowly as “the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action of a performance” (4). White’s pointed focus on action is significant. As theatre practitioners continue to explore the boundaries and boundlessness of live performance in contrast to canned performance forms, White’s project is of significant value.

Employing support ranging from Erving Goffman’s anthropological work to Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, White carefully outlines the processes utilized by the “procedural author” (31) to invite audience members successfully into the action, as well as the risks associated with spontaneous, albeit prestructured, performances. Even as White underscores the need for a thoughtful approach to shaping audience participation, he notes its unpredictability within “horizons of participation” (55). He argues that these horizons “Are not set by the procedural author, but arrived at through the interaction of all the contributing elements of