

# NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Bella Merlin

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Stevie Simkin

## Marlowe: the Plays

Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001. 263 p. £11.50.

ISBN: 0-333-73260-X.

The purpose of this book is admirably clear. A 'how to analyze' lesson is offered for five of Marlowe's plays (regarding the other two, *Dido, Queen of Carthage* is basically ignored, whereas *The Massacre at Paris* is glossed over due to its text's 'corruption'). The level of anticipated audience is not made quite clear, but it is apparent that the book is oriented towards and suitable for less experienced Marlowe readers.

Simkin wears his historicist principles proudly, insisting that the texts must be understood in the context of the Renaissance, but his own historicizing methodologies can be a little imprecise. For instance, when accounting for anti-Semitic prejudices that led to the construction of the title character in *The Jew of Malta*, Simkin neglects the more relevant Elizabethan age, referring instead to fourteenth-century myths about Jewish malfeasance. His best work involves the reading of formal effects in Marlowe's blank verse. Usually, his receptiveness to rhythmic scansion and stresses is exacting, if routine, but his suggestion that the mountains of Barabas's gold are heightened through the verse's accented syllables is imaginative and tautly evocative.

Simkin is very helpful when outlining the vast disparities between early modern audience expectations and contemporary assumptions. Very convincingly, he uses his own practical directing experience to demonstrate the Elizabethans' prioritizing of rhetorical effect over psychological realism; and his guide to the stage conditions of the Renaissance is informative and solid. The stress on the collaborative tendencies of early modern drama is useful, although it does jar slightly with his repeated assertion that as an author, Marlowe himself was an 'innovator'.

A few traits in the book may annoy more experienced readers of Marlowe. Too often we are blandly told that a character is 'fascinating'. Promises of 'as we shall see' grate after repetition. Readers who already know the plays reasonably well (even sharper undergraduates who have never heard of Marlowe) do not need to be told that Hero is 'a woman', that Marlowe's Machiavel is 'a parody of Nicolo Machiavelli', or that 'usury is the loaning of money and charging of interest'.

There is a helpful examination of the cultural approaches that selected critics (Levin, Dollimore, Greenblatt, and less predictably Emily Bartles) have taken to Marlowe's canon. There is also a descriptive bibliography that could have been more up to date, and that didn't have abruptly to dismiss some editions of Marlowe's plays. But the secondary texts referred to are numerous and necessary for Marlovian scholarship. This typifies the book's twin role as a repository of information and as a primer for the poetry of blank-verse drama. It can be recommended for students of Marlowe – but only for those who are engaging with the plays for the first time.

KEVIN DE ORNELLAS

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Alan C. Dessen

## Rescripting Shakespeare

Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 268 p. £16.95 (pbk), £47.50 (hbk).

ISBN: 0-521-00798-4 (pbk); 0-521-81029-9 (hbk).

Alan Dessen has spent much of the last quarter-century pursuing mainstream Shakespeare productions across the UK and USA, and the result is this record of the emendations, cuts, transpositions, and additions which characterize 278 contemporary performances of Renaissance plays. *Rescripting Shakespeare* is a valuable resource for students of Shakespeare in performance; Dessen's powers of observation and recall are impressively acute, and extend from noting the omission or reorganization of entire scenes to recognizing specific syllabic difference within verse lines. His prose is refreshingly simple and often entertaining in a book that increasingly resembles a giant list as you move through it. Indeed, such documentary strength would perhaps be better served in the form of an electronic database, giving the reader greater flexibility in his or her interaction with the information held.

Where the book falls down is its lack of theoretical foundation and analytical reflection. Dessen broadly distinguishes between performance decisions to 'rescript' or 'rewright' the play, and talks of 'price tags' and 'trade-offs' in his discussion of the consequences of such choices, but this terminology is often unhelpful. There is no real attempt to contextualize the ideological repercussions of what a 'price tag' may be, just as there is a surprising lack of reflection in his subjective judgement

of some alterations as 'improvements'. Equally, the establishment of the 'rescripting-rewriting' binary is unconvincing; as Dessen himself says, the margin between tweaking and reworking a play is frequently unclear, so that this opposition seems set up only to be demolished, while the opportunity to examine this fluctuating boundary is not taken up.

While undoubtedly a useful compendium of information which would otherwise be difficult to access, Dessen's book would ultimately have benefited from sustained reflection on the tensions between performance exigency and interpretation, and tendentious notions of textual fidelity.

JONATHAN HOLMES

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03230372

R. A. Foakes

**Shakespeare and Violence**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

224 p. £16.95 (pbk); £47.50 (hbk).

ISBN: 0-521-52743-0 (pbk); 0-521-82043-X (hbk).

The objective of *Shakespeare and Violence* is to locate Shakespeare's plays in the present – to focus on them as works 'that resonate across the centuries and take on new life and meaning in the context of our own time'. However, Foakes reneges on this claim of pertinence. He devotes a chapter to exploring events contemporary with Shakespeare's writing and to recounting contemporaneous texts, claiming them as influences on the selected plays' contents. All this is fine, but it does not seem to concur with his intention, and is too cursory to be helpful.

The expectation created is that he will look at current scholarship, discoveries in the field of psychology or, more importantly, the changing palate for violence in productions. One might consider this material for the chapter pondering *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet* 'in connection with the reworking of them in film', yet Foakes does little with this chapter beyond paraphrasing the play and film scripts in tandem, with no concomitant insight of any consequence. The most thorough essay is a previously published text looking at the primal act of violence in *Hamlet*. Here is the heart of the book, around which other chapters are fanned. The book was compiled prior to the 'liberation' of Iraq, but is consciously post-11 September; and yet the somewhat meagre amount of debate in light of events of such resonance is curious, and rattles rather clumsily around the bandwagon upon which it has jumped.

It is difficult to fathom for whom the book is intended. There is little for the enthusiast, political animal, practitioner, or scholar. Furthermore, there is insufficient rigour of analysis to stretch our knowledge of the plays, humankind's propensity for violence, or the use of violence in

theatre. Also missing is an analysis of language as a catalyst or a pacifier of violence, or as a violent form in its own right. At a time in which we can see how rhetoric can win or lose a war, this seems to be an opportunity missed.

EMMA PALLANT

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03240379

S. E. Wilmer

**Theatre, Society, and the Nation:**

**Staging American Identities**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

281 p. £45.00.

ISBN: 0-521-80264-4.

This useful and impressive book examines how theatre and other forms of performance have influenced the articulation and production of cultural identities in the United States from the second half of the eighteenth century through to the present. Following an introduction that offers some critical and international context as well as an overview of the book, seven chronologically ordered chapters focus on case studies of significant performance in transitional eras in American history: Federalist and Democratic theatre before independence; native religious ritual and/of resistance in the late nineteenth century; workers' pageants in the early twentieth century; Black, Chicano/a and anti-war theatre in the 1960s; suffragette and feminist theatre in the early and mid-late twentieth century; and mixed-race theatre and performance art practices of the 1990s.

While he provides examples of patriotic performance, Wilmer argues for a more nuanced understanding of that which may at first appear simply patriotic, and he focuses on performance he describes as counter-hegemonic. He grounds close readings of plays and performances in extensive historical and cultural context, and he rigorously examines plays' performance, reception, and impact as well as their literary form, content, and rhetoric.

The book does not aim to be comprehensive; rather, it provides a useful indicative history, surveying not only significant moments in American cultural history, but also an important range of issues (related to, for example, political affiliation, race, class, and gender), as well as a diverse range of performance practices (including plays, ritual, pageantry, and performance art). The book is both fluent and scholarly, combining lucid, detailed description with committed ideological engagement and analysis, as well as a solid academic apparatus of notes, bibliography, and index. It will make a welcome contribution to the study of American theatre, American culture more broadly, and, comparatively, other national cultures and their performance practices.

JEN HARVIE

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03250375

Jarka M. Burian

**Leading Creators of Twentieth-Century Czech Theatre**

London; New York: Routledge. 225 p. £60.00.  
ISBN 0-415-27030-8.

*Leading Creators of Twentieth-Century Czech Theatre* is the most recent in the Routledge Harwood Polish and East European Theatre Archive series. It is a survey of the work of the major directors and scenographers of the Czech theatre of the last century, together with a chapter on productions of *Hamlet* and one on the theatre writing of Václav Havel. It is a readable and authoritative work, combining wide research with the author's personal observation and involvement with Czech theatre-makers from the 1930s onwards.

The careers (often disrupted) of the selected creators are delineated with reference to political events, e.g. with directors K. H. Hilar, E. F. Burian, and the avant-garde Liberated Theatre of Voskovec and Werich characterizing variously the inter-war period, then the work of Alfred Radok, Otomar Krejca, and others up to or spanning the Warsaw Pact invasion of Prague in the spring of 1968. The chapter on Havel incorporates the Velvet Revolution and its after-effects of 1989.

The chapter on productions of *Hamlet* constitutes an interesting snapshot of the fervent responses of the Czech theatre to events of political moment, whether through metaphoric opposition or identification with Shakespearean archetypes, throughout the period. Also of particular interest are the accounts of the development of Czech scenography, from Radok and Josef Svoboda's post-war *Laterna Magika* experimentation with film and stage action to Svoboda's international collaborations and experimentation with theatre and technology.

One problem is that the definition of a creator as a director or scenographer results in a panorama of Czech theatre of the period which has an almost exclusively male population. The two scenographers Maria Roszkopfová and Jana Zboilová make an appearance in the chapter on scenography since 1968, which Burian prefaces by claiming that Czech women took longer than their western counterparts to extend their theatre work into design and direction. However the account of the two women is comparative; they do not merit a section each. A note on the work of later directors includes a list of other directors who have been excluded only because of space restrictions, and some of these are women. Some actors are mentioned in reference to specific productions; however, it seems that if these are women their names tend to be omitted.

The book, however, remains an accessible and informative account of Czech theatre of the last

century. There is enough to interest those familiar with the subject, but it could also provide those less knowledgeable with a good introduction and insight particularly into the unique and varied traditions of Czech directors' theatre and its forms of staging.

ROSE WHYMAN

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03260371

Robert Leach

**Stanislavsky and Meyerhold**

Bern: Peter Lang, 2003. 255 p. £27.00.  
ISBN: 3-906769-79-8.

In this pithy and articulate book, Robert Leach charts the journeys of Russia's two most prominent twentieth-century theatre directors/actor trainers through their separate careers in the 1890s, their professional experiments together in the fledgling Moscow Art Theatre and its later Theatre Studio, their mid-career split-up, and their final reunion in 1938. We see how Stanislavsky's emphasis on psychology offset Meyerhold's unique take on the physicality of theatre; then how, later in his life, Stanislavsky embraced many of his younger colleague's ideas in his own search for a psycho-physical acting technique. Throughout the book, Leach succinctly and accessibly presents a social and political backdrop to the two pioneers' careers, highlighting the constraints placed on their professional experimenting and personal development.

In many respects, the material is very familiar territory, yet Leach's archival research conjoins with his own evident enthusiasm for the subject to present illuminating insights and some exercises and ideas, which to date I had not read elsewhere. The result is a book which is not only vastly enjoyable for its clarity and linguistic liveliness, but also informative in its juxtaposition of theories and practices. Particularly useful – to those familiar or new to the area – are Chapter Five, 'The Search for a System (1): The Studios of the Moscow Art Theatre', and Chapter Six, 'The Search for a System (2): Doctor Dapertutto's Studio'. These are complemented excellently by the two later chapters on each practitioner's research into psycho-physical acting (Chapter Seven on 'Meyerhold's Biomechanics' and Chapter Eight on 'Stanislavsky's Method of Physical Actions').

Although I didn't necessarily agree with all of Leach's interpretations, the overall tenor of the book is compelling and convincing. His conclusion that 'in Stanislavsky's system, psychology precedes action, whereas in Meyerhold's system . . . movement precedes psychology' may not seem particularly unexpected; however, the streamlined focus of Leach's arguments throughout the book invites the reader to reconsider this familiar territory. The valuable appendices include an

extract from Stanislavsky's production plan of *The Seagull* (currently out of print in its entirety) and a glossary which adds significantly to those already available in other books on the subject. This is a vital addition to undergraduate reading lists on actor training, as well as being accessible and fascinating to a general readership.

BELLA MERLIN

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03270378

Gerry McCarthy

**The Theatres of Molière**

London; New York: Routledge, 2002. 256 p.

£19.99 (pbk); £65.00 (hbk).

ISBN: 0-415-259479 (pbk); 0-415-033497 (hbk).

The study of Molière seems to be a troublesome area, and this latest offering has a somewhat confusing title. It is not a study of Molière's theatres (as in buildings), nor yet of Molière's theatre (as in plays), nor indeed of the theatre in the age of Molière, but rather a hybrid of all three. The most satisfactory aspect of the thesis is the interpretation of the plays themselves, where the analysis of context and acting frequently gives rise to original insights, with the sections on education and *L'École des femmes* and *Les Fâcheux* being particularly striking in this respect.

The conclusions are always thought-provoking, even when they are rather contentious. Thus, *Tartuffe* is described as a reworking of the farce staple of the 'defeat of a cramped and jealous husband by a younger and more attractive lover', and McCarthy posits that the first three-act version would have ended with 'Tartuffe and a compliant Elmire undisturbed in their affair'. However, the book is problematic. In the introduction, the author speaks of the wealth of documentary material available. Yet these sources are used little, and then usually at secondhand, and some illustrations are curiously chosen. Thus, when writing of the *commedia dell'arte*, Riccoboni is quoted rather than Gherardi, and Duchartre rather than Biancolelli via Spada.

On occasion, the author's seeming lack of close familiarity with sources and recent critical work in the field leads to some unfortunate slips. Thus, a misinterpretation of documents relating to the remodelling of the Palais-Royal elicits a strange hypothesis as to the design of that theatre. On the other hand, the occasionally elliptical writing style sometimes gives the impression that vital information has been edited out. For example, when writing of Molière's return to Paris, the author links in one paragraph the dramatist's court debut, his lease on the Marais, and expectations of receiving a play from Thomas Corneille. Those familiar with the material will be able to make the connections; others might find it more problematic.

The focus in the book is on Molière the actor, and considerations of acting give rise to many prolix and not always easily comprehensible passages. The sources on seventeenth-century acting are certainly limited, and McCarthy's interpretations of contemporary engravings, which he sees as being 'lively and full of movement', or with 'strong attitudes' and 'strong physical presentation', give rise to one of the least convincing aspects of the thesis.

More consideration of the fact that Molière was not universally considered a great actor in his own day would have enhanced the argument, as indeed would an assessment of the styles and abilities of other members of the troupe. Overall, then, this is an uneven volume, which succeeds in part to achieve not only its own stated aims but also those of the series. The elusive definitive study of Molière and the theatre of his age remains to be written. I wonder who will be the next to take up the gauntlet?

JAN CLARKE

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03280374

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ed.

**Interfaces:**

**Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance**

Michigan University Press, 2002. 472 p. £18.00.

ISBN: 0-472-06814.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson are well known for their work with autobiographical theory and written culture; here, though, they take on the project of gathering together materials which look at women and self-representation 'at the interface of visual image, written text, and performance', and as such, this work has a cross-disciplinary appeal, its chapters covering a range of historical contexts and cultural practices as well as a range of media.

The book is split into four sections: 'Acting Out the Body'; 'Performing Spaces'; 'Serial Lives/Imaged Diaries'; and 'Visual Narratives'. There are analyses of aspects of the work of artists such as Jo Spence, Louise Bourgeois, Charlotte Salomon and Erica Lopez, and Cindy Sherman, as well as chapters on performance artists such as Bobby Baker and Laurie Anderson. In the introduction, the editors talk of the fact that the book project has a long history, and some of the chapters, such as Lesley Ferris's on 'Cooking Up the Self: Bobby Baker and Blondell Cummings "Do" the Kitchen', do not adequately reflect on recent scholarship in the areas covered.

Equally, some of the chapters lack a depth of analysis, probably owing to the requirements of a publication of this type which inevitably prioritize the need for a sense of overview – and the sheer range of materials covered is admirable. Watson and Smith's introductory chapter, on



'Mapping Women's Self Representation at Visual-Textual Interfaces', takes the reader on a journey, which begins with a situating of Tracey Emin's work, through the various practices and theoretical positionings involved in theorizing the autobiographical. It then looks at questions of narcissism, the 'stakes' of the autobiographical, the visual/textual, and performative interface, and possible models for reading the 'gendered interface' of autobiographical practice.

Of particular interest to theatre and performance scholars is Jessica Prinz's "'It's Such a Relief Not to Be Myself": Laurie Anderson's *Stories from the Nerve Bible*', which provides an intelligent feminist appraisal of Anderson that credits her with great humour and originality. Overall, the quality of the studies is high and this will be a useful publication for students working in a number of visual and performative areas.

MAGGIE B. GALE

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03290370

*Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe*

**Approaches to Acting Past and Present**

London: Continuum, 2001. 225 p. £19.99 (pbk); £55.00 (hbk).

ISBN: 0-8264-4901-8 (pbk); 0-8264-4900 (hbk).

The author's admirable ambition and clear grasp of his material would have benefited from a more rigorous outside (editorial) eye, to ensure that he adhered to his 'superobjective', and presented a student-friendly survey as intended, rather than a mixed historical and cultural cocktail of overview and in-depth research. The content is uneven – the chapter on 'Theatre Criticism' particularly out of place, adding nothing to his analysis of acting per se.

Overall, the ten chapters are unbalanced – that on the twentieth century takes up nearly a third of the book and perhaps inevitably becomes occasionally muddled, as one might expect. Meyerhold and Tairov are analyzed under a subsection concerning 'Stanislavsky's Legacy', just before one on anti-realism. Stylistically, the book is also uneven, shifting between overview surveys – the chapters on early drama across the world rely on synopses of Brockett's *The History of the Theatre* – to detailed PhD-level analysis of consciousness, Meyer-Dinkgräfe's specialism. The felt need is for the reader to be guided more clearly through the book's wide-ranging but intelligent content.

The priority given to Indian practices and thinking is enlightening when applied to Brook's *Mahabharata* in a chapter on interculturalism, but this emphasis is given rather than explained and it skews the book. Consequently, in a chapter on non-western drama, Japan is discussed too briefly and in relation only to the usual aspects of Noh and Kabuki; and Iraq is given one line. In other

words, the book could benefit from judicious cutting. Too often it reads like written-up lecture notes, a reservation compounded by the fact that the author shamelessly refers to a colleague's web-based lectures for a definition of performance art. However good the definition, such parochial back-slapping jars. I was left uncertain as to whom the book was aimed at, and fearful that the process of academic editing is heading towards extinction.

PAUL ALLAIN

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03300375

*Matt Wolf*

**Sam Mendes at the Donmar:**

**Stepping into Freedom**

London: Nick Hern Books, in association with Donmar Productions, 2003. 186 p. £14.99.

ISBN: 1-85459-705-1.

This is a book that chronicles and celebrates the first ten years of the Donmar Warehouse under the inspired and indomitable leadership of Sam Mendes. It is a canter through that history, picking up and examining some of the highlights of the decade such as *Cabaret* (which transferred to Broadway, where it won four Tony Awards) and *The Blue Room*, which famously starred Nicole Kidman. There is barely a whisper of the odd unhappy event such as *Endgame*, which is briefly referred to in passing with 'wasn't enormous fun either off stage or on'. As such the book is not particularly critical or analytical, but it does capture something of the youthful vibrancy of the Donmar under Mendes as it celebrates the creativity and sheer audacity of the place.

In the Foreword, Sam Mendes talks of the 'retrospective policy' that they had – which meant 'wait three years and we'll have worked out what the policy is'. The policy then emerged from the mist as 'eclectic, entertaining, brazen, unapologetic in its pop-art aspirations, and consequently mostly under-funded'. This 'retrospective policy' meant that the Donmar was in its own way experimental. Its programming was responsive to audiences and their tastes, accepting that new plays were something to steer away from until the name of Sam Mendes himself had become a strong enough brand and a big enough draw to sell the tickets.

The book owes much of its readability to the layout, which is packed full of pictures and chunks of quotes from a whole range of people who have been associated with the theatre over the decade. The two messages that come out loud and clear from the comments are that the theatre space was challenging and exciting, providing an intimacy not usually associated with the West End; and that the organization felt like a family. Instrumental in creating this atmosphere were the administrative staff, who are given due recognition

in the book, especially the Donmar's Executive Producer, Caro Newling, and the Casting Director, Anne McNulty.

*Sam Mendes at the Donmar* is celebratory rather than critical or analytical, and there is almost something of the coffee-table book about it. It is useful in cataloguing all the productions of the decade and capturing the spirit of enthusiasm that clearly pervaded the organization. The book at least feels in tune with the ethos of the Donmar, as time and again contributors tell us of the tireless energy, generosity, and enthusiasm displayed by Caro Newling and Sam Mendes. The book is, quite rightly, a great tribute to them.

JENNY STEPHENS

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03310371

*John Lennard and Mary Luckhurst*

**The Drama Handbook: a Guide to Reading Plays**  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 416 p.

£12.99.

ISBN: 0-19-870070-9.

This is rather a useful book. It is wide-ranging, perceptive, and clearly and economically written. The only proviso is that you must realize that it has got the wrong title. Students might expect a 'guide to reading plays' to take them, in some detail, through the protocols of formal analysis. In fact the book gives more space to, and is more interested in, general histories and contexts than the activity of reading.

The opening sections deal, rather effectively, with the materiality of the written text, its appearance and provenance, and offer models for reading. The book then moves on to survey genres (with lots of well-chosen examples), architectures (including not just theatres but the study and bookshop), and the personnel involved (from playwrights to teachers). Its final section is on exam papers and sample answers – which are, nicely enough, by real candidates. There is also a handy glossary of terms.

The book won't really help a student approach someone 'difficult' such as Genet or Heiner Müller. Nor does its thinking about 'technology' move far beyond the use of light and the relationship with TV into the work of such as Blast Theory. Although there is a section on 'Theatre Today' and challenges to playtext, it's a bit limp on detailed wrestling with 'new' form: mentioning examples such as Foreman is one thing, deep conceptual engagement is another. Its heart I think is in the historical canon. But for all that it is a very readable, authoritative, and dependable work.

SIMON SHEPHERD

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03320378

*Peter Bond*

**Locating Performance: Performance Related Text**

London: Light More Light, 2003. 79 p. £6.00.

ISBN: 0-9543802-0-7.

In the genre of the artist's book, Bond has constructed a hybrid volume of text and image. The package consists of a written text, colour poster with illustrations by the artist and others, plus a DVD devised and performed by Bond himself. The published paperback book is unconventional in size and delivery. Securely taped, the first reader is required to cut open the book using a knife. This performance gesture articulates the performative nature of the reading process, exciting the reader to investigate the text.

At the book launch in central London, guests watched the DVD enjoying the light-hearted but complex interrogation of performance by Bond himself (filmed and edited by Andrea Luka Zimmerman) in nearby London streets. Designed to challenge conventional ways of thinking, the text spreads over 79 pages, weaving narratives through seemingly fragmentary passages, drawing on Artaud, Barthes, Benjamin, and Sontag among others. The illustration showing the backstage of the Coliseum and theatregoers in their proscenium box locates theatre in expansive and total performance mode: backstage, in the bar, and of course in front of the proscenium arch.

In bringing performance out of the theatre into the streets, a new system of frames emerges. Bond locates performance as a wholly subjective experience by putting himself firmly inside his work, both in the written text and in the performance on DVD. The overall argument of the written text and DVD focuses on the economy of performance. Repetition and replay is increasing, but the heart of performance happens in a particular moment and place.

Rather than starting with text, *Locating Performance* advocates finishing with it. Challenging conventional scripted performance modes, this project emphasizes the importance of improvisation and spontaneity. As it says on the back of the DVD box (a limited edition with a numbered drawing by Peter Bond), 'The audience of the film represents an entirely new audience, removed and subjected to a new set of values, boxed, mediated, and packaged into DVD'. Suitable for artists, practitioners, and students, the text and DVD provide an inspiring response to the performance debate with a fresh approach to the issues surrounding the production and consumption of performance.

ANNA BIRCH