

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rachel Clements

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Zachary Dunbar and Stephe Harrop

Greek Tragedy and the Contemporary Actor

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 237 p.

£59.99.

ISBN: 978-331-995470-7.

The term ‘classical acting’ within drama school training today references the techniques needed to perform texts from Shakespeare to Chekhov. The authors, formerly colleagues at RCSSD in London, correct the anomaly by examining the skills needed to play Greek tragedies. Dunbar is a music-theatre specialist now at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, while Harrop is a storytelling specialist at Liverpool Hope University, and the richness of their book derives from the way two very different perspectives merge into a single voice.

The authors’ core argument is that the received teachings of Stanislavsky, still the implicit if not explicit foundation of most conservative training, align with those of Aristotle, a deeply misleading guide to the realities of ancient performance. The result is that student actors commonly approach Greek texts with assumptions about the primacy of text and character which leave them floundering. The authors incorporate some challenging arguments, which do not underplay complexities and contradictions in the Stanislavskian legacy. Having established their theoretical foundations, the authors offer us four hands-on chapters on sound, myth, space, and chorus – rejecting the more obvious categories of voice, narrative, mise-en-scène, and characterization.

In each chapter, the authors begin by evoking their own lived experience of watching a successful contemporary production, and follow up with theoretical reflections grounded in historical information about ancient performance and in modern performance theory, moving finally into a series of practical exercises for the classroom. The main omission, which derives from the determination to steer the student away from text-based scholarship, is any discussion of how the translator mediates the performer’s experience.

Greek Tragedy and the Contemporary Actor has an original format which ties theory to practice in an engaging fashion, and it is to be hoped that a paperback version will soon make it affordable for the student user. The book presupposes a student reader who is in some measure a theatre-maker rather than the obedient servant of a director, and is concerned with creating a performance

event rather than the interpretation of a canonical text. It is this capacity to create an event which keeps pushing Greek tragedy back into the repertoire. The book sits diametrically at odds with Simon Goldhill’s *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today* (2007), which presupposes a very different reader, the imaginative classics student concerned with what the play means. The moral of this important book is that performances do not ‘mean’, they *are*.

DAVID WILES

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Anna Harpin

Madness, Art, and Society: Beyond Illness

Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. 226 p. £30.99.

ISBN: 978-1-138-78428-4.

‘We, in the global north, are living in pharmacological times’, declares Anna Harpin in her groundbreaking new study. Mapping the prevalence of standardized methods of treatment for anything considered as mental illness or madness, Harpin’s study explores the rise of biological psychiatry and the problematic impact of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) established in 1980 and its subsequent legacy.

The book offers new ways of conceiving ‘madness’ and its treatments through engagement with artistic practices. Harpin advocates passionately and in great detail for the role artistic practices can play in this regard due to their functions and scope as dimensional, relational, with capacity to change, and to exist as incomplete, and finally as a feeling encounter that chronicles human experience.

This book is also a call for tenderness, ‘to be tender and to tend to one another in more radically open and uncertain manners’. With the use of pharmaceuticals consistently on the rise, such tenderness is urgently required, not least due to the failure of current treatments and philosophies of care. As Harpin notes, ‘neither the drugs nor the well-being industries are making us “better” . . . It seems increasingly plain that a neoliberal model of mental health care serves to proliferate the very distress it purports to treat. Moreover, it does so in manners that render the patient not the treatment the source of failure.’

Divided into two key sections, *Madness, Art, and Society* firstly considers ‘Psychiatrists, Institutions, Treatments’, followed by ‘Realities, Bodies, Moods’. This approach allows for a convergence