

# NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Alison Jeffers

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Ellen Margolis and Lyssa Tyler Renaud, ed.  
**The Politics of American Actor Training**  
New York: Routledge, 2010. 218 p. £28.99.  
ISBN: 978-0-415-89653-5.

This is an interesting and provocative look at actor training in North America, readdressing mainstream issues (such as the contemporary percolation of Stanislavsky's teachings) and looking afresh at 'minority' perspectives. Such perspectives include those of race (including Asian, Indian, African American, and Latino/a), and sexuality (not least the erotic nature of acting and how to deal with that in the classroom). There is also a powerful and enlightening chapter addressing disability in actor training.

The liberal arts model of many American universities, along with the proliferation of private acting coaches, poses challenges that may not be immediately apparent to the British or European-based practitioner. That said, globalization, along with cultural and racial diversity (all tackled in this volume) are increasingly impacting on European training. While this book's title may seem particular to the US, there are many areas that will interest a broader readership. One of the most striking features – since the writers are nearly all practitioners rather than scholars – is the passionate assessment of teaching and acting practice.

There are many hands-on examples, and some chapters offer exercises, such as Venus Opal Reese's excellent contribution focusing on trauma, embodiment, and the African American 'story'. Reese successfully combines heartfelt rhetoric with cultural and social history, as well as acting experience and teaching practice. Much of the content arises from personal experiences, and I certainly appreciated some of the calls to arms, inciting actor-trainers to break out of the white, male, European/American canon and to realize that the individualistic, humanistic aspects of Stanislavsky's 'system' are not appropriate for all theatres and styles.

On occasion, however, there was a slight leaning towards the 'rant'. This was counterbalanced by some excellent scholarship in Sharon M. Carnicke's timely chapter on 'Stanislavsky and Politics', which opens the volume, and Chandrasan's illuminating insights into the damage caused by 'The Politics of Western Pedagogy in the Theatre of India'. With an increasing number of actors and teachers writing about practice,

volumes such as this are extremely welcome and useful; however, it behoves us to ensure that the insights gained in our classrooms provide other practitioners with implementable strategies that move beyond the anecdotal or descriptive. Essentially, the volume is of most use to those who are teaching acting, though there are sufficiently diverse contributions to be of interest to the theatre/acting student in general, at both post-graduate and undergraduate level.

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Ros Merkin, ed.

**Liverpool Playhouse: a Theatre and its City**  
Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011.  
250 p. £25.00.  
ISBN: 978-1-84631-747-7.

In retelling and updating the story of Liverpool Playhouse to celebrate the centenary of its founding in 1911, Ros Merkin has adopted a similar strategy to that deployed in *Liverpool's Third Cathedral*, her 2004 book about the Everyman Theatre. She juxtaposes extracts from documents such as board minutes, press reviews, programme notes, and play lists with the voices and accounts of those who were most intimately involved in the Playhouse's birth, growth, and remarkably – after the Playhouse's closure in 1998 – its resurrection in 2000 as the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse: one company running two theatres.

While Merkin's methodology does not permit an extensive analysis of the impact of Liverpool's turbulent social and economic history on the struggle for survival, an important strand which emerges is the transition from an institution which, however unfairly, was viewed as a bastion of artistic conservatism and social elitism to one which from the 1960s onwards increasingly reached out to claim its place in the city's theatrical landscape. The policy outlined by Gemma Bodinetz and Deborah Aydon, who became respectively artistic director and executive director in 2003, to emphasize the 'Made in Liverpool' stamp on their programme, highlights not only the importance of home-grown new writing, but also its popular local relevance.

Strong women have contributed a great deal to the Playhouse's success. From Madge McIntosh and Estelle Winwood, who set up the 1914–15 Artistes' and Staff's Commonwealth which saved the theatre from closure, to the redoubtable Maud