

Book Reviews

Campbell Edinborough. *Theatrical Reality: Space, Embodiment and Empathy in Performance*. Bristol: Intellect, 2016, 171 pp., £70 (hardback), £56 (PDF ebook).

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Theatre has a unique and peculiar relation to reality. While rooted in conventions of creating imaginary worlds and fictional characters, it can never hide its artificiality, and while evolving towards the ‘real’ here and now of performance art, it cannot shake off the theatrical and aesthetic framing devices that constitute the performative act in the first place. Such dialectical relationships have inspired many theatre scholars and are also at the heart of Campbell Edinborough’s *Theatrical Reality: Space, Embodiment and Empathy in Performance*. This book is an engaging and original exploration of the many ways in which reality takes shape in the theatre, where each chapter twists our understanding of the ‘nature’ of theatrical reality, and related assumptions of how spectators experience reality.

Although a familiar subject, Edinborough explicitly approaches the topic from a phenomenologically inspired perspective, asking how spectatorial engagement with bodies and spaces facilitates empathy. He sees theatre, in fact, as “a technology for producing empathic relationships” (46). While attending to the spectator’s experience, the book refreshingly opts for a practitioners’ point of view, focusing on *how* these experiences are created, and (thus) attends to the close connection between scenography and dramaturgy. Standing in line with the phenomenological inquiries of Bert O. States, and Stanton B. Garner’s still inspiring *Bodied Spaces* (1994), both of whom are briefly mentioned by Edinborough, *Theatrical Reality* shows a similar affinity with bodies in/and spaces, yet attends less to dramatic theatre and embraces postmodern dance, immersive theatre and performance art instead.

The book takes off with a thoughtful analysis of Peter Brook’s famous opening lines in *The Empty Space*, and although analysed a thousand times, the author manages to evoke a specific sensitivity for the shared spaces in performance, where ‘sharing’ not only involves performers and spectators, but also relates to the polyphonic ways in which physical space, mental space and social space encounter one another. It is this alchemy that every theatre maker, experienced visitor and performance scholar knows intimately, but which is nevertheless hard to put into words. Edinborough takes Brook’s observation as an invitation for audi-

ences to engage with and reflect upon what they see; this is why theatre can be understood as a framing device for empathetic engagement.

Chapter one then proceeds with introducing us to the dialectics of theatrical reality, a recurring theme throughout the book. While discussing the manipulation of clay in *Paso Doble* (2006) by Josef Nadj and Miquel Barceló and the enticing skill of blowing bubbles of Pep Bou in *Clar de Llunes* (2008), Edinborough observes that even in situations that do not address fictional realities, the spectator is nevertheless asked to imagine a reality, a reality that somehow suggests the existence of *another* reality next to that of occupying and sharing the theatre space. Chapters two and three, covering topics as diverse as Appia's view on staging Wagner or the non-virtuoso realism of postmodern dance, make way for understanding the performer not as an object to be looked at, but as a (moving) subject to empathize with. In both chapters, the performer's body is presented as "a conduit for empathy" (46). This approach is continued in chapter four, where a reassessment of the acting techniques deployed by Stanislavsky, Strasburg and Meisner is used to argue that in naturalist theatre, the actor seeks to share his experience with the spectator rather than striving for mimesis. The spectator is encouraged to "believe in the reality of the actor's experience" (118). This specific stance also informs the discussion of Brechtian theatre, immersive installations and participatory performance in the subsequent chapters. Chapter five starts with a helpful discussion of Pina Bausch' *Kontakthof* (1978), where male performers touch the body of a female performer, in a manner that alludes to the objectification of female bodies in culture and society and that is likely to make the audience feel uncomfortable. Here the dialectics of theatrical reality surface again, since the audience empathizes with both the fictional character *and* the dancer as a private person.

Despite this illuminating example, the overt focus on the *performer's* actions and feelings, presented as the object of the spectator's empathetic attention, is not always helpful in analysing contemporary forms of theatrical reality. This focus may even obfuscate the discussion, which is the case, in my view, in Edinborough's critical reading of Ontroerend Goed's *Audience* (2011) in the same chapter. In *Audience*, which raised controversy (mainly) in the UK, a female audience member is sexually addressed, which is actually an invitation for the other audience members to act and intervene. It is also a scene that potentially exposes the darker realities of theatre, where audiences tend to behave as (passive) group animals. Edinborough criticizes the performance for being insincere: the audience is being manipulated, we do not know the performer's motivation and, due to theatre's artificiality, the scene does not succeed in creating transparency. Therefore, the performance is valued as an example of 'false alienation.' I find this interpretation remarkable, since we hardly ever get to know a performer's motivation (we do not

know the motivation of the dancers in *Kontakthof* either, for instance, or of Josef Nadj working with clay). I have seen this show as well, and the scene, although indeed unpleasant, is very explicit in showing how the situation is created, what mechanisms are at work, and in that regard is very transparent and ‘real.’ Here and elsewhere, the focus on the performer obscures what ‘really’ might be going on. Instead of asking to identify with the performer, Ontroerend Goed shifts registers and employs another, more participatory paradigm, where spectators are equally involved in the production of reality. It is not the motivation of the performer we should enquire, but the situation of the audience and their (lack of) response. It seems that in this analysis, (the absence of) sincerity is mistaken for (false) reality. Indeed, the actions of the performer are utterly insincere, but the true question is: how do we react, while knowing this? Ontroerend Goed uses the theatre as a tool for producing experience, mirroring, however unpleasant, the persistent ways in which our perception and experience are constantly pampered with, both inside and outside the theatre.

The reading of the scene is all the more remarkable since in chapter seven, Edinborough provides an excellent analysis of similar dramaturgical techniques, this time related to Rosana Cade’s piece *My Big Sister Taught Me This Lapdance* (2012), a one-to-one performance in which a single spectator is (gently) confronted with the issue of whether or not to look at a female performer who gradually undresses. This performance intelligently exposes and tackles the process of showing and being seen, of observing, staring, gazing, and what is involved in ‘just’ looking, thus producing self-awareness and self-reflexivity on the side of the spectator. This exposure of the mechanisms of theatre-making and performative acts, of manipulating audiences and moulding experience, generates a transparency that is utterly Brechtian in my view. It is the kind of (intelligent and playful) transparency that also characterizes Dutch and Flemish companies indebted to Brecht, like STAN, Compagnie De Koe, de Roovers, Dood Paard or ‘t Barre Land (which makes me wish, like so often, that Anglo-American scholarship would have access to and were much more knowledgeable of their work). Edinborough argues that much of what he labels contemporary ‘Brechtian’ theatre does not attend to raising social consciousness (96), yet I am inclined to think that, especially in today’s mediatized society, these acts of facilitating the analysis of the construction of spectatorship, raising awareness of how experiences of reality are produced, mediatized and manipulated (whether en groupe or in a one-to-one performance) are exceptionally socially relevant.

Edinborough not only discusses performances in traditional theatre venues. Chapters six and seven are dedicated, amongst others, to participatory works of Tino Seghal, Blast Theory, Punchdrunk and Adrian Howells, works that create liminal zones between several layers of reality. These ‘usual suspects’ are plea-

santly alternated with less familiar but equally interesting examples like the humorous *Haircuts by Children* of Mammalian Diving Reflex or *The History of Water*, in which the author himself was engaged. Chapter eight, lastly, looks at autobiographical performance, an apt way of ending this survey of staged realities. By discussing examples from stand-up comedy, film and television, where actors play versions (of versions) of themselves, Edinborough lucidly shows how these meta-mimetic acts once more invite a reassessment of how we perceive and constitute reality.

Throughout the book, I have kept wondering why the performer's body is presented as the main conduit for empathy. Although Edinborough goes to some lengths to unfold this argument, would it not be more productive to attend to the performer's *actions* rather than to the performer as *actor*? Many of the discussed examples could support this approach. In *Paso Doble*, for instance, spectators may as likely engage with the process of moulding and shaping clay instead of with the performers doing this; in Yvonne Rainer's choreographies, we might feel empathy with the making of patterns, rather than with the creator of those patterns; returning to Peter Brook, we may consider the act of walking a stage, rather than the man who walks. The focus on the performer neither matches the scenographic mindset that resurfaces throughout the book (evidenced, for example, by the attention for the qualitative behaviour of bubbles, or for Yi-Fu Tuan's coupling of knowledge production and the ways we move through space). Such a mindset facilitates in fact a much more ecological, new materialist and perhaps less human-centred approach. We are, I believe, perfectly capable to not only empathize with human performers, but equally with objects, material processes, spaces, and other animated processes, and this book offers sufficient openings and initial pathways to assert that.

Theatrical Reality wants to be a book especially for practitioners and spectators, grounded in the observation that most academic studies seem to target academics only. This is a truly sympathetic and relevant stance. As a consequence, although up for debate, arguments often are only modestly supported by academic literature. The focus on neuroscience and cognitive psychology, for example, presented as one of the book's theoretical frameworks, actually receives little attention, and ignores the extensive attention for these theories in theatre and dance studies. Also, Carol Martin's work on the 'theatre of the real' is remarkably absent. Emphasizing practice does not necessarily exclude academic literature, in my view. On the contrary, Edinborough's 'call to arms' may also intensify attempts to convey these theories to practitioners and audiences. Take the issue of vitality, for instance, derived from psychiatrist Daniel Stern and developed through Susan Stuart's 'enkinaesthesia.' These concepts, which address affective and embodied responses to variation, are interesting but also remain a little un-

derdeveloped. Vitality has also been addressed in philosophy (for example by Nietzsche or Deleuze), new materialism (Bennett; Barad), or architecture (Spuybroek), in very inviting ways, which can certainly inspire practitioners and audiences alike. Something similar pertains to scenography and dramaturgy, which regularly appear as natural partners in this book. This is interesting, because their joint appearance is still quite rare. True, scholars have studied how spaces and site-responsive behavior create meaning and experience (Birch and Tompkins; Levin), or how dramaturgy can be thought spatially and architecturally (Turner). Yet dramaturgy and scenography are seldom partnered in such a self-evident manner, and therefore, it would have been worthwhile to give their entanglement a bit more consideration.

“Great theatre must have an attitude” (4), writes Edinborough in the opening pages, paraphrasing George Devine. It is a loose, yet interesting remark (and there are more of those in the book). We may wonder what kind of attitude Edinborough and Devine have in mind. And yet, maybe it suffices to have just that: attitude. This book equally shows attitude: it takes a stance, firmly rooted in practice. Although some arguments could have been developed a bit more systematically, *Theatrical Reality* definitely shows a mind at work. An exploring, thinking, feeling mind that takes us as readers along. This approach vitalizes theatre and performance studies, which could do well with more of such an attitude.

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