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REVIEW

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON APPLIED THEATRE, EDITED BY JENNY HUGHES AND HELEN NICHOLSON (2016)

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
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This is an important collection of essays from major scholars in the fields of applied theatre and performance studies. The volume brings together a number of critical explorations of what applied theatre is and can be, book-ended by Hughes and Nicholson's effective introduction and Nicholson's helpful concluding essay. The book is divided into three parts with four essays each: Histories and Cultural Memories; Place, Community and Environment; and Poetics and Participation. Together, the three parts are built on Hughes and Nicholson's understanding that twenty-first century 'applied theatre is shaping and is shaped by new conceptual paradigms' that simultaneously respond 'to contemporary concerns' and 'are also influencing the ways in which socially engaged art and art-making are produced and understood' (2016: 2). At the same time, the collection seeks to complicate 'too easy accounts of the transformational powers of theatre' and 'apologetic expressions of applied theatre's political engagements and its aesthetics' (2016: 4). Hughes and Nicholson have framed a diverse and complex set of 'politically aware and reflexive' (2016: 5) essays in terms of philosopher Isabelle Stengers' notion of an 'ecology of practices' that 'resists the master word' of a destructive progress and 'aims at the construction of new 'practical identities' for practices' that 'connect' them to one another (2016: 2–3). Contributors speak as parts of the same ecological system, both within their respective parts and across the entire volume. The natural metaphor clarifies the two underpinning ideas that animate the collection: 'a new attentiveness to the historical' and 'how materialities of place and the politics of attachment are inviting new social imaginaries' (2016: 3).

Part 1: Histories and Cultural Memories, has the most explicit tie to the volume's first underpinning idea. First, Baz Kershaw endeavours to develop a historiography of applied theatre and community performance, a tall task that reveals 'thematic connections' between 'traditional cultures + indigenous forms ... autobiographical memory + community stories ... [and] witness testimony + colonial eras' (2016: 21) that have directed applied theatre's interest over time. Next, editor Jenny Hughes' chapter takes readers to performances held in Victorian-era British workhouses, arguing that workhouse entertainment was both 'compliant with a disciplinary regime that recognised life as valuable when it *works*' and 'opened up to the economically excluded in ways that prefigure egalitarian and progressive forms of cultural practice' (2016: 40, italics in original). Third, through philosopher Michel Foucault and urbanist Edward Soja's notions of 'heterotopia' and 'third space' respectively, Wan-Jung Wang helpfully frames performances in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan as forms of cultural resistance that 'facilitate the reconstruction of cultural memories and counter the manipulation of space by the forces of globalization' (2016: 62). Part 1 concludes with an innovative chapter by Paul Heritage and Silvia Ramos, written as a series of letters to the late psychiatrist and drama practitioner Nise de Silveira, reflecting on a psychiatric hospital in Rio de Janeiro that now bears her name and continues her work of 'breach[ing] the divisions between arts, medicine and life' (2016: 82).

Part 2: Place, Community and Environment reflects the text's second underpinning idea, specifically in terms of place. This part begins with Sally Mackey's persuasive troubling of 'the intimate relationship between applied theatre and place' (2016: 107) via its personal, temporary and mattering natures, exemplified by her work in the English town of Oldham where migrants sought to be 'dwelling in the present' rather than the past (2016: 120). Then Paul Dwyer compels readers to embrace 'a "slower" applied theatre practice' by reflecting on his experience of supporting rather than facilitating an applied theatre-based peacebuilding process in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, which developed over the better part of a decade. Third, Syed Jamil Ahmed's excellent presentation on the intersection between climate change and applied theatre in Bangladesh highlights the ways in which neoliberalism trickles down to affect the environmental messages promoted by the non-governmental organization Rupantar (meaning 'transformation') in such a way that the environmental 'change' sought by the organization 'acts for neoliberal systematicity' (2016: 164). Finally, Peter O'Connor uncovers how performative responses to and narratives around the 2010–11 earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand reflected both disaster capitalism as part of a neoliberal politics and opportunities 'to reclaim and resist the rallied forces of crisis capitalism' (2016: 187).

Part 3: Poetics and Participation echoes new social imaginaries via Hughes and Nicholson's framing of the politics of attachment. The section begins with Mark Fleishman's astute awareness of how 'storying' (2016: 198) in South Africa's town of Clanwilliam reflects a literal and figurative 'play[ing] with fire' (2016: 200), active participation and shifting authority, proposing 'a possible politics for participatory performance practices' in South Africa (2016: 209). Second, D. Soyini Madison helpfully chronicles the staging of *Labor Rights* at Northwestern University in the United States, which questioned how to handle the notion that 'the greatest suffering in the world (war, torture, poverty, loneliness) is too often caused, directly and indirectly, by conditions of labour' (2016: 228) via affective resonances between

the meaningful and embodied matters of labour. Third, Kathleen Gallagher concentrates on Toronto when documenting the role of applied theatre in an intriguing interdisciplinary project addressing youth homelessness across urban parts of Canada, highlighting 'the micro-political meanings and macro-structural pressures' (2016: 230) of one workshop that used improvisation to undertake 'a more thoughtful structural analysis' (2016: 244) of youth homelessness. Rounding out Part 3, and the volume, is editor Helen Nicholson's useful 'chip[ping] away' at the paradox that 'affect captures social imaginations, and affect also sells' (2016: 249) through her notes on a relational 'one-to-one performance' (2016: 254) with her elderly residential care-bound neighbour and a return to the Victorian workhouse as a contemporary museum.

In an effective, accessible, far-reaching and critical manner, these essays reflect a new attentiveness to the historical as well as an invitation to consider new social imaginaries via the materialities of place and the politics of attachment that Hughes and Nicholson highlight at the outset, allowing readers to engage the essays independently, in their respective parts or all together. Hughes and Nicholson's framing of this diverse range of practices as an ecology invokes the relational nature of applied theatre as well as the importance of pressing contemporary economic, environmental, social and political issues. Simultaneously, this volume does not present a self-congratulatory or self-indulgent reading of applied theatre, but rather a politically aware and critically reflexive understanding that contributors leverage based on their particular contexts. It is therefore worthwhile reading for any educator, practitioner or student working in performance studies and applied theatre.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Asif Majid is an interdisciplinary researcher, teacher and performer at the intersection of conflict and performance, particularly in terms of devising, improvisation and applied theatre with marginalized communities. He graduated *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa with a self-designed BA in Interdisciplinary Studies (Global Peace Building and Conflict Management) from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, earned an MA with Distinction in Conflict Resolution from Georgetown University and is pursuing a practice-based PhD in anthropology, media and performance at the University of Manchester.

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