

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Alison Jeffers

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Peter Dickinson

World Stages, Local Audiences:

Essays on Performance, Place, and Politics

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010.

260 p. £60.00.

ISBN: 978-0-7190-8174-3.

In recent years whenever a close coupling of 'world' and 'stage' has floated into view it has reminded me of Groucho Marx on best holiday form: 'Room service? Send up a larger room.' Maybe nothing will be enough for the caller mistaking a phrase for what it names.

Momentarily true to this interpretive rule, Peter Dickinson's Introduction to this divertingly diverse monograph refers to the 'performative effects' of climate change, then quips: 'Extreme weather affords us all a front-row seat on the world.' Thus faced up-front and full-on by such a wittily intemperate metaphor, the reader might well anticipate an excess of excitement and appropriate zeal in an account of a 'world' where performance perforce often incites abandon of, say, an everyday calm that ironically takes care *never* to come before a predictable storm.

This book seems aimed primarily at university students and lecturers, as its four chapters each present analyses of a select set of performative/performance examples that attempt to cross the high wire between 'think global' and 'act local'. For a project of elevated ambitions, this discursive amplitude should surely be enough to do for the early twenty-first century's global theatrical aesthetic state what funambulist Philippe Petit did for the 1970s zeitgeist: take focused daring to especially encompassing heights. Hence Chapter 1, 'One World, Two Cities', is impressively and expansively pitched to compare the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics through edgily critical works by challenging visual artists Ai Weiwei/Zhang Ga (China) and Edward Burtynski/David Rokeby/Alex Morrison (Canada): all rooting against the social-cultural-environmental downsides of Olympian excess. Likewise its main theatrical example, Canadian James Long's play *The View From Above*, which clearly refracts Dickinson's acute observations on the authorities' offensive clearing of the homeless from Olympic building sites in both Beijing and Vancouver.

Chapter 2 radically shifts focus to the vicissitudes of 'same-sex marriage' internationally. Works

by USA performance artists and playwrights Tim Miller, Terence McNally, and others, plus UK Cheek by Jowl's all-male *As You Like It*, are used to strongly exemplify its global complexities. But it is Annie Sprinkle/Beth Stephens's seven-year *Love Art Laboratory*, with its annual experimental-arts re-staging of their nuptials, first opened to the public in Calgary 2005, that prompts Dickinson's subtlest aperçu: 'The marital proscenium is breechable' – a pun which reverberates finely with his closing double-barrelled reminder of 'queer' knot-tying by Prince Charles/Camilla Parker Bowles and Elton John/David Furnish, both at Windsor Guildhall in the same year.

Chapter 3's 'Travels with Tony Kushner and David Beckham' wittily constitutes a 'nomadology' or quasi-travelogue that tractably compares productions of Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* in England, USA, and Canada and flits digitally to and fro between Beckham's 2002–2010 intercontinental multi-million dollar postings. Dickinson makes a vibrant fist of posing the full-throttle theatrical-political Kushner play as a 'productive transformation of loss into a new model for social action'; but 'Becks's' nifty feet somewhat cheat him of a finishing pulse for globalization's 'retribalization of the local': just one encounter live at a Vancouver exhibition match leads to a 'thoroughly uninspiring' nil-nil result.

Chapter 4 engages with 'queer rituals of remembrance' through several sensitive valedictories: three USA plays (McNally's *Corpus Christi*; Kaufman's *Laramie Project*; Vogel's *Baltimore Waltz*), four dances (by Canada's Margie Gillis; UK's Liam Steel/Paul Tannion, Lloyd Newson), and a video installation (Canadian Rebecca Belmore). Noting the many violent deaths refracted more or less obliquely through these aesthetic events, Dickinson tellingly calls for 'a speaking of the unspeakable . . . rituals to utter the silence, to outer [*sic*] the active forgetting [*sic*], to counter the wilful amnesia at the heart of heterosexual melancholia.'

The global-local tightrope is, of course, perilous in many ways, from the trivial to the profound. My football-referee dad is likely blowing the whistle in his grave at the suggestion that 'theatre, like football, is a contact sport'. My undergraduate philosophy professor (colleague to Wittgenstein) would be blue-pencilling the sleight-of-keyboard that hopes to make words into things through metaphor: 'commit to resolving a bit more concretely'. But these are shuttlecock cavils in light of a text that frequently rises with

bouncy energy to pass on many pertinent points about the state of the 'world' under climate change – among them, as this book's Coda so civilly says, that 'theatre's "poverty" is also its greatest resource'.

BAZ KERSHAW

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John Fleming

Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*

London; New York: Continuum, 2009. 136 p.

£9.99.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-9621-8.

Helen Iball

Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

London; New York: Continuum, 2008. 136 p.

£9.99.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-9203-6.

Ladrica Menson-Furr

August Wilson's *Fences*

London; New York: Continuum, 2009. 128 p.

£9.99.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-9648-5.

Ken Nielsen

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

London; New York: Continuum, 2008. 152 p.

£9.99.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-9504-4.

David K. Sauer

David Mamet's *Oleanna*

London; New York: Continuum, 2009. 128 p.

£9.99.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-9646-1.

Mark Taylor-Batty and Juliette Taylor-Batty

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

London; New York: Continuum, 2009. 128 p.

£10.99.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-9594-5.

The bibliographic similarities between these books evident from the heading of this review should indicate their further relativity within a new series of 'Continuum Modern Theatre Guides', edited by Steve Barfield, Janelle Reinelt, Graham Saunders, and Aleks Sierz. Each title considers a consequential modern play from a dramaturgical and theatrical perspective, primarily as a means of offering a critical introduction to the work for advanced-level and undergraduate students. Attractively priced for student consumption, these compact volumes pack an impressive intellectual punch into their hundred-or-so pages.

The systematic consistency of chapter organization ensures familiarity for readers of multiple texts without appearing to restrict authorial

individuality. Much of the content is resonant of existing literature study aids – contextualizing play and playwright; incorporating a synopsis of dramatic action; discussions of prominent characters; close readings of key scenes; seminal performance history – although it should be noted that, with the exception (from the selection I received) of *Waiting for Godot*, I am not aware of many similarly accessible guides available for these important late twentieth-century plays.

Particular attention to 'workshopping the play' marks a significant and welcome departure from structural expectation, emphasizing the advantage of combining practical and literary modes of investigation when interrogating a dramatic text in either a classroom or rehearsal environment. I found the more persuasive exercises to be those which focused on pertinent moments or themes rather than those which attempted to condense less specifically an entire rehearsal process; but, while the activities proposed by some authors remain predominantly discussion-oriented, most are nevertheless valuable in supporting a more creative and indeed subjective response to the scripts than is likely to be generated by text-based study alone.

A short annotated bibliography and a relevant timeline, usually charting social, political, and cultural milestones within the period(s) of each play's genesis and setting, form additional supplements which suggest varied pathways for more detailed and personal exploration. Each book in this series is proposed as an introduction as well as a hopeful springboard to further study and, despite their familial similarities, there is perhaps more significant variance in respect of the latter. The volumes I found less engaging were those that prioritized explanation over exploration, devoting more space to summaries and surveys than to analysis and discussion. In these instances, I found myself questioning the extent to which the author may (or may not) have succeeded in stimulating the enthusiasm of another, albeit embryonic, investigator.

Conversely, the outstanding text for me was David K. Sauer's masterful study of *Oleanna*, although I also enjoyed particularly Mark Taylor-Batty and Juliette Taylor-Batty's discussion of the 'ideotextual' *mises en scène* of *Waiting for Godot* as well as Helen Iball's detailed socio-political contextualization of *Blasted*. Regardless of aspiration, I suspect study-guide books are most frequently used for revision, typically marking the end of a student's relationship with a text rather than the beginning. In the previous examples, I found the authors' enthusiasm for their subjects infectious, effectively igniting my own desire to revisit these works on page and stage; of course, this was not my 'introduction' to the plays but, had it been, I trust it would have been a beginning, not an end.

ALICE BARTLETT