

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

JOAN LAZARUS

Signs of Change: New Directions in Secondary Theatre Education.

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004. 208 pp.

DAVID BEARE

In this long overdue book, *Signs of Change: New Directions in Secondary Teacher Education*, Joan Lazarus interviewed over one hundred American secondary theatre teacher-artists, in search for “best practice.” While a number of theatre education resources tend to be generic or slanted toward elementary schools, this text is very specific to the narratives and best practices of secondary school theatre teacher-artists. Lazarus is a veteran theatre educator, and currently she is the head of the theatre education program at the University of Texas. She is a leading voice in rethinking secondary school theatre education, and her book provides a healthy balance between academic theory, theatre education practice, and interview excerpts.

Lazarus’s book is based on her concept of learner-centred practice, where secondary school theatre education is done not solely for the sake of performance, but more importantly, for the sake of learning. Learner-centred practice does not mean the students are in charge, but rather, teachers play a key role in constructing and facilitating a safe, inclusive, meaningful, socially responsible, and provocative learning environment. Lazarus challenges secondary school theatre teacher-artists to surrender the control of the creative process to the students and to conceptualize rehearsals as learning laboratories. She argues that secondary school theatre teacher-artists can no longer direct award-winning plays as a justification for poorly run classrooms; they need to be both skilled artists and skilled teachers.

Chapters one and two provide an overview of the unstable and sometimes outdated conditions of secondary school theatre education in America, and Lazarus explains the concept of learner-centred practice in detail. In chapter three a wide range of socially responsible practices are highlighted. Role-playing scenarios are utilized to address issues, barriers, and struggles that students face in and out of the classroom, such as race, gender,

social class, poverty, sexual orientation, disability, culture, and religion. In chapter four, Lazarus illustrates many forms of comprehensive theatre education, which examines the integration of play themes, academic subjects, local issues, and/or world events. Chapters five and six examine ways of bridging secondary school theatre education programs with professional theatre companies and ways of bringing local artists into the classroom. In the final two chapters, Lazarus and other leading theatre education practitioners (for example, Maxine Green) reflect upon current best practices and provide new directions on secondary theatre education.

Throughout her book, Lazarus also highlights several innovative techniques used by secondary school theatre teacher-artists such as role-playing, creative play, script analysis, and musicals. For example, this book offers an alternative way for students to learn about blocking (movement on stage). In this example, instead of the blocking being dictated by the teacher or director, the students in small groups move through a process of collectively and organically discovering the blocking themselves. Lazarus argues that while this process may take more time and look messier, the level of learning is richer, more comprehensive, and more meaningful for students.

A frustration for some may be that this book does not provide detailed “how-to” lesson plans like those found in other similar resources. Lazarus does not advocate for one teaching style to copy; instead, she provides snapshots of a diverse range of best practices and lived experiences in order to showcase options and possibilities. It is up to secondary school theatre teacher-artists to figure out how to adapt their lessons to be more learner-friendly. This could be challenging for new practitioners or readers not familiar with theatre education.

Fortunately, Lazarus avoids the controversial, yet tiresome, process-versus-product debate. Regardless of one’s traditional or alternative teaching style, she believes the strength of theatre education stems from the integration of art and education, and that one discipline can not be separated from the other. She does not agree with the argument that too much emphasis on process would weaken the discipline of theatre as an art form, nor promote mediocre theatre.

Lazarus’s push for inclusion and meaningful learning is not anti-theatre. In fact, she implies that a strong product can motivate, stimulate, and move the process along. However, while striving to create compelling, entertaining, and meaningful theatre, she

cautions that it is not enough to direct a play and assume that learning is occurring. Secondary school theatre educators are responsible for creating an educational framework for learning.

A criticism of Lazarus's work is that her focus on "best practice" may be elitist and misrepresent the reality of everyday theatre classrooms. Success or failure of secondary school theatre practice may not have anything to do with learner-centred or performer-centred perspectives; sometimes students respond to the personality of their teacher. Ask two teachers to do the same lesson, and most often two different outcomes will emerge. Is not the quality of "best practice" a combination of years of experience, political climate, cash flow, community ties, school environment, degree of work, time of the year, and luck? What about the voices that did not match Lazarus's philosophy of learner-centred practice? Perhaps students who are routinely barked at by directors to stand three-quarters left are learning something about discipline that is equally valuable to students that are discovering blocking for themselves. Also, with having so many options to structure our theatre programs, could theatre teachers not justify any kind of worthwhile learning that occurs in their classroom?

Regardless of the above criticism, the wisdom in this book has great potential to make a huge impact on the training of North American secondary school theatre teachers, both new and experienced. Lazarus advocates for excellent theatre, whether traditional or experimental, but not at the expense of the learner. "Best practice" is a search for a shared identity, as a way of building a community—a community where theatre and student learning are interwoven and equally respected. At last, a book in the right direction.

JOHNNY SALDAÑA, ed.

Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre.

Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira, 2005. 230 pp.

Mia Perry

As the very title of this book makes clear, its subject, *ethnodrama*, is positioned as "reality theatre." The book is an edited anthology of such dramas, written by scholars, teachers, and theatre artists in North America over the last ten years. Due to the newness of the material and the relatively recent coinage of the term "ethno-