

COMPTE RENDUS / BOOK REVIEWS

TIM PRENTKI and SHEILA PRESTON, eds.

The Applied Theatre Reader

New York: Routledge, 2009. 380 pp., index.

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The Applied Theatre Reader is a remarkable collection of theory, project testimonials, and creative writing about the kind of theatre that breaks the barriers of mainstream production in a wonderful variety of ways. Although the term “applied theatre” is unattractive and uninspiring—connoting the concept of applying theatre as one would mathematics to a particular issue—it is frequently used as an umbrella term for the many processes of play creation that grew out of post-WWII progressive movements and gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century. Editors Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston include a variety of theatre genres in the *Reader*—community theatre, theatre for social change, popular theatre, theatre for development, drama in education, prison theatre—and transparently discuss the challenges of organizing such a broad spectrum of work. Rather than simply filing the selected papers under categories of applied theatre, the editors focus on ideological objectives and describe the journey that helps facilitators, participants, and sponsoring organizations realize them. Citing Philip Taylor on applied theatre as a transformative encounter: “[t]he theatre becomes a medium for action, for reflection but most important for transformation.” Prentki and Preston consider “transformation” as an overriding discourse of applied theatre. Each play or process in the *Reader* struggles to define and attain this objective, and the collection itself moves purposefully towards the final section, “Transformation”; on the way, it engages with the complex and thorny issues of representation, ethics, intervention, participation, and “border crossing” (11).

Apart from a few puzzling editorial choices—there is a focus on carnival that seems disproportionate in light of the case studies presented, the inclusion of two pieces by Edward Bond seem slightly out of place, and there is a conspicuous absence of writing on labour or union arts—the *Reader* works because it is a dialogic mix of theory and case study. The inclusion of more recent theory, like excerpts from Chantal Mouffe’s *On the Political* or Noam

Chomsky's *Profit Over People*, or bell hooks's "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," enhances the fundamental theories of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, and contextualizes the applied theatre projects of the twenty-first century.

Delightfully, the *Reader* begins with a Prologue—an excerpt from Dario Fo's *Mistero Buffo* (The Birth of the *Jongleur*), in which an oppressed peasant becomes a *jongleur* by the grace of Jesus. With his skillful articulation, "my tongue whirls, almost like a knife," the *jongleur* tells of his oppression and ridicules those in power (1). As in many of the social justice projects recounted in this collection, the voice of the oppressed rings out to crush the oppressor (5). But not always. For what if the oppressor turns out to be the sponsor of the applied theatre project? What is at risk if the coordinators and/or funders must be challenged (for example, in the case of development agencies which have global objectives that do not always coincide with local needs)? Is it ethical to bite the hand that feeds you? Or as Fo's *jongleur* might one day discover, can he make jokes about Jesus and keep his new-found talent? Or in our case, funding, space, or community support?

Several contributors candidly discuss the contentious issue of critiquing the facilitators or project sponsors (sometimes the government). "Who's Got the Power? Performance and Self Advocacy for People with Learning Disabilities" and "Child Rights Theatre for Development with Disadvantaged and Excluded Children in South Asia and Africa," for example, probe this dilemma. In the first, adults with learning disabilities in South East London created a play for their organization's AGM and brought their concerns to their sponsors' attention. Following the performance, facilitator Liselle Terret commented on the gap between "the ethos of the drama group [. . . and] that of the committee" who saw the group as a showcase opportunity (343). In the second, Michael Etherton relates the traumatic case of a Theatre for Development training programme in the Himalayas where the young participants overruled the organizer's agenda by determining who was "an appropriate audience for the plays about education" (357). These papers expose the differences that can exist between collaborators of applied theatre and optimistically declare how projects may flourish in spite of them.

Astonishing too are the projects that reach completion when, regardless of project organizers' enthusiasm for theatre for social change, the participants refuse to engage with the form. In "Is this the play?" Applied Theatre Practice in a Pupil Referral Unit, facilitator Caoimhe McAvinchey explains how the students'

resistance to doing anything “more physical than sitting in a chair” forced them to present an installation without live performers. Jane Heather and Josie Auger also heartbreakingly comment on the lack of interest in theatre in “*My People’s Blood: Mobilizing Rural Aboriginal Populations in Canada Around Issues of HIV*”:

Everyone who has ever done a show knows that combination of intense, creative, joyful work and the explosive high of performance. The participants in this project achieved the latter but rarely the former. Quite often, not only did they not come but when they did, they did not want to do drama. (288)

The candid writing on these obstacles to theatrical creation in community settings is of great value, and the authors’ detailed accounts of how exercises were carried out and how successful they were, are helpful to both new and seasoned facilitators.

On another, perhaps more devastating, note some contributors suggest that applied theatre can be dangerously misused. “Participation for Liberation or Incrimination?” by Anand Breed challenges the use of applied theatre that elicits testimony and accusations for the *gacaca* courts of Rwanda: “the personal automatically becomes the political” (154). James Thompson radically calls for an end to applied theatre as a result of a project he facilitated at a child soldier rehabilitation centre in Sri Lanka. “The Ends of Applied Theatre: Incidents of Cutting and Chopping” is a chilling account of a project that unwittingly became part of the events leading up to a massacre. Thompson distinguishes between tactical (private) and the strategic (public) actions that must be considered when creating applied theatre and calls for a new “enmeshed public/private/tactical/strategic performance practice” (123).

The inclusion of difficult cases is invaluable for a study of applied theatre, but it does not preclude the documentation of inspirational stories that prove the efficacy of theatre beyond the mainstream. Such is the case in Adrian Jackson’s “Provoking Intervention” in which the story of Boal’s first spect-actor is told, or David Kerr’s “You Just Made the Blueprint to Suit Yourself: A Theatre-Based Health Research Project in Lungwena, Malawi,” where intelligent intergenerational debates on gender follow comic wife-husband scenarios rooted in local tradition. Lois Weaver’s passionate “Doing Time: A Personal and Practical Account of Making Performance Work in Prison” about theatre

with women inmates in the UK and Brazil, is a beautiful piece that combines lyrical, evocative writing with detailed explanations of drama exercises. The exercise “Doing the Laundry” demonstrates the intense creativity, joy, and activism of the project:

Laundry is one of the most hopeful things in the prison yard. It is a constant rhythm, a dependable display of individuality, a message sent when things can be seen but not heard. For us, it became a canvas, a costume and a political banner and hanging laundry in public became our method of declaring our human rights. (61)

Through theatre, the prison women, artists, and spectators were taken to a place of truth.

Because of stories such as these, and they are numerous and recent, *The Applied Theatre Reader* is a testament to the astounding ongoing international phenomenon of applied theatre as a means of communication, change, and cultural engagement.

MARC MAUFORT and CAROLINE DE WAGTER, eds.
Signatures of the Past: Cultural Memory in Contemporary Anglophone North American Drama
Bruxelles, Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford, Wein: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2008. 314 pp.

ANNE NOTHOF

Originating in a conference at the Université Libre de Bruxelles in 2007, this inclusive collection of critical essays on postmodern and postcolonial Canadian and American drama in English provides a detailed consideration of “cultural memory.” In his Introduction, Marc Maufort acknowledges both the “genetic and generic affinity between the dramatic production of the two countries” (11) and the difference and divergence in respect to “diasporic identities, exilic predicaments, and multi-ethnic subject positions” (11-12), leaving the field wide open for the following twenty essays. Although he offers the proviso “that the notion of ‘cultural memory’ is not only an attribute of ethnic difference” (14), most of the essays focus on “minority” cultures in both countries, placed in opposition to an assumed homogeneous “white” majority. In this collection, the recurrent motif of