

KIRSTY JOHNSTON

Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012. xv + 221 pp.

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Despite the presence of foundational studies such as Carrie Sandahl and Phillip Auslander's *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* and Petra Kuppers's *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge*, there is still a need in disability studies and theatre studies for even more significant, book-length works that extend knowledge about disability theatre. It is wonderful, then, to see such an excellently researched and written study as Kirsty Johnston's *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre* take its place as another important benchmark work, one that both recounts an important theatre history and also posits significant questions about disability art. The work delineates the history of Canadian disability theatre, but because it situates it within the context of an evolving disability culture, the changing understanding and sometimes conflicting definitions of disability aesthetics, and the realities of arts funding and political debates, it manages to be a deftly wrought and theoretically informed work that will be useful to a variety of audiences, from activists to academics, most particularly disability studies scholars, theatre historians, and theatre practitioners.

As Johnston herself acknowledges, "disability theatre is neither easy to define nor homogeneous in its expression" (xiii), even as she asserts that its "chief presumption is a sense of shared and open-ended identity rooted in disability experience" (6). As a result, she tries neither to be comprehensive in her coverage nor didactic in her terminology. Instead, at the very outset she usefully explores key terms like "disability art," "disability theatre," and "disability culture," inviting readers to weigh their history and their diverse meanings before turning to the particular examples that concern her. But even so, it is clear her discussion is rigorously framed by an understanding of the debates, both critical and artistic, that undergird these variegated meanings. Moreover, because "disability theatre presents profound challenges to mainstream aesthetics that have not yet been fully recognized," Johnston's work is also important for its contribution to ongoing debates about the shaping and importance of disability art and culture (14).

The introductory chapter grounds the rest of the book historically and theoretically, establishing an overview of the histories of both disability rights and disability studies, making clear the cultural and critical contexts from which this book stems. Johnston crisply sketches out the different models of disability, as well as how these have been interrogated, and considers the ways in which the arts have emerged as a powerful site through which a retort to traditional ableist representation can be made. Johnston manages to make this early part of the book both accessible for the novice and useful to the reader already acquainted with the field.

Stage Turns is subsequently divided into two parts: the first half is a combined history and ethnography of Canadian disability theatre practice, in which Johnston shows that "most companies have faced similar core debates over the balance between training and artistry, amateur involvement and professionalism, fundraising and partnerships, disability identity and politics" (172). In this first half, she surveys disability theatre in three major urban centres:

Calgary, Toronto, and Vancouver, as well as the solo performance tradition. She then moves to consider two theatre companies more closely, Toronto's Workman Arts and Vancouver's Theatre Terrific. To survey these different cities is to take what Johnston calls "snapshots" of how disability theatre emerges in diverse contexts. More than a collage of the Canadian disability theatre scene, however, it also calls to mind the many choices facing the creation of a disability theatre: should it be allied with a particular disability? Should it emphasize inclusion and training or insist on professional levels of performance? Should it devise work more activist in nature, or should it shift its focus more to disability aesthetics? Should it particularize and highlight the disability experience, or should disability be presented as part of a more universalized, humanist landscape? Should its funding come from a charity model or a business model? Should the change sought be radical or incremental? Who are the audiences for this theatre? Is the aim to challenge stereotypes, or to build coalition? To what extent is the emergence of disability theatre the product of a given location and the opportunity for connection with other companies locally or globally through the presence of festivals? How do funding and clarity of mission weigh in? Johnston engagingly and intelligently weighs the implications of different answers to these questions through examination of her diverse case studies, which also provide a template for the potential questions and difficulties companies must face. She is thorough and detailed, points out areas of disagreement among groups and practitioners, and avoids judging choices made by theatre companies even as she shows the consequences of them.

The second half of *Stage Turns*, in which Johnston moves from the history and politics of disability theatre formation to a consideration of disability aesthetics, repeats the structure of the first. Again, she begins this section of her work with a general survey comparing disparate disability performances and then moves into a more involved analysis of some specific aesthetic choices in the case studies she has chosen. Here, Johnston avers that as far as the disability aesthetics embodied by Canadian disability theatre, a "wide spectrum of approaches exists, each differently charged by disability politics and aesthetic considerations, at times seeking to place disability within universal stories or to rupture prevalent ideas and insert disabled voices and performances into public debate" (173). Johnston's purpose is not to be comprehensive in her coverage of disability theatre, but rather, to focus on the key questions that disparate strategies raise; some of these carry over from the first part of the work. For example, she deepens the discussion of the dilemma of professional development for disabled performers, noting that while "[a] key challenge for each of the companies and artists producing disability theatre in Canada is to find a particular way of being 'good' within current standards of assessment and critique and to demonstrate talent," access to everything from training programs to actual stages still remains limited in many areas (125). Johnston again resists creating a hierarchy of disability performance; in discussing aesthetic strategies, she instead insists that she "can see value in several directions as long as one does not usurp the other as the only acceptable contributor to the Canadian disability arts scene" (125).

Most compelling in this second half is her discussion of the diverse strategies for depicting disability deployed by the theatre companies she studies, whether staging mental illness, movement, or the medical encounter. The chapter on "Staging Schizophrenia," for example, is a thoughtful assessment of Workman Arts's play about the murder of a mentally ill man, *Vincent*, and theorizes how schizophrenia might be reimagined on stage in ways that create

empathy and eschew old clichés of the “mad scene.” Conversely, a chapter about how the clinical experience is staged in diverse works shifts the focus from the challenges of embodying disability to those of staging the social experience of disability. Johnston compares different examples of this and asks, “How might including disability artists’ voices [. . .] unsettle the ideology of ability at play in clinical encounters, and re-imagine disability as a valued human condition?” (154). By way of conclusion, a chapter comparing disparate performances of disability that happened in the context of the Vancouver Winter Olympics and Paralympics become a way to consider the wide-ranging aesthetic and political strategies of works; these include such disparate performances as a production of *The Miracle Worker* and a more overtly political theatre piece by Realwheels, *Spine*.

Because of the work’s focus on English-language theatre in Canada, I did find myself curious about whether French-language theatre has a similar disability theatre presence; Johnston’s study posits a model for how someone wishing to take up that question might shape its answer. Her voice throughout the work is lively and accessible; it is difficult to write about performance in a way that can both vividly re-create and analyze works, yet she does so. She engages in critical activism by shaping this important history, and creates these case studies as the basis for larger theoretical discussions that are applicable beyond the Canadian context. Johnston writes, “It has been through disability theatre that I have experienced some of the most affectively powerful innovations in form, reinventions of tradition, and direct challenges to my understanding of humanity both in local contexts and around the world” (xiv); her work honours those traditions by creating a text which will certainly help others assess, conceptualize, and create disability theatres of their own.

ALAN FILEWOD

Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada

Toronto: Between the Lines, 2011. 376 pp.

MIKE SELL

Committing Theatre is a masterwork, an adroit synthesis of three decades of research, teaching, editing, organizational leadership, and artistic practice. It is the most comprehensive survey of political theatre in the Canadian multicultural to date, but also a rigorous critique of the very terms “political” and “theatre” and their role in scholarship, the Canadian arts economy, and Canadian culture more generally. While paying attention to works that fit a more conventional understanding of political theatre, the book’s author, Alan Filewod, places them in a high-definition map that describes a far broader conception of “performance intervention.” If that weren’t enough, he also calls to question the methods and aims of theatre and performance historiography.

Readers may find a family resemblance between Filewod’s method and the “broad spectrum” approach to performance studies advocated by Richard Schechner. In addition to conventionally theatrical, conventionally political works such as the 1933 Toronto Workers’