

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’

Theatre production of *Eight Men Speak*, one finds discussion of Ukrainian cultural heritage performances, women's suffrage mock parliaments, first nation pageants, Mayday parades, the occult rituals of fraternal societies, right-wing sci-fi radio performances, even the massive multi-player online computer game *World of Warcraft*, to name just a few. Like Schechner, Filewod broadens the spectrum of political theatre to celebrate the diversity of his subject. Like Schechner, he aims to link the mainstream to the fringe and the local to the global. And like Schechner, he wants to both draw attention to and critique the analytic standards of the field.

But the question for Filewod is not just what counts as "theatre," but what counts as "politics." U.S. Congressman Tip O'Neill once remarked, "All politics is local," and that is especially true of artists and activists who would challenge power through public display and spectatorship. Filewod writes, "Historically, most theatre work has happened outside of the institutionalized theatre. [. . .] Local, unremarked, and artistically invisible, the theatre of political intervention is impossible to trace in any complete way" (3). Which raises a question: "How then is it possible to write a history of it?" (3). This is actually two questions, one concerning how one finds evidence and documentation of the events that constitute that history, the other concerning how to tell the tale.

To answer this double question, Filewod rallies a staggering range of archival material. And as he does so, he regularly pauses to reflect on the nature of those materials and how they fit—or don't fit—the standard narratology of Canadian theatre studies. Consider his comment on locating documentation about nineteenth-century temperance theatre: "The numerous anthologies of temperance recitations and parlour tableaux that can still be found in small-town second-hand stores attest to the scale of organization" (41). It appears that the only way to write a comprehensive history of interventionist performance is to be one part rummage-sale aficionado and one part Michel Foucault. Quoting theatre historian Baz Kershaw, Filewod makes clear that the scholar must step outside, quite literally if the trip to the second-hand store is any evidence, the "disciplinary regime of the 'theatre estate'—the complex of industry, professionalism, economy, and canonicity that constitutes 'the theatre'" (5).

It is in this effort to encompass the entirety of political performance that *Committing Theatre* proves not just its historiographical, but also its critical, mettle, forwarding the project of Canadian theatre history, but also the broader endeavour of understanding what it means to be political through performance. Filewod offers three "fundamental hypotheses," hypotheses that can effectively guide any study of interventionist performance, not just those that have occurred in Canada: 1) "Radical theatre refuses the theatre estate"; 2) "Radical performance is a process of networks, not structures"; and 3) "Networks enter history as 'movements' when they are captured by structures of control and regulation" (17-19). In sum, he argues that we must study both those who do performance and those who write about that doing; historiography is itself a discourse of control and regulation. The answers to this double question are consistently surprising. At one turn, Filewod upends assumptions by showing that "both documentary theatre and agitprop emerged as theatrical discoveries from the Right" (63). At another, he describes a kind of quantum theory of theatre historiography: in a discussion of 1930s workers theatre, he demonstrates that there is no way to conclude whether it was a movement at all, whether it was killed off by the Popular Front, whether it evolved into humanist social action theatre, or whether it produced a living legacy (112-13). The answer depends entirely on the conceptual and historiographical domain—the

discursive “estate,” if you will—in which one considers the issue.

Ironically, despite the resolute self-consciousness of his study, Filewod doesn’t fully address two aspects of the contemporary theatre estate that “control and regulate” the story he tells. The emphasis on networks speaks to the impact of digital and social media in his conception of political performance, suggesting that it is only with the development of such a technology that we can recognize the totality of our social, political, and theatrical past. Thus, *Committing Theatre* rejects the embedded metanarrative of one discourse—nationalism—but embraces another, the post-national discourse of information networks. There’s nothing wrong with that per se, but it is a blind spot. And while Filewod resolutely articulates the work of political artists with the institutions that constitute the “theatre estate” at their given time and place, he doesn’t reflect on the synergy of the university system and contemporary political performance. It is no small matter that a founder of the Bread and Butter Festival and former member of Ground Zero is a fully vested faculty member at the University of Guelph. Likewise, it matters that his research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Again, I raise this point not to challenge the premises and conclusions of the project, but simply to carry through on the book’s most significant argument. Doubtless, Filewod’s personal experience with the contemporary theatre estate gives him singular insight. His access to the vibrant intellectual communities and research technologies of the university system enable him to tell the tale in a way that no one else can. However, if there’s one thing this book teaches us, it’s that there is no epistemologically neutral relationship to institutions and no way of writing history that avoids ideology. But these are questions for another time, another rummage sale.

Committing Theatre is the smartest book on theatre and performance historiography I’ve read in years. And it is at its smartest when it alerts us to the future of the field. When its author asserts that contemporary artists “are probing the ways of navigating [. . .] fundamental precepts that have governed the interaction of performers and spectators for the last century” (285), he alerts us both to the unprecedented dangers posed by today’s corporate state and to a spirit of creative communication, mobilization, and collaboration that has endured for over a century and promises, despite the pundits of gloom and doom, to continue far into the future. “There is always something happening out there that we cannot see,” Filewod concludes. “In theatre, that is where the radical plays” (314).

JENN STEPHENSON

Performing Autobiography: Contemporary Canadian Drama

University of Toronto Press, 2013. 212 pgs.

SHERRILL GRACE

In *Performing Autobiography* Jenn Stephenson has produced a major, original study of autobiography and theatre. Although the sub-title indicates that Canadian drama is her focus, this study offers more than readings of Canadian plays. Stephenson presents a detailed, thoughtful analysis of what constitutes the autobiographical in prose memoir, biography, and live