

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

theatre. In addition to her set of illuminating discussions of selected plays, she examines the assumptions underlying autobiography, considers a wide range of autobiography theory, and demonstrates how pervasive this “fragile genre” is in contemporary culture.

Stephenson’s overview of the general theory of autobiography and the concepts of the key theorists is invaluable for readers new to this field. From early proponents like Philippe Lejeune to recent studies by Susanna Egan, Stephenson explains how the theory has developed through its application to texts beyond the customary diary, memoir, or prose autobiography. She also draws on the theories of Canadian scholars, such as Susan Bennett, Alan Filewod, Sherrill Grace, and Ric Knowles, and she pushes this theoretical work further to explore how autobiography works in live theatre performances. Of particular importance is her skillful application of this rich body of theory to drama, and this is her most original contribution to knowledge. Until very recently, few scholars have looked closely, and through theoretical lenses, at plays that probe the assumptions and complications of autobiography. Using her Canadian works as case studies, Stephenson does just that; the results are fascinating.

Some of the plays she chooses to study are predictable and essential for her argument: *Perfect Pie*, *The Drawer Boy*, *Goodness*, and *Eternal Hydra*. Other choices are surprising and all the more interesting for that. Few theatregoers or readers will know Timothy Findley’s last play *Shadows*, but it makes a superb case study. Still more surprising is Stephenson’s choice of Ronnie Burkett’s *Billy Twinkle*, but she makes a convincing argument for understanding the play in these terms. In her last full chapter, she tackles Daniel MacIvor’s *In On It*, for which this approach should come as a shock because one of the main characters is dead—or was until his ghost came back to act out his story! Of all the challenges to autobiography, this is the most daunting: a life story ends when the life does, when the first person narrator dies—right? Well, not exactly or entirely. At least not in the theatre and not in this play. Stephenson calls this chapter “Self-Authoring Characters in Recursive Autothanatography,” and she argues convincingly for this process in MacIvor’s play. As she explains, “theatre raises the dead through the repetition of sameness in a context of difference. The basic embodiment convention is a ghostly doubling that blends an animate actor with a non-living thing . . . to produce uncanny spectacle” (146). In other words, only in live performance can the autobiographical exceed the end of a life story.

Other gems to note are her nuanced examination of *Perfect Pie*, a play that eludes any decisive resolution or tidy conclusion; her analysis of witnessing in *Goodness*; and her attention to the ethical dilemmas raised by autobiography in *Shadows*. *Perfect Pie* is a recalcitrant play. It is powerful yet baffling, but Stephenson sets forth some possible readings through autobiography theory to unwrap the complexities. Although I remain unconvinced by any one reading, I find the interpretive journey she takes me on compelling; she opens up the play without claiming to solve its mysteries. Her discussion of witnessing trauma in the next chapter is, to my mind, the most important discussion in the book. We read a lot about trauma and witnessing today, and I think witnessing is a central ethical dimension in much contemporary literature and art. Therefore, I was especially pleased to read Stephenson’s discussion of *Goodness* as witnessing.

Through *Goodness* Stephenson articulates her concept of “performative witnessing,” which enables her to isolate and discuss the ethics of listening—as performed on stage or

participated in by an audience—to someone’s life story. When this story involves torture and trauma, the secondary listening witness is placed in a challenging position and must respond IF, that is, he or she has entered into “the contract of testimony.” Much has been written in recent scholarship about trauma, witnessing, and testimony, but few scholars have brought these concepts together so precisely and no one, to my knowledge, uses them so well to illuminate how a play can exploit a performed strategy of witnessing to profound effect.

I read Stephenson’s discussion of Findley’s *Shadows* with particular interest. The play has only received one production (at Stratford in 2002) and has been published, but it is not well known. Neither is it an appealing play—Stephenson calls it a “bear pit” narrative of competitive story-telling, lies, revelations, and accusations. It is, however, vintage Findley and important for that reason alone. Using the tools of autobiography theory, Stephenson unfolds the ethical core of this play, which comes down to major questions in all autobiography: Whose story is this really? Who has the right to tell it? And what judgment should be made of an autobiographer who lies? Fictional autobiography is central in most of Findley’s work, and so are these ethical questions. As Stephenson argues, *Shadows* explores what happens—on stage and off—when “what we took to be ‘truth’ is actually another nested fiction” (78).

To conclude, Stephenson writes a “Coda” instead of a summary of her previous chapters. This is a refreshing way to wrap up a scholarly study because it allows her to engage our present as readers, theatregoers, and people living in the age of autobiography. Instead of concluding, she invites us to ponder other ways of performing autobiography and other uses for such performances, and she leaves us with some strategic questions about the possibility of transformation through autobiography and theatre as well as warnings about our expectations of this slippery and “fragile genre.” This is a splendid book that I recommend heartily.