

KATHLEEN GALLAGHER AND BARRY FREEMAN, eds.

In Defence of Theatre: Aesthetic Practices and Social Interventions.

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WES D PEARCE

It seems every week a variation on this meme appears on my Facebook feed: the quote (attributed to John Steinbeck) reads, “The theater is the only institution in the world which has been dying for four thousand years and has never succumbed.” Steinbeck’s words can be found in *Once There Was a War* (1958), a collection of articles and essays that he wrote when he was a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Theatre, concludes Steinbeck, “requires tough and devoted people to keep it alive” (23). The nineteen authors who are included in Kathleen Gallagher and Barry Freeman’s anthology *In Defence of Theatre: Aesthetic Practices and Social Interventions* can be counted among these “tough and devoted people.”

Gallagher and Freeman ask the provocative question, “Why theatre now?,” and the resulting essays, conversations, and poetry are always in dialogue with this seemingly simple challenge. Judith Thompson responds that this “feels like a trick question, the kind we were asked in theatre school [...] when there was a right and wrong answer” (243) but then engages the reader in a deeply personal essay that looks backward and forward, ultimately arguing that theatre is needed now more than ever. John Mighton suggests that theatre is the necessary antidote to a world in which people are not being “educated to their full potential” and consequently losing “their sense of curiosity, their sense of wonder” (230). James McKinnon, writing about Jane Heather’s sexual education play, *Are We There Yet?*, defiantly answers: “[b]ecause it can solve problems and accomplish objectives that have flummoxed scientists, sociologists, educators and policymakers for decades” (213).

One of the delights of this anthology is how it reveals the great variety and intellectual depth of contemporary theatre that is happening across Canada outside of its “mainstream” stages. The theatre that the authors in the collection are defending is not the “safe and special place” that President Trump argued it must be in response to the *Hamilton* cast’s address to Mike Pence, but rather a place of active witnessing, radical dialogue, and communal experience. For a clear majority of the contributors this means that if theatre is to survive and flourish it must reject the past one hundred and fifty years of Anglo-European-American theatre—as award-winning Catherine Banks argues, “until theatre stops trying to razzle-dazzle audiences it will struggle” (111).

As alternatives to the “razzle dazzle,” what emerge from this collection are two related and possibly unsurprising themes: community and engagement. Dustin Scott Harvey argues that “the shared experience [is] the point of the theatrical encounter, not just a by product” (36); Andrew Kushnir comments on “theatre’s capacity to situate and celebrate audience members as both special individuals and members of a community, coalesced for a joint undertaking” (96); and Nicholas Hanson suggests that “the perceived limitations of theatre [...] actually provide the conditions for enrichment, because they compel audience members

to encounter other humans in a communal experience” (183). Many of the contributors stress the importance of the temporary community that theatre creates. Julie Salverson laments “we live in a time where the ability to feel—ourselves, others, the world we live in—is disappearing” (144) and argues that theatre is a way of re-connecting with other humans, or as Banks eloquently states, “a place to gather and feel connection” (111).

For several of the authors in the collection, the importance of theatre in the early twenty-first century moves beyond simply creating community to fostering curiosity, empathy, and engagement. This requires an audience that does more than just “show up”—as Jackie Maxwell asks, “who wants to go to the theatre and just kind of slump in your seat?” (125). Engagement, Ann-Marie MacDonald suggests, is a willingness to connect to the work: “Because I’m right in it. And we want to be in something. We want to forget ourselves so that we can make deeper contact with ourselves. I think that’s what happens when people are really engaged” (264). Most of the collaborators propose that the communal aspect of theatre creates (or should create) a space for profound engagement that affects the spectator beyond the moment to, as Harvey writes, “change the way you relate to other people, to alter how you go about doing things in the place you live” (33). For authors such as Gallagher, Kushnir, Hanson, and McKinnon, who are variously writing about the intersection of theatre and millennials, meaningful engagement with theatre may become “a buffer for narcissism and a catalyst for emphatic maturation” (Hanson 182). Other contributors highlight theatre’s unique ability to foster moments of empathy within the temporary community it creates and to become an extension of a more humanized and less solitary world.

The editors have achieved an unexpected balance in the collection by including an equal number of pieces by academics and professional theatre artists. As a result, there is great variety in the writing, form, and tone of the pieces, but one of the most gratifying aspects of the anthology is the way that essays and authors speak to each other. The book is divided into five sections—“A Politics of Place in a Global Age,” “Antidote for an Ailing Modernity,” “(En)Gendering Change,” “Breaking Down Barriers,” and “Why Theatre Always”—but the authors pick up threads of conversations from across the collection and make intellectual and thematic connections between multiple, often disparate, pieces. This weaving of ideas not only strengthens individual essays but enhances the anthology by creating a stronger sense of community amongst the writers.

Why theatre now? Gallagher and Freeman have compiled a valuable and innovative set of voices, opinions, and points of view to address that question. Not surprisingly, there is no one answer; instead there is an important collection of meditations, manifestos, and reflections that suggest a number of imperatives for “why theatre now” (and well into the future). Julie Tepperman sums it up best by writing, “Now more than ever, theatre can and must be a bulwark against despair” (211). This is a book that will be of special significance to both scholars and practitioners and it would make an excellent text for a variety of classes, but, importantly, it is an accessible entry point for anyone curious about contemporary Canadian theatre.

Works Cited

Steinbeck, John. *Once There Was a War*. New York: Viking, 1958. Print.