

## Book Reviews

***Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art: The British Community Arts Movement* by Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty (eds.)**

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017, 263 pp. (hardback)

By Linford Butler

*Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art* is a vital history and critique of the unorthodox and unusual, collective and non-hierarchical artistic activities which energised and sought to emancipate communities across the UK between 1968 and 1986. The editors Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty offer a volume which is both entertaining and incisive. Drawing together contributions from a range of community artists active during the period, who act as interlocutors and informants, this text contributes a remarkably complete historical account of a broad and varied range of community arts practices and assorts fascinating theoretical perspectives on the role, purpose, successes and failures of the community arts movement. The book offers an impassioned argument in favour of arts practices which enable alternative modes of living and acting in the world and promote that creative expression is a right and opportunity belonging to all.

The book is split into two parts. The first half offers a potted history of community arts in the period under examination from Jeffers, followed by four views from each of the UK's constituent countries, in which each author (Gerri Moriarty on England and Northern Ireland, Andrew Crummy on Scotland and Nick Clements on Wales) offers insightful and evocative anecdotes of their work in community arts in each national context. The authors' enthusiastic recollection of festivals, protest marches, parades, heated exchanges, and a range of diverse artistic projects are illustrative and thereby importantly situate the geographical, socio-political and historical terrains of their studies. The second part of the book concentrates upon developing a theoretical critical position on the movement in retrospect. Jeffers identifies that the emphasis on the pragmatics needed to 'get the job

done' have historically dominated community arts, to the detriment of 'reflecting on and theorising the work' (139). The second half of the book address this lacuna, through six chapters which offer a range of diverse theoretical concerns and positions, each making a distinct and valuable contribution to the developing discourse on community arts' struggle to empower communities across the UK to access culture and to create art.

On the whole, the essays tell the story of community arts' naissance, its growth and emboldening as it became more widespread, and the collective solidarity developed through shared values and common methodologies which cemented a sense of community arts as representing a collective movement in art-activism. The book however also traces the challenges and pressures the community arts movement experienced: the policy and funding pressures imposed by government and the Arts Council, disquiet within the movement as fundamental values came into conflict with desire for practicality and expediency, and community arts' slow decline as it struggled to respond to a society which was rapidly changing—in particular with the rise of Thatcher and neoliberal state policy from 1975 onwards. Ultimately, the book tells the story of the erosion of community arts as committed cultural activism and mourns its total transmutation by the mid-1980s into a professionalised and structuralised mode of cultural employment. Nick Clements establishes how the introduction of subsidy for community arts in Wales during the 1980s radically changed community arts practices, with practitioners suddenly rendered as professional grant-seekers; he explains that the need for increased managerialism, formalised accountability and formal legal and financial structuralisation within community arts collectives inevitably restricted innovation and creativity. Owen Kelly theorises that community arts' original anti-hierarchical and therefore collectivist ethos was effective as it permitted dividuality: the development of each individual within a group. The notion of the radical monopoly, Kelley theorises that the figure of the professionalised 'community artist' effectively precluded the non-hierarchical arrangements which

were seen as vital early in the development of community arts, instead privileging the professional artist as visionary and leader, rather than merely as facilitator of communities' own creative ideas and instincts. Janet Hetherington and Mark Webster consider how the rapid expansion of community arts practices combined with the professionalisation effect caused by subsidy and structuralisation gave rise to formalised education and training courses in community arts. They argue that some of these reinforced the notion of the "qualified" community artist, accelerating the reconstitution of community arts as an institutionalised profession rather than as grassroots activism. These examples act only to briefly highlight *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art* theoretical project, which valuably foregrounds the risk posed by professionalisation and structuralisation to the efficacy of any practice, seeking to develop cultural democracy. The implicit message of the book is that professionalisation ultimately rendered community arts politically impotent, resultantly unable to deliver its vision of a radical cultural democracy in which all cultural activity was equally valued and supported, and universally accessible.

The complex tensions which the book illuminates between the distinct figures of the politically oppositional, socially-engaged activist-artist on one hand, and the professionalised, propositional, sector-engaged career-artist on the other, ensure the book is not merely a nostalgic historical account of a single niche art movement. Instead, its critique of the concurrent professionalisation and decline of the community arts movement played out upon a backdrop of rich first-hand accounts and insightful theorisation of the politics and praxis of the movement, ensures *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art* has implications for both a broader range of artistic work, and offers valuable lessons for artists making original work today. The book begs important questions for any researcher or practitioner engaging with historical or current socially-turned or politically-engaged practices: what is the role of education and training? How should 'doing' and 'thinking' be balanced against one another? To what extent should we view artistic production as a calling or as a career choice? How does one

remain committed to their values and politics in the face of external pressures? And, finally and perhaps most importantly, who does and who should have access and agency to contribute within our society?

*Platform's* postgraduate and early-career readers will find much value in *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art* for its fulsome education in the history of and lessons learned from the community arts movement, for its powerful, sometimes provocative political conviction, and finally, for its exploration of the formidable potential of art activism in precarious times like ours. There is perhaps a lack of maintained reflexive critique to interrogate the basic political and ethical assumptions upon which community arts were predicated. The book's focus is instead put upon the practices that emerged and on how they agitated against what community artists believed was an inherently inequitable society. Altogether the book is an entertaining and fascinating read, and reminds of the potential and power of art as a vehicle for reimagining a radical reconstitution of our social and political relations.

***New Playwriting at Shakespeare's Globe* by Vera Cantoni**

London: Methuen Drama, 2018, 238 pp. (hardback)

By Jemima Hubberstey

Vera Cantoni seeks to add to the existing body of scholarship on Shakespeare's Globe by exploring how far the theatre's assumed cultural history informs modern plays that have been written specifically for the Globe. While scholars such as Andrew Gurr, J. R. Mulryne, and Margaret Shewring in *Rebuilding Shakespeare's Globe* and *Shakespeare's Globe Rebuilt* have played an important role in setting the stage for considering Shakespeare's Globe in terms of how it enables a better practical understanding of early modern performances, Cantoni's book offers a fresh outlook on theatre history and considers how a modern audience regards the cultural paradox of having a modern theatre pertaining to an early modern past. Indeed, scholars often refer

to the Shakespeare's Globe as 'rebuilt' and thus placing emphasis on the importance of the original. Cantoni however makes it clear that this book is also concerned with 'new' playwriting, creating an open dialogue between the past and the present that is not simply recreating the past, but creating new plays that will add to our cultural heritage in the present.

The first chapter, 'Something Old, Something New' considers previous scholarship on Shakespeare's Globe that establishes the playhouse as a 'test tube,' to use Andrew Gurr's term, for theatrical experimentation. Cantoni considers a range of arguments about how the playhouse should be defined in relation to its cultural heritage, remarking that it is neither a copy, imitation or replica, but rather a practical model that offers an insight into the possibilities of performance. Using what she describes as a 'production analysis' methodology, she then examines a wide range of contemporary plays to probe deeper into the peculiarities of the unique space, which she argues allows playwrights to tap into a nexus of historical interpretations and assumptions.

'Presenting the Past' explores the theoretical frameworks around the theatre to explore how Shakespeare's Globe fits into our contemporary cultural network. Cantoni's interpretation of the Globe offers a careful insight into how the theatre bridges the gap between unauthentic architecture and the audience's expectations for historical authenticity by allowing the audience to accept anachronisms and appreciate the art of what they see over historical authenticity. This is a daring stance against the body of criticism that has grounded plays at Shakespeare's Globe in terms of their historical relevance, and it asks a pertinent question about the value of contemporary performances and what they suggest about the audiences of today.

Cantoni's chapter on 'The Spectacle of Spectators' draws on her practical experience of theatre and considers the realities of performance for spectators: who they are, what they expect, and how they view the plays. Going against theatre historians who initially presumed that an audience of backpack tourists is largely uninformed, Cantoni makes the point that the historical locus in fact draws in an educated audience;

made evident in their engagement with early modern jokes and references. This is an important part of understanding what a modern audience expects and how they are likely to be conditioned to view the new repertoire of plays.

In 'The Weight of the Past' Cantoni makes the point that modern writers have sought to use the audience's historical expectations of Shakespeare's Globe in order to ask further questions about historiography and dramaturgy. This is particularly strong in her discussion of Howard Brenton's plays, which demonstrate how far the relation between playwright and theatre can work, in a similar vein to how Shakespeare may have once deliberately written his plays to be in dialogue with his theatrical performance spaces. Her discussion on 'historiographic metatheatre' further highlights how modern playwrights are able to employ the medium of performance as a means of self consciously presenting their plays in dialogue with past performances and different versions of history.

Finally in 'Playing to the Crowd', Cantoni considers the means by which modern playwrights seek to engage the audience, and to what purpose this serves. She argues that Howard Brenton in particular makes careful use of comedy, romance and music to gain and maintain the audience's attention. She examines how the protagonists in *In Extremis* and *Anne Boleyn* establish a dialogue with the audience that capitalises on dramatic irony and metatheatre to play with the viewers' knowledge of history. However, such devices, she argues, are intended to provoke active thought from an audience, so that by engaging the viewers, the playwright is able to admonish them gently and highlight ongoing societal issues, especially the 'prurient curiosity for the sordid details.' Highlighting the moral responsibility of playwriting adds an interesting dimension to the discussion, showing the importance that the audience is asked to reflect on its own dialogue with history and whether past mistakes are, or could be, repeated.

While Cantoni's study pioneers a new insight into Shakespeare's Globe, to her own admission, Cantoni deliberately considers modern playwrights as a heterogeneous group that is unified by the context in

which their plays are produced. For students wishing to make more direct comparisons to Shakespeare's plays, there is perhaps further scope to consider the plays on an individual basis and to tease out further differences between them. Historically, Shakespeare's own plays were performed in a variety of places, and so one might ask whether these plays would be viewed differently without the shadow of Shakespeare silently hovering over them. Moreover, instead of focusing on the playwrights' use of linguistic devices and allusions, she offers a practical outlook by keeping her focus on the Shakespeare's Globe as a performance space.

Overall, Cantoni offers a meticulously researched book that pioneers a new way of thinking for theatre historians and scholars. While there is scope for further avenues of exploration, she brings scholars' theoretical expectations of the early modern playhouse to the contemporary age and asks important questions about the value of history and the meaning of performance in the modern age. The question that Cantoni addresses is to decipher what modern playwrights seek to show their audiences today. By not allowing the shadow of Shakespeare's reputation and historical importance to define his eponymous theatre, Cantoni opens up new discussions about the purposes of performance and offers a new perspective on Shakespeare's Globe: not a relic of the past, but a means of understanding the relationship between the past and the present in order to inform the future of performance.

### **Works Cited**

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- Mulryne, J. R., and Margaret Shewring, eds. *Shakespeare's Globe Rebuilt*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

***Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (eds.)**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 348 pp. (hardback)

By Karen Morash

We have not quite reached the end of the second decade new millennium, yet we already have a full-length study of (predominantly English-language) twenty-first century theatre. Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage, editors of *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, justify the text's publication by stating 'there is still no full-length study of specifically twenty-first drama' (1). Although the book is in dialogue with other texts exploring issues and trends in contemporary drama, including *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* and Dan Rebellato's *Modern British Playwriting, 2000-2009*, it is the only one focusing specifically on the years 2000-2016.

The clocks' ticking over to mark the new millennium certainly infected popular imagination and culture, particularly with worries over technological meltdown. However, this did not mark a radical shift in the attentions of theatre and performance makers, and none of the text's authors argue that the years denoted by the title signify a significant rift with twentieth-century theatre praxis. The volume is organised into sections which point to particular areas of focus for twenty-first century theatre makers, suggesting changes which have come about gradually and pointing to approaches which may mark the beginning of new areas of interest. By taking a collective overview of the chapters, one can pinpoint certain trends that have arisen in the last two decades. These include: the audience being seen/treated as a dramaturgical element; a turning away from postmodern concerns; the theories of Jacques Rancière; and gender.

Part I, 'Beyond Postmodernism: Changing Perspectives on Drama' suggests that theatre and performance in the first decades of the twenty-first century has not yet formed a defined identity, but, fascinatingly, involves a backward glance to historical forms which may be revitalised and renewed for contemporary purposes. Of particular



note, Elaine Aston's chapter, 'Room for Realism?' makes an insightful argument that, despite the academic disregard for realism, it is still a popular form. Through her analysis of Fiona Evans' *Scarborough* (2008), *NSFW* (2012) by Lucy Kirkwood, and *Free Outgoing* by Anupama Chandrasekhar (2007), Aston makes a case for its continuing importance, particularly in the work feminist playwrights who challenge the twentieth-century performative conventions of social realism. In another compelling chapter, Stephen Bottoms uses Ranci re's theories on the 'stultifying' effects of education in a refreshing way to examine radical approaches to Shakespeare in Tim Crouch's *I, Cinna (the Poet)* (2012) and Toneelgroep Amsterdam's *The Roman Tragedies* (2008). Arguing for an 'emancipated' attitude towards Shakespeare, he identifies problematic tendencies within many Anglophone productions of Shakespeare's work, such as the assumption that audiences 'need help in approaching the plays' (64), which can result in directors creating performance frameworks focused on teaching rather than storytelling. Rather, theatre makers should be approaching Shakespearean texts with the assumption that audiences are not only intelligent, but capable of forming their own interpretations of the words and action.

Parts II and III look at issues of austerity and class, and race and national identity respectively, with a fair amount of overlap, as these issues are inextricably intertwined. Highlights of these two sections include Mark O'Thomas' 'Translating Austerity: Theatrical Responses to the Financial Crisis', a welcome interjection into the general dialogue about austerity, commenting on initiatives such as Theatre Uncut and the PIIGS project at the Royal Court which, in their usage of plays in translation, provide a timely reminder that non-English playwrights are crafting work that provides significant insight into our contemporary world. Equally timely is Si n Adiseshiah's chapter, which uses Simon Stephens' *Port* (2013), *Jerusalem* (2009) by Jez Butterworth, and Gillian Slovo's *The Riots* (2011) to argue that, whilst the working-class experience has returned as a theme of interest for playwrights, it can be problematised by depictions of powerlessness and the 'violent potential of the middle-class gaze' (166). In Part III, Nadine Holdsworth also

responds to *Jerusalem*. Her investigation, in contrast, focuses on the often overlooked characters of English travellers and gypsies. She points out that Johnny ‘Rooster’ Byron, Butterworth’s captivating anti-hero, is emblematic of an ‘uncomfortable irony’ (181) that, whilst audiences celebrate his rebellious and anti-social tendencies, in reality he symbolises the marginalised groups—including travellers—whom many English people view as a threat to their way of life.

Part IV departs from previous sections in its focus on the future, examining the beginnings of certain types of conceptual dramaturgical exploration, including the implications of genetic science in Mary Luckhurst’s chapter on Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* (2000) and *A Number* (2004). Marie Kelly writes on an underserved topic in theatre discourse – casting – using cognitive approaches in a fascinating investigation of director Katie Mitchell’s work. Finally, Una Chaudhuri’s ‘Anthropo-Scenes: Staging Climate Chaos in the Drama of Bad Ideas’, placed as a deliberate closure to the volume, examines two plays portraying dystopic futures: Churchill’s *Far Away* and Wallace Shawn’s *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* (2009). Chaudhuri argues that these two plays identify a movement into the era of the Anthropocene—an acknowledgement of the scale of ecological change wrought by human activity. As such, these are not plays of ‘ideas’, but work which faces up to the enormity of the destructive forces human society have put in motion.

Although a number of chapters refer to Hans Thies Lehmann’s theories of the postdramatic, and/or cover work which might fall into this category, the editors make no reference to it in their introduction, nor do they explore the implications of the titular word ‘Drama’ (which has been problematized by Lehmann’s theories). In addition, given its current prominence in the media and academic debate, and its regular appearance as a theme in many of the book’s chapters, one could query why gender does not warrant a section in its own right.

Many chapters avoid saying anything definitive about early twenty-first century theatre making, and perhaps, as suggested by the subtitle’s quasi-question ‘What Happens Now’, this is the point. Rather, the focus is on the documentation of dramatic work (both that

which has been deemed important by the critics, and that which may eventually be deemed canonical), and the societal forces which shape the plays. There is a palpable sense of energy and revitalisation within the text, not just in terms of the artistic work covered, but also in the perceptive efforts of many of the book's authors to use interdisciplinary approaches to argue for theatre's increasing significance in the effort to understand the time and space we inhabit.

### **Works Cited**

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