

APPLIED THEATRE RESEARCH, GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY AND IDEA

APPLIED THEATRE RESEARCHER ISSN 1443-1726 Number 12, 2011

BOOK REVIEWS

Helen Nicholson, *Theatre, Education and Performance: The Map and the Story*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2011, ISBN 978 0 230 57423 6, £16.99 (pb)

Review by Michael Balfour

Reviewer's biography

Michael Balfour is Chair of Applied Theatre at Griffith University.

Helen Nicholson's book is a conceptual update on the practices and debates in contemporary theatre education. Her approach is broad and significant, rebooting and revising ideas that have underpinned the field over the last century. With considerable delicacy, she revisits the foundations of theatre education, exploring and connecting how the ideas of pioneering educationalists and social reformers were put into practice. The book is structured into two sections: Part 1 is Looking Back: Histories and Landscapes; Part 2 is Moving On: Theatre Education in the Twenty-First Century. Nicholson reconstructs the arts education history, rightly giving prominence to some neglected names and reformers – many of them pioneering women who had strong beliefs in the value of creativity and education.

Nicholson begins her story with a personal anecdote about a visit to a school in Slough, and weaves around this some of the central metaphors of the book. One of Nicholson's great strengths as a writer is the way in which she interconnects ideas and perspectives from a diverse range of thinkers and practitioners from performance studies, theatre, cultural theory, philosophy and education. She pursues the development of ideas and places them in their context, but also skilfully links them to their prominence in contemporary discourse. It is this critical genealogy that Nicholson explores, combining abstract ideas with embodied practices to draw 'attention to moments of rupture, observes counter-memories, questions the gaps and absences, and considers how established patterns are disrupted and why orthodoxies are disturbed' (p. 10). The author is careful not to present neat timelines, but precisely charts how ideas are revisited and revised over time.

Nicholson's critical genealogy, as with Anthony Jackson's equally far-reaching genealogy in *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings*, begins in the mid- to late nineteenth century with the idea that the arts could provide a liberating space away from the increasing industrialisation of the age. Indeed, she traces the development of ideas through Arnold and William Morris to social reformers like Jane Addams in Chicago and the pioneering work of University Settlement Houses. Nicholson observes that although founded on an idea of cultural utopia, and high art's role in 'civilising' the working class, considerable inroads were made in linking the principles of the arts and education together for policy-makers and practitioners. The author uses the period to critically explore the ways in which school spaces were (and were not) conceptualised as places of play, and the ways in which concepts of childhood changed. She connects how philosophers such as John Dewey were influenced directly by the work of Jane Addams, leading to some of the early theoretical justifications for arts education, such as *Art as Experience* (1934). It is perhaps surprising in this early genealogy that there is no mention of Montessori or Rudolf Steiner as influential educational reformers in the period, but it is the ideas and their development that are the focus, not a comprehensive history.

Nicholson's adept ability to condense and find new aspects to old histories is never more present than in her account of the 1960s Theatre-in-Education movement. As with her deft *Theatre & Education*, this section traverses old territories with a vividness and freshness that is deceptively difficult to achieve. She concentrates on tracing the influence of a more politicised agenda, reaching back to Ewan MacColl and exploring the link between radicalised participation in the 1930s to the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry and other 1960s and 1970s practitioners internationally (notably John O'Toole in Australia). Again this is not a comprehensive historical account of the period, but an imaginative and precise critical re-examination of the ideas and ideals that fuelled an explosion of innovation and creativity. It ends with an obvious

question: What happened? Nicholson answers this not with firm answers but carefully constituted questions that give rise to Part 2 of the book, in which she attempts to understand the lessons of the past century and how they have impacted on contemporary practice. As with the history section, the answers emerge from a careful cultural reading of the times. This approach enables her to explore a wide range of themes and complex issues with precision, care and intelligence.

In Part 2, Nicholson traces the impact of changing social and political constructs, principally the movement from industrialisation to globalisation. In this section, she sets herself the challenge of asking how theatre education has been able to maintain its traditional orientation to providing challenging, artistic and socially engaged practice in an increasingly globalised context. She draws on Kwame Anthony Appiah's term 'spheres of moral concern' (p. 84) to explore notions of home, nationhood and intercultural dialogue. She contextualises this with a mapping of how education theories and policies have adapted to the needs of the creative class, providing an incisive account of the ways in which these new perspectives have been enacted in schools with a growing emphasis on market-orientated skills rather than ideals. One of Nicholson's questions here is whether there are other ways to understand creativity that avoid the link between creative learning and global capitalism. In many ways, this is a replay of earlier ideological conflicts, Marxism version 2.0 and the omniscient capitalism now rephrased as consumerism. But there are subtler manifestations, and Nicholson is deft at emphasising these, in particular the ways in which vernacular spaces for creativity have the potential to revise and renew the original William Morris ideals. After this careful contextualisation of contemporary ideas, Nicholson moves to illustrate strategies and tactics for dealing with, and resisting, globalising forces through the examination of a number of practical examples. This includes the work of applied theatre consultants in New Zealand; science and theatre education; participation politics; and her own practice undertaking research projects in London, South Africa and Japan. Her exposition of her project in Japan is particularly honest (sometimes squeamishly so), and it is a mark of her integrity as a writer and practitioner that she allows us in at the pointy end of intercultural praxis.

Theatre, Education and Performance attempts to weave together the ideas and possibilities of theatre education, and make the connection between a critical genealogy and contemporary questions of belonging and becoming. Nicholson is an articulate and lively guide, pushing at traditional perspectives on theatre education, and forcing a connection to a broader, complex, changing world. Nicholson fluently plays with ideas from a range of fields and discourses to deliver an incisive, provocative and highly relevant book for these uncertain times.

Jonathon Shailor, *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre*, Jessica Kingsley, London, 2010, ISBN 978 1 84905 823 0, \$37.95 (pb)

Review by Linda Davey

Reviewer's biography

Linda Davey is currently pursuing a PhD in Applied Theatre at Griffith University, Queensland. In addition to her prison theatre work, she has worked as a senior psychologist in prisons and correctional settings in South Australia and as a researcher in forensic psychology, publishing mainly in the area of offender rehabilitation.

Jonathon Shailor has provided us with an engrossing collection of accounts of fifteen actor/directors who have led theatre programs in prisons throughout the United States. These inspiring narratives invite us behind bars in some of the most challenging environments for theatre workers, where creative solutions to obstacles to the work are constantly sought. Whether it be finding ways to work with offenders in solitary confinement; dealing with the interpersonal frictions amongst program participants; negotiating for resources and support within hierarchical organisational systems; filling roles vacated without warning through prisoners dropping out or being sanctioned; or simply the emotional strain of working with those with such significant needs; these fifteen facilitators provide a glimpse into the world of the incarcerated and the possibilities of artistic/theatre programs within these settings.

Throughout these chapters, we are introduced to individuals who, through their engagement with a prison theatre program, find new perspectives, gain new insights and develop new skills. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the facilitators of the programs that constitute this book make some claim to being 'transformative': the notion of theatre being a catalyst for 'new lives' pervades the text. As a prison theatre practitioner reading this text, this is truly motivating, yet it also highlights our dilemma as prison theatre workers: experientially we know that what we do enables change in quite profound ways, yet our evidence for change thus far is thin and our accounts generally individualistic and anecdotal. Increasingly, this matters. Accounts within this book highlight how prison access, institutional support for and sustainability of programs are fragile in a political climate where law and order agendas are conservative, where public and tabloid media opinions are weighted towards retribution rather than rehabilitation, and where resources for intervention programs are scarce. In Australia, add to this a somewhat fundamentalist approach to 'what works' in offender rehabilitation and an emphasis on manualised CBT-based programs within correctional departments (see Heseltine et al. 2011), coupled with our society's lack of sufficient support for arts programs in general, and the imperative for prison theatre to justify its transformative claims is unavoidable.

Perhaps part of the problem is the broader lack of engagement of prison theatre with criminology and offender rehabilitation research. It may be argued that if we are to claim, as does Shailor, that prison theatre is 'a crucible for transformation' (p. 24) in any sense – even if we are to begin with the disclaimer that our 'theatre is not therapy' but see it nonetheless as building emotional awareness or interpersonal skills in ways that impact criminal behaviour – we are in fact making a rehabilitative claim, and therefore need to engage, even if radically, with the offender rehabilitation discourse. It may also be argued that to ignore this discourse is to potentially deprive ourselves of a place in the rehabilitation landscape and to keep our work at risk of neglect or worse.

It may well be that the first step in taking a place in the offender rehabilitation landscape is letting others know that we exist: that theatre practice in prisons is alive and well, its ubiquity seen globally, in examples from death row in Kentucky to Russia's Urals; from Berlin to Santiago; in Italy, France, Greece, India, Nigeria, South Africa, the United Kingdom and beyond. Certainly Shailor's book stakes a claim for US prison theatre during the 2000s. Similarly, edited volumes by Michael Balfour (2004) and James Thompson (1999) have presented work done in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. With such publications and the advent of Applied Prison Theatre departments in universities, we can safely say that an academic discipline of prison theatre is emerging, and with publication comes accountability.

Once we begin to write about what we do, there is a requirement for us to define and position our work, to self-reflect, to critique. Within some chapters of *Performing New Lives*, this level of reflection was missing; in other chapters, it arose incidentally and briefly but nonetheless was a welcome and stimulating mirror held up to the work being described. In one or two chapters, such as Curt Tofteland's 'The Keeper of the

Keys' (Chapter 13), reflection on the work more generally was a central feature of the writing. In his chapter, Tofteland reflects on the thirteen-year history and development of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program and his own growing awareness of the imperatives of working within a correctional facility. In doing so, Tofteland alerts practitioners to the significance of fully appreciating the limitations of engagement with prisoners and the tenuous nature of correctional support for the work. His commentary, while referring specifically to the US context, is nonetheless applicable to most jurisdictions, and is essential reading for any arts practitioner seeking to work within a correctional setting.

The final chapter, 'A Conversation with the Authors', is constructed from selected email correspondence between the chapter contributors during a three-week period. Here, the authors reflect on various aspects of their work, although the writing remains largely anecdotal. There is some welcome debate, such as that by John McCabe-Juhnke, as he challenges Laura Bates' assertion that Shakespeare 'allows prisoners to examine, and change their lives more successfully than the prison's other programs that address, more directly, the psychological issues facing prisoners'. He counters:

Larry's story is striking evidence of success. But it's a particular success supported by his compelling testimony. Is it possible that Larry's self-discovery says more about Larry's individual receptiveness or sensitivity to artistic expression than it says about Shakespeare ... The challenge for me is to know whether amazing stories of transformation are enough to 'prove' the value of our programs to those who aren't familiar with our work. (p. 271)

These are important questions that deserve elaboration, and such debates are to be encouraged. Shailor's invitation for others to join the community, as he introduces this final chapter, is worth taking seriously.

If presenting examples of our work is the first step, what might be the next? Certainly central to the mission of legitimacy lies the thorny issue of evaluation and how this might best be discussed and implemented. We also need to explore and coherently theorise prison theatre's relationship to transformation and rehabilitation. No longer can we blithely ride into prisons on the back of the disclaimer that 'we're just doing theatre, not rehabilitation'. Prisons are unique environments, and prisoners are particular populations with specific and complex needs (Day et al. in press). Criminologists Parkes and Bilby (2010) encourage prison arts practitioners to develop the courage 'to capture and evaluate those [arts] approaches and the "transformative effects" they can have'. They also suggest that:

to consider the effect of artistic and spiritual endeavour [in prisons] means to theorise these concepts, the practice, and the outcomes, and to consider their relationships with the traditional forms of intervention in prisons aimed at altering offenders' behaviour. (p. 106)

If prison theatre is to make a significant contribution, its writing will need to not only tell inspiring accounts of prisoners' transformation through theatre, but seek to reflect on its practice and engage in the debates that so affect the way prisons run. Our maturity as a discipline is best displayed in our writing about what we do and our willingness to engage with other linked disciplines that concern themselves with prisons and prisoners.

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