Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices by Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Katie Normington

London: Routledge, 2007, 215 pp. (paperback)

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Despite the dominance of devising as an approach to the activity of making performance in our contemporary climate, the body of critical and theoretical literature published on the subject is oddly sparse, and the field is definitely wanting.

Alison Oddey was one of the first to attempt to address the lack of a substantial study of devising practices in 1994, with her book, *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, in which she describes the gap in the literature as one of the main reasons for undertaking her project; she "felt that there was a lack of information on the subject of devising theatre."[1] Oddey's work has, to a certain extent, started to address this gap, but it did not, at the time, prompt an immediate or substantial response from either the academy or practitioners. Although certain practitioners and groups, such as Forced Entertainment[2] and Goat Island[3] have since published texts that illustrate their own devising practices, they are few and far between. In 2005, *Theatre Topics*[4] published a devising special issue, with a variety of papers, contributions coming from both the academy and practitioners. This extended Oddey's project "across the water," creating a platform for devising practices and theoretical formulations from outside of the UK. In *Devising Performance: a Critical History*, Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling explicitly locate their work as a response to Oddey's; picking up the project where she left off, bringing it up to date and taking it

[1] Alison Oddey, *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994) xi.
[2] Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1999).
[3] Stephen Bottoms & Matthew Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology, and Goat Island*, (London : Routledge, 2007).
[4] Jonathan Chambers & Joan Herrington, eds., *Theatre Topics: Devising Special Issue* (Michigan: John Hopkins UP, 2005).

on into the new Millennia, saying that "it is curious that the conversation Oddey hoped would result from her book has never really taken place […] this book sets out to demarcate and explore the parameters of devising."[5] Interestingly, the publication of Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Katie Normington's *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices* follows up so swiftly on *Devising Performance* that I would like to suggest that it might herald a renewed, more urgent critical interest in the arena of contemporary devising practices.

Making a Performance is an attempt to "shed light on some of the moments and concepts that have informed devising, marking some of the major paradigm shifts and changing practices evident in the varied and highly complex strategies that constitute devised performance" (10). Unlike Oddey's survey of contemporary devising, *Making a Performance* is not only concerned with providing a critical analysis and commentary of particular British theatre practices from a narrow "aesthetic" perspective but, instead, throws its net farther a field. As well as including work from a wider geographical area, it, like *Devising Performance*, considers practices that fall outside of what we might understand as "theatre." *Making a Performance* adopts an approach that seeks to go beyond simply illustrating contemporary practices. It takes up a discourse which attempts to locate particular practices within their historical, social, cultural and ideological context; identifying and mapping key moments that represent a shift or significant change in conceptual, theoretical and practical approaches to making performance.

This approach is similar to that of Heddon and Milling. However, *Devising Performance* locates the origins of devising practices in Post-War experiments; *Making a Performance* challenges this perspective and asserts the origins of devising

[5] Deirdre Heddon & Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: a Critical History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 1.

as being located in the "high-modernist" and avant-garde experiments of the early twentieth century. Heddon and Milling make a point of omitting performance art and live art practices from their study, but *Making a Performance* does not make this distinction, in fact, the authors assert that devising is directly related to and informed by 'live art' and 'performance' art practices. The discourse of the book does not make an attempt at offering a complete history of devising, nor does it pin it down to a singular notion; instead, it seeks to contextualise a specific selection of varying manifestations, in their historical, theoretical and cultural moments of production. Govan, Nicholson and Normington focus on work that can be understood as innovative and radical, paying particular attention to practice that marks a resistance to and/or a shift from the dominant practices of its time. The discourse cites the historical avant-garde as a starting point and charts the development of devising through the post-war, neo avant-garde and non-textual experiments of the 1960's and 1970's. By tracing such a path, they inevitably place the dissolving of the boundaries between life and art, and the shift from theatre to performance, at the heart of the devising discourse.

Making a Performance, is divided into four sections: Genealogies and Histories, Shaping Narratives, Places and Spaces, and Performing Bodies. The chapters that explore the "Creative Performer" and "Virtual Bodies" are of particular note. There is currently a frenzy of debate being generated around the notion of the creative performer; both the industry and the academy are (re) considering approaches to the training and teaching of performance practice, specifically on "acting" courses. This chapter "Creative Performer" rigorously exercises and contributes to those current debates. The chapter titled "Virtual Bodies" is also topical, an area of much debate and critical discussion, of which it contributes an insightful and informative

entry, exploring the emerging relationship between digital technologies and live performance.

Making a Performance makes a strong, substantial and much needed contribution to the field of devised performance theory, and I hope that it will inspire others to enter into the discourse and disseminate their work. The text covers areas that will not only be of interest to students, practitioners and scholars. It is not a handbook or guide to producing devised performance, but a cultural and histrological review of contemporary devising practices and their conceptual and practical origins.

Film, Drama and the Break-Up of Britain **by Steve Blandford**

Chicago: Intellect Books, The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 200 pp. (paperback)

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"Berlin, Paris, Cardiff, Antwerp

It could be anywhere" (Ed Thomas qtd in Blandford 178)

Sound familiar? It should. In *Film, Drama and the Break-Up of Britain* what we find is a tattered nationalism roughly taped together with a longing to be anything *but* British. Despite a globalized identity (can we really extract America from anyone's national character these days? Aren't New York, Houston, Seattle implied in this list?), it is difficult to miss the inherent ingredient in Scottish, Irish and Welsh nationalism, namely, *not*-English; which is to say Hegelian antithetical determination is at work here. Otherness has always been a feature in the construction of nationhood, of course, so this shouldn't come as a surprise.

Blandford tends to be ambiguous about "fixing identity" for any of Britain's new nations post devolution, though he argues that an older notion of Britain needs to

be dismantled. The battleground for theatre artists ultimately lies in the question: What *is* Britishness anyway? Blandford asks us not to forget that the prime subject of "in-yer-face" theatre is the *consumer* in a society that enjoins enjoyment as its subject. It doesn't appear to matter too much these days whether that consumer should inhabit Berlin, Paris or Cardiff.

The problem is, even post devolution, "'British' remains synonymous with 'English'" (Blandford 19). Blandford suggests that although Richard Curtis' films represent a "theme park of Britain," the English are pretty much stuck with the likes of Hugh Grant as their national hero. Not too many English people recognise their lives in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* or *Notting Hill* (remember that characters in Curtis' films don't hold down serious jobs, and even if they do they don't *take* them seriously). Blandford points out that although this "self-effacing Englishness" (22) is a masquerade, it is also a big seller on the world market, and as the Scottish learned from *Braveheart*, that goes a long way in tourist pounds and inevitably affects our own perceptions of national character. This also opens the question: *who* decides on national identity? Do the English decide what it means to be English, or does the market decide for them? Perhaps the most interesting point in his chapter on English cinema concerns the male posturing we see in the fad for Guy-Richie-style gangster films.

There is no doubt that Blandford is correct in his assertion that Britain is struggling to come to terms with an Ireland that portrays itself outside of the narrow confines of postcolonial labels. But so is the rest of the world. Northern Ireland, and Belfast specifically, has been trying to recreate its reputation beyond the Troubles; the problem is that not too many audiences are interested in the attempts to portray a modern, likable, *European* Belfast. The burden of national representation has sat

heavily upon the shoulders of Irish playwrights. Alternatively, many dire American representations of Ireland have belied an agrarian hinterland rather than the thriving consumerist Mecca the country has become since the (huh-hum) Celtic Tiger. Blandford quotes Michael Higgins in his hope that film, beyond Sheridan and Jordan, will be a vital part of Irish cultural output so that "the country becomes [...] a 'maker' of images rather than simply a consumer" of them (63). Again the uncertainty of ownership of identity arises, both in its production and consumption.

The chapters concerning Scottish film and drama could be regarded as the focal points of the book. [6] There is a generation of talented playwrights in Scotland (Greig, Neilson, Greenhorn, Glover, McCartney, Harrower, Harris, Munro, Lochhead) and Blandford encounters all of them. Even prior to devolution, the mass of "new images about Scotland" in the 1990s "produced a sense of something altogether more concerted" (66) *vis-à-vis* a new Scottish aesthetic and political landscape. A space has been created, Blandford suggests, in the "crumbling of certainty" of British identity. If Blandford wishes to merely itemize the modes in which Scotland's self-representation looks to Europe, away from the colonial ties of England where "monolithic ideas of Britishness are breaking up" (18), then he has successfully done so. Ken Loach made a number of films that address the particularly Scottish problems of alcoholism, poverty and unemployment *(My Name is Joe*, *Riff-Raff*, *Raining Stones),* but much of what Blandford discusses reiterates the "bright European future" for the "new" Scotland. But one wonders – is this not ultimately an issue of globalization rather than

[6] Unless you are profoundly interested in Welsh film and theatre, there is little impetus to read the chapters that dive with such relish into the subject. Wales was naturally given significant airtime when one remembers that Blandford is a professor at the University of Glamorgan. Certainly the issues concerning the inauguration of a Welsh national theatre and the dilemma over the development of English-language work within such an institution are pertinent, but Blandford avoids any helpful suggestions. (What's more, I have no doubt that the confinement of the Welsh chapters to a footnote will be correctly construed as a reflection of the ongoing problem for Wales in Britain.)

of national identity? No doubt Blandford would argue these issues are indivisible. When Blandford discusses *Ae Fond Kiss* for example he makes the point that we ignore the changing identity of a multicultural post-9/11 society at our own peril. One wonders if this is a Scottish issue *per se*. This is perhaps a point at which the book fails to delve into cultural theory. Does Blandford feel that Scotland should tarry on the micro-level of Deleuzian identity politics, or is he on Žižek's side, hinting at Scotland's role in the greater problems of late-capitalism, which must avoid such out-dated Leftist guises?[7] Unfortunately, Blandford does not propose either.

If you are looking for a summary of film and drama's engagement with pre- and post-devolution in Britain this is the book for you. However, one can't help but notice an inherent faith in 'healthy' nationalism haunting the book. A deconstruction of this belief might perhaps have been a more informative platform for Blandford's work. An uncertainty regarding the future only seems to heighten our anxiety for a new national identity rather than deflating that desire. The question remains: is this desire really anything more than a basic fear and loathing of Otherness? Either way, it would be nice to know what Blandford thinks.

[7] I am not suggesting here that either Deleuze or Žižek need be representatives of Blandford's cultural theory; rather, I am calling attention to the very lack of any theoretical platform for a book that critiques ideology and nationalism, even if that position were to be "anti-theoretical."

Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance **by Lynette Goddard.**

Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2007, 229 pp. (Hardback)

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What is it that constitutes a black feminist theatre aesthetic? How do black British women dramatists and performers define and express themselves within a white, middle-class, heterosexual matrix? Is there an outlet for a progressive black feminist performance? Is the feminist movement pertinent to black women or is it founded on white women's principles? These are some of the recurring questions that permeate Lynette Goddard's *Staging Black Feminisms*. In an era that considers feminism tainted and out-of-date and yet explores the deconstruction of identity categories contesting essentialist assumptions of subjectivity, her venture is timely and up-to-date.

Staging Black Feminisms is not simply aiming at mapping the theatrical practices of black women of African-Carribean descent in Britain since the 1980s; it critically attempts to trace the potential of black feminist subversion within a British multicultural framework. As its title suggests, black feminist theatre is alive and kicking, aligning itself with socio-political transformations that foster less rigid categorizations and enable black artists to break free from stereotypical assumptions regarding their identities. Goddard avoids falling into the facile assumption that every work by black women implies its adherence to feminist values. On the contrary, she provides a close reading of different kinds of performance art that has been produced by black women working in British theatre and critically assesses their feminist political agenda.

The book is conveniently divided into four parts; the first part examines the position of black women artists working in theatre in relation to the socio-political

formations that took place in Britain during the 1950s-2000s, underscoring the marginalization they have envisaged in both black and women's theatre companies and the difficulty to form independent companies. The second part focuses on specific texts and productions by black women dramatists such as Winsome Pinnock, Jacqueline Rudet, Jackie Kay and Valerie Mason-John. Here, Goddard explores the plays in terms of content and form, insisting on the representation of diasporic subjectivities and illustrating how the playwrights create a dialogue between black lesbian sexuality and mixed race. She also sheds light on quite unfamiliar – to the white reader – and important practices of black female identity, such as obeah rituals, othermothering and zami, dramatised by black women to negotiate their relation with the Carribean and the incorporation of their mixed race identity in a Western context.

Part three shifts the attention from playwrighting to live art and solo performance. There is a separate section devoted to the production history of Black Mime Theatre Women's Troop and its contribution to black women's theatre. The exploration of the Troop's insistence on social issues pertaining to black women in particular, ranging from alcoholism to single parenting and the fetishization of the female body in Hollywood action movies, offers an insight regarding the company's immense input to black theatre aesthetics through the mixture of devising theatre, physical performance, music, dance and mime. The documentation of solo performers' work is also worth mentioning. Drawing from autobiography and interrogating the relation between the audience and the performer, independent solo performers like SuAndi, Susan Lewis, Valerie Mason-John, Patience Agbabi, Dorothea Smartt and Adeola Agbebiyi offer their own piece of black feminist aesthetics and vindicate the black female body through performance aiming at reversing mainstream notions regarding female beauty.

As an alternative epilogue, Goddard has chosen to ponder on the future of black feminist theatre by assessing the work of debbie tucker green, a prominent, "in-yer-face black playwright," as the point of transition from the old to the new generation of black women and feminism. The question mark after the section's title "Black Feminist Futures?" which accurately reflects her concern about the future of black feminist theatre also reverberates with the concern of another book published in the same series *Performance Interventions* under the title *Feminist Futures?*[8] This convergence mirrors the growing concern for the general loss of feminist political perspective in the cultural sphere; it also stresses the need for theatre historians to probe the feminist continuity among generations of women playwrights and Goddard effectively establishes a link among three decades of black women's theatrical practices. She also boldly addresses key questions pertaining to feminist theatre; her discussion on black aesthetics is a pivotal point of particular interest complementing the feminist emphasis on breaking realist patterns of representation as a means of subverting dominant hegemonic ideologies.

Staging Black Feminisms has succeeded in establishing a discourse that counterbalances text and performance as well as theory and practice, offering the reader a critical lens through which to assess current theatrical practices of black women. What needs to be highlighted is that it is the first published monograph that focuses exclusively on African-Caribbean black British women's theatre and, hence, it certainly constitutes an intervention in the contemporary scholarly world working against the monolithic and crystallised representations of black women and significantly contributing to current debates on gender, mixed race, feminism, diaspora and theatre.

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[8] Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, eds., *Feminist Futures? Theatre Performance, Theory* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave 2006).

Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre by Alice Rayner

Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 205pp. (paperback)

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Alice Rayner's *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre* attempts to illuminate the various ways in which the theatre makes ghosts visible, and to critically assess the notion that theatre and performance operate within structures of loss and memory. From the outset, Rayner locates her work amongst the varied and extensive multiplicity of works which have, over the past two decades, concerned themselves with the spectral and the haunted. From Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994), to Jonathan Roach's *Cities of the Dead* (1996), to Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (2001), Rayner suggests that a ghostly framework acts as a "corrective to forms of thought that reduce the world to a series of oppositions" (xxvi). This framework provides the mainspring for Rayner's argument, which is that "theatre itself is a ghostly place in which the living and the dead come together in a productive encounter" (xii). Throughout *Ghosts*, images of doubling and repetition, memory and loss, presence and absence recur and reverberate, as Rayner seeks to articulate and address the ontological and epistemological problems which surround the discourses of the spectral.

Each chapter of *Ghosts* takes as its starting point "some overlooked aspect of theatre" (xxviii). So, the opening chapter considers the complex issue of our "appointment" with theatre (30), and its tricksy relationship to "real" time. Rayner argues that keeping an appointment with the theatrical constitutes an agreement to enter a space of repetition, in which the "present" is automatically doubled, fraught, and problematic (29). In her second chapter, she addresses the idea of memorial,

exploring the ways in which "repetition composes theatre's way to memorialize the dead" (34). Using an extended example of a performance of *Waiting for Godot*, and convincingly drawing attention to the gap between older "deadly monument[s]" (70), designed for forgetting, and recent memorials by artists such as Maya Lin, Rayner suggests that "[r]emembrance and repetition render very different forms of history" (36).

"Objects: Lost and Found" focuses on the "suspended" nature of the prop table (75), where the "uncanniness" of these objects anticipates "the death of the present," offering a kind of memorial, loading them with a ghostly quality. This chapter allows Rayner to deal with the complexities of the idea of ghosts and haunting in material terms, assessing the ways in which theatre can be seen "[g]iving flesh to the uncanny" (108). Continuing the theme of objects and memorial, Chapter 4 considers the place and meaning of chairs, and is chiefly concerned with the ways in which the stage "effectively double[s] the object" (112), transforming the specificity and materiality of chairs to create its own meanings. The Oklahoma City memorial by the Butzner Design Partnership is connected with Ionesco's *The Chairs*, and Kantor's posthumous *Today Is My Birthday* (1991). Rayner convincingly demonstrates the ways in which the empty chairs of these works act "as the sites of death's power and life's vulnerability" (136).

Chapter 5 also deals with a material phenomenon of the theatre: that of the curtain, which divides space, providing "a double perspective that both displays and hides, conceals and reveals" (139) and, according to Rayner, functions to break down epistemological dualities such as onstage and offstage, real and imitated, inside and outside. Rayner also discusses the boundaries between the "visible" stage and the

"invisible" stagehands,[9] and the ways in which the audience read – or refuse to read – the presence of the crew (in, for example, set changes).

The final chapter, "Ghosts Onscreen" shifts the focus of the book away from the "theatrical" and onto the cinematic. Rayner considers the use of light (particularly in relation to developments such as gaslight and electricity) and dark. Comparing the blackout with the filmic cut, she considers the technological apparatuses at work in the construction both of narrative and of haunting. Centring her discussion on the films *Gaslight* (1944), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and *Vertigo* (1958), Rayner connects the ghosts of film – created through narrative elisions, jump-cuts, visual registers – with psychoanalytic and trauma theories. Arguing that death is "utterly unrepresentable," known "only by its fake double, the effigy that stands at a portal to identify what death is like but not what death is" (175), Rayner's work consistently illuminates the ways in which the spectral is bodied forth, made visible, via the "endless, stochastic repetition of imagination and reality" (182).

Ghosts is expansive and inclusive in its scope, moving from discussions of specifically "theatrical" moments to considerations of modern memorials and broader conceptions of "performance," limiting itself by the structure and aims of its discourse rather than with temporal or theoretical boundary markers. It is predominantly informed by psychoanalytic and trauma theory, although again, Rayner's approach is to select as appropriate, and there are a wealth of connections with and references to theorists from Heidegger and Derrida to Butler and Kristeva. The success of this approach is perhaps partially a matter of personal taste, and Rayner is explicitly aware of a number of her work's pitfalls and problems (as she says in her concluding

[9] She suggests, in fact, that where stagecrew are (intentionally) visible, this acts as a *further* doubling, which heightens awareness of the more normal practice of invisibility; the crew, in this way, become the visible ghosts of themselves. Furthermore, she locates such practice (which she associates, generally, with the "postmodern") as being politically or ideologically motivated; a playful calling to the fore of theatre's modes of operation which affects the audience's view of its materiality.

paragraph, *Ghosts* is "both repetitious and incomplete. Examples are scarce" (185)). Nevertheless, *Ghosts* is an engaging, intriguing work, full of surprising connections, confident in its ability to move in and out of a range of theoretical and theatrical discourses. Although it is, from the outset, located alongside a range of texts which are broadly concerned with the haunted and the spectral, Rayner's text, which consistently works in the realm of the theatrical, elegantly and eloquently demonstrates that "the ghost is not so much an essence of theatre as it is an inhabitant of all its elements" (xv).