

***Trial: A Study of the Devising Process in Reckless Sleepers’
“Schrödinger’s Box” by Andrew Brown, Mole Wetherell and Reckless
Sleepers***

Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2007, 84 pp. (paperback)

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Over the last few years, I have been following the work of Reckless Sleepers. They are not, perhaps, as widely known as some of their contemporaries (Station House Opera, Forced Entertainment), but they deserve much greater critical attention both within and without the academic world than they have so far received. *Trial*, the book written by Andrew Brown, Mole Wetherell and Reckless Sleepers, which creatively documents some of their existing work and processes, is therefore a very welcome development.

Whilst reading the book, I thought about a particular personal experience of working with Reckless Sleepers (as an observer/ researcher) on a *Quiet Time* project in Oxford. The project was over. It was late at night and I walked back through the square in which we had performed earlier that evening. The trails of sugar we had left on the empty paving stones of the square during the performance (as personal mappings of the city), glittered in the light of the street lamps, like hieroglyphics writ large across the space. I’d been there; I’d help to create them, but as traces of something passed, they seemed to have taken on a different, mysterious meaning. What can you make of such traces? What can you re-construct or imagine of what took place, from the leftovers of performance? *Trial* is about just such a re-construction: not just a documentation of a project that is past, but a re-animation of a performance based on traces of the past.

In an exploration of the connections between theatre and archaeology, Pearson and Shanks suggest that:

The past is not somehow “discovered” in its remains, for what would it be? ... What archaeologists do is work with material traces, with evidence, in order to create something – a meaning, a narrative, an image – which stands for the past in the present. (Pearson and Shanks 11)

Trial is both a construction and a re-construction. It is also a set of traces or evidence for further imaginings by the reader. *Trial* focuses (although not exclusively) on one of Reckless Sleepers’ projects, *Schrödinger’s Box*. The company decided to re-visit the project (which it had first presented in 1998), not just to reproduce it as it was then, but to re-animate it in the present, using the same pool of material – the constructed metal box which was the “set,” the ideas and the notes, diagrams and videos, and memories of the 1998 *Schrödinger’s Box* - as evidence for re-interpretation. To help with this re-interpretation, new performers were introduced to the process.

In the re-devising of Schrödinger’s Box, the artists ... asked questions of the original work, and generated new ideas. The involvement of new people is necessary because new ideas are necessary. (Brown, Wetherell and Reckless Sleepers 13)

The approach of drawing from previous ideas or performances is one that features in the work of many contemporary companies; old projects sow the seeds of new ones or cross-fertilize with other ideas in development. However, Reckless Sleepers’ re-visiting and re-devising of a previous project, and the documenting of this process in *Trial*, seems to me to be a valuable challenge to a funding culture which prioritizes “the new.”

Trial, as a documentation and re/construction of this process, also presents a possible way forward in the tricky question of the “legacy” of devised performance. At a recent symposium on *Devising In Process* (2008), a discussion took place about what the possible legacy of devised work could be, and what any such legacy might bring to the field of performance. A playwright leaves behind a script for interpretation and re-

interpretation, so the work can continue to be explored by other people in other contexts. Devised work, on the other hand, is often seen as being closely linked to its originating company or performer, so not appropriate for others to perform. A script, or other form of notation, also carries very little of what gives life and meaning to a devised performance, particularly when the work relies on physicality, visuality, liveness or engagement with the audience. Video documentation raises problems of its own, as it cannot capture the full phenomenological experience of a performance, particularly with a company such as Reckless Sleepers who often use sensual elements (such as touch, smell, performers' proximity, audience perspective) in their work. Finding alternative ways, then, of increasing the exposure to and legacy of devised work, seems to me to be an important issue.

The book, *Trial*, especially if viewed alongside the video of *Schrödinger's Box*, offers a new kind of legacy: a complex, multi-voiced re/collection of ideas, images and processes from both the original development of *Schrödinger's Box* (and other works), and the re-visiting of it in 2006. As well as being a documentation of the project, the book seems to invite new explorations by the reader of the "evidence" – both in re-constructing it in their mind as they read, and in presenting possibilities to create new work from the same pool of material and processes, as the company themselves have done.

As *Trial* informs us, Reckless Sleepers are often inspired by Surrealist ideas and imagery; their name comes from Magritte's painting, "The Reckless Sleeper." *Trial* also draws on the surrealist processes of collage and juxtaposition to create and shape the text, structure and layout of the book. The text comprises four different voices: Andrew Brown (researcher/writer), Mole Wetherell (Director of Reckless Sleepers), various company members through their records and notes on projects and processes, and a written

notation of the 1998 performance of *Schrödinger's Box*. These voices are presented side by side on the page; sometimes the texts directly relate to the same idea, and sometimes they take the reader in different directions. The various voices allow different ways into understanding the work, as well as opening up space for the reader to find their own connections between the disparate ideas and experiences presented.

The book focuses on the 2006 re-animation of *Schrödinger's Box*, but rather than follow a linear path through this process, it draws in ideas and understandings from previous company projects (through the various voices and collaged texts) and diverts out to explore processes and theories that underpin the company's work in general. Detailed descriptions are given of the "box" that forms the stage set of *Schrödinger's Box*, and is described as a "performance machine" for "generating ideas and behaviours" (15). The performance of *Schrödinger's Box* evolved from a physical and *thought-full* exploration of this box construction: "The box is an experimental chamber, a cloud chamber, a crucible, an alchemical experiment, a television, a radio, a tuning device; it is so blank it calls other rooms into being" (9). Explanations are also given of the relationship between the performance piece and Schrödinger's original thought-experiment (from the field of quantum physics) from which it derives its name. But *Reckless Sleepers* are inspired by a diverse range of ideas and knowledges, and so the book, too, represents this eclectic approach, with chapters on such diverse subjects as physics, mathematics, Magritte, alcohol, letters, maps and journeys, alongside descriptions of the company's devising processes and descriptions of exploratory, practical exercises.

The structure and collaged approach of *Trial* makes it a book that is sometimes challenging to read, necessitating the reader to pause for thought or to digest or connect

ideas. It is ideal for dipping into for inspiration, or for referring to when lecturing on postmodernist theatre, or for gleaning practical exercises for devising work. For lecturers, students, practitioners or readers engaged with contemporary performance, *Trial* offers a useful and fascinating insight into the workings of this important company.

Bibliography

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***Multi-media: Video-Installation-Performance*, by Nick Kaye**
Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, 249 pp. (paperback)

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Multi-media: Video-Installation-Performance is a result of the interdisciplinary project, *Performing Presence: from the Live to the Simulated*, an AHRC funded project managed by Nick Kaye (University of Exeter), Gabriella Giannachi (University of Exeter), Mel Slater (University College London) and Michael Shanks (Stanford USA). The emphasis of the project is on the performance of presence in live, mediated and simulated environments. The book explores the concept of presence by presenting a series of discussions with leading international artists including, Vito Acconci, The Builders Association, John Jesurun, Pipilotti Rist, Fiona Templeton and Studio Azzurro.

Multi-media develops a stimulating discourse between theoretical analysis and documented art practice. Kaye covers a considerable amount of ground, examining a wide range of video, installation and performance, providing an extensive, creative

investigation of current multi-media practice, and addressing the complicated concept of presence, an ongoing issue in the field of intermedia art. This interdisciplinary study moves between different practices and consistently interrogates some of the main themes and concerns in current multi-media practice, including notions of space, time, liveness, presence and media while exploring the performance of subjectivity. Kaye elaborates on some recurring issues across video art, installation and multimedia theatre, including the intertwinement of, and collision between, the live and mediated; the media's dispersal and multiplication of the performing subjects; the re-configuration of the notion of "presentness" in relation to different operations of the multiple times and spaces of the performances.

The book is organized into an introduction on "Live Video" followed by three major sections: "Video Time/Performance Time," "Video Space/Performance Space," and "Multiplying Media." Between these sections, there are illustrated documented artworks and essays as well as new articles. Kaye's selection of the artists' pages is one of the strongest attributes of the book as it provides an invigorating dialogue, with a sophisticated theoretical analysis, on live and mediated performance. The author situates the chapters through a carefully laid out introduction, discussing different experimental practices in relation to the notions of place, presence and media mainly through the theoretical lens of Samuel Weber and Jacques Derrida.

In "Video Time/Performance Time," Kaye examines the complexities of "time-structures" in video, video installation and performance in the works of several artists: Nam June Paik in response to John Cage's use of "chance method and indeterminacy," as well as Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham and Joan Jonas, who were influenced by Paik's

ideas about the “the performance of a plurality of musical and visual times” (26). Focusing on the ideas of liveness and ephemerality in various multimedia practices, Kaye goes on to discuss the interplay between the “real” and “virtual” performance moments that are “subject to variability, difference and multiplication” (37).

The second chapter, “Video Space/Performance Space,” explores the “presentness” of “real” and “virtual” spatial experiences and subjectivity. To exemplify his discussion on the “performance and mediation of the body and its sites” (211), Kaye looks to the work of Vito Acconci, Studio Azzuro, Pippilotti Rist and Gary Hill. In this chapter, Kaye elaborates the problematic and also challenging concepts of presence and absence in the screened body in relation to aura and distance of art work in spaces where the boundaries between the “real” and the “virtual” are blurred and disjunctive. To discuss these concepts, Kaye foregrounds and challenges Pontbraid’s, Benjamin’s, Weber’s and Derrida’s accompanying theories on the subjects.

The book’s final chapter, “Multiplying Media” focuses on the multimedia theatre practices of The Wooster Group, the writer and director John Jesurum and the New York based theatre company The Builders Association. Here, Kaye concentrates on “place, narrative and identity” (210) in relation to media’s operation in the different modes of production. Through discussion of multiplication and convergence in multimedia theatre, issues re-emerge that have been analysed earlier in the book: “the division between video time and performance time; between video space and performance and the multiplication of media in the theatrical re-framing and performance of mediation” (26).

Overall, *Multi-media: Video-installation-Performance* offers an insightful account of multimedia practices in terms of space, time and subjectivity. Kaye opens a dynamic

dialogue between times, spaces and media with various multimedia practices so as to emphasize “the instability or ‘undecidability’ characterizing the transmitted image and the performance of mediation” (212). Although the study successfully counterbalances theory and practice, at times the writing style is somewhat dense and compacted in its engagement with the issue of the reconfiguration of bodies, spaces and times in multimedia practices. The additional illustrated material between the chapters functions as a fascinating oasis that illuminates and facilitates Kaye’s discussion. Undoubtedly, *Multimedia* is a well-researched and highly informative book, which is a valuable resource in the growing body of work on multimedia performance.

***African Theatres and Performances* by Osita Okagbue**
Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007, 200 pp. (hardback)

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Osita Okagbue’s *African Theatres and Performances* sets out to examine and, in the process, to challenge some of the (mis)conceptions about what constitutes theatre or performance in an African context. In this book, Okagbue confronts a key question that has, in the past, threatened to undermine African theatre pedagogy. The publication of *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: a Critical Source Book*¹ in 1981 brought the issue of contemporaneity of African performance forms to the fore and exposed the dangers of analysing African performances from a Western perspective. *African Theatres and Performances* builds on this argument surrounding the contemporaneity of African

¹ Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed. *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: a Critical Source Book*. Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981.

forms by highlighting the ill-defined tendency to distinguish between Africa's indigenous and literary theatre traditions as traditional and modern respectively.

Okagbue argues that appropriating the term traditional to describe indigenous performances implies that they are "fossilized" whereas, the term modern would signify forms that are "fashionable" (Okagbue 9). The arbitrary use of such *loaded* terms as traditional and modern in relation to African theatre forms continues to inspire debates as to whether indigenous festivals, masquerade performances, rituals, and other such events constitute theatre in their own rights and the appropriateness of validating them based on Western theatre hypotheses. Meanwhile, Okagbue is resolute in affirming his belief that indigenous performances are as contemporaneous as the literary ones due to their "ability to dialectically interact and negotiate with history...constantly reviewing and revising themselves in response to their ever-changing historical and cultural contexts" (10).

African Theatres and Performances offers a comprehensive insight into indigenous African performance forms by examining individual performances' contexts and performance aesthetics. The book examines the systems of management and organisation of each of the four performances, their training and rehearsal methods, staging techniques, design concepts, performer-spectator relationship, and functional and social relevance. The book is suitably divided into six chapters, four of which are devoted to the analysis of individual performance forms, with a very poignant compelling introduction and conclusion. It contains almost thirty photographs and diagrams that thoughtfully illustrate the performances being discussed.

The introductory chapter examines what I discussed earlier as (mis)conceived notions about theatre and performance in Africa. In Chapter 2, Okagbue focuses on his embodied and researched knowledge of the Igbo masquerade theatre of south-eastern Nigeria to underscore the requisite correlation between an understanding of the Igbo worldview and *Mmonwu* performances. For his analysis of *Mmonwu* performances, Okagbue examines the *Enemma* festival performance found in Nkpor community in Anambra State of Nigeria. Okagbue justifies his choice of *Enemma* on the fact that it provides “a spatial envelope in which independent and unrelated masquerades or other performance activities can take place simultaneously or separately” (21). The nature of *Enemma* festival is such that it can be described as a carnival which provides the opportunity for a variety of masquerades to parade through designated spaces. However, Okagbue’s preference exploits his entrenched knowledge of *Enemma* being that it is a performance event from his own indigenous background.

Chapter 3 discusses the *Bori* ritual theatre of the Hausa people of northern Nigeria. This chapter considers the relationship between ritual, theatre, therapy and the society by examining influences such as Hausa patriarchy, world-view, and Islamic religion. Here, Okagbue argues that *Bori* ritual performances function both as ritual – “an emotional and therapeutic outlet for the politically, socially and sexually repressed groups in Hausa society” (98), and as theatre – a form of entertainment. The fourth chapter introduces *Jaliya* of the Mandinka as a performance form that is reliant on words unlike most other performance arts of Africa. However, Okagbue is quick to point out that this reliance on words is not “dialogic” (101), but free-flowing, in one direction – from performer to audience. The *Jaliya* performance that Okagbue

investigates in this chapter is known as *Jaliya Balundo* and was performed in Dakar, Senegal.

Okagbue then shifts his attention to Mali in Chapter 5 where he looks at the *Koteba* satirical comedy of the Bamana, describing the performance in detail. The particular performance he describes in this chapter was performed at his request after he arrived too late for *Sogo Bo*, a form of *Koteba* that is performed using masquerades and puppets. Okagbue illustrates how the “situational comedies” (166) of the *Koteba* are used to explore a range of social issues by relying on stereotypes in a manner that is reminiscent of pantomimes. In the concluding chapter, Okagbue assesses the future of indigenous African performance forms, affirming his confidence that “indigenous performances continue robustly alongside the European influenced literary theatre, strongly challenging African theatre scholarship that oftentimes differentiates between these two forms, by using the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ respectively” (175).

African Theatres and Performances is a practical and theoretical guide into the making and appreciation of indigenous African performance forms. It is particularly useful as a pedagogic tool for introducing indigenous African performances in Higher Education and a must-read for anyone interested in African performance arts. The book does not pretend or attempt to discuss *all* forms of indigenous theatres and performances in Africa – a virtually impossible task for any one author to accomplish due to the vast but often overlooked diversity of culture that exists on the continent. What the book does is to focus its analyses on the production processes and reception of indigenous oral performances in four West African performance traditions: the Igbo *Mmonwu*, Hausa *Bori*, Mandinka *Jaliya*, and *Koteba* of the Bamana people.

The fact that the title of the book alludes to theatre(s) and performance(s) clearly points to what I noted earlier as vast diversity of forms that exist among the peoples of the colonial construct known as Africa. Acknowledging this diversity does not suppose that most African cultures do not have certain characteristics in common. For instance, the performance traditions discussed in the book are commonplace in Africa and their practices are comparable across cultures, particularly West African cultures. In essence, the analysis of the Igbo masquerade performance would normally provide useful insights into the practice of this form elsewhere in the region and Africa as a whole.

African Theatres and Performances is perhaps the first book by an African scholar to assert its prerogative to apply the term African to a specific tribal or regional performance tradition without feeling the need to fulfil the post-imperial requirement of felicitating with regional traditions elsewhere on the continent. The book is a bold and brilliant intervention in cultural and performance studies on Africa, and I hope that it will help to refocus African theatre pedagogy and inspire other focused reading of Africa's vast performance forms and traditions.

***Sacred Theatre*. Ed Ralph Yarrow**
Bristol: Intellect, 2007, 224 pp. (paperback)

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Attempts to discuss the ineffable in theatrical experiences often result in clichéd assertions that there are no words to describe the event. *Sacred Theatre*, devised and edited by Ralph Yarrow, takes a collaborative approach to the examination of theatre,

allowing multiple perspectives to inform each other while resisting the temptation to rigidly define what is or is not sacred.

Sacredness or the sacred of theatre is not treated in a conventional or culturally specific way, as Yarrow explains, “[w]e have...emphasized in this book that we are not necessarily accepting such definitions, not least because they may be freighted with all kinds of inculturation and its political and social baggage” (156). With the word sacred un-tethered from its moorings, “what is crucial is whether or not the kinds of experience and process which may occur serve to open out or close off the scope of being, and whether they offer the possibility for the kinds of transition we have identified” (156). The book begins with definitions of sacred theatre drawn from the six contributors: Ralph Yarrow, Franc Chamberlain, William S. Haney II, Carl Lavery, Peter Malekin, and John Fox. These are diverse and highlight the difficulty of accepting any one concept: empty fullness, full emptiness, presence of emptiness, sense of doubleness, of flowing, a gasp or gape, liminality, becoming another, voiding of thought, shift of consciousness, blurring of boundaries (16). Throughout the book the discussion returns to the idea of cognition, a shift, change or transition of consciousness in the actor, spectator or participant. Thus, the sacred of theatre is most clearly aligned with how consciousness can be affected by theatre: “The sacred of theatre may be its capacity to activate a particular quotient of energy, a form of active and holistic knowing, qualitatively different from ‘normal’ discrete subject/object cognition” (16-7).

The book’s nine chapters each contain many short sections and the writers take turns with subject matter, switching between voices, tone and formality. Split into nine sections, “Terminologies and Categorizations of the Sacred” focuses almost exclusively

on theory and philosophy through short subject specific examinations, e.g. Ritual, Space, Time, Aesthetics and The Absurd. In the first of these, *Modern Views of the Sacred*, various philosophical positions ranging from Emile Durkheim to Sigmund Freud, Mircea Eliade to Georges Bataille are used to effectively negate any investigation of western concepts of the sacred because a “logocentric understanding of the sacred negates the defining feature of sacred experience: cosmos and continuity” (36). The main comparisons, then, throughout the book in relation to ritual and spiritual practices come from India (the *Natyasastra*, the *Advaita Vedanta*, *Samkiya-Yoga*, the Vedic), Japan (Noh drama and Buddhism), Bali and others. The application of Eastern and South Asian philosophies to western playtexts certainly provides an interesting and productive analysis. However, this might have been complemented by a more open position towards western practices which engage ritual, religion and drama.

Five of the chapters address theatrical texts in a critical context, and it is here that the strength of the book lies. The readings of Stoppard, Churchill, Ionesco, Pinter, Genet and David Henry Hwang combine theories and close textual analysis in provocative and diverse ways. Each playwright and playtext is treated to multiple layers of analysis which build successively on what the sacred of theatre could mean. In all cases the analyses return to the kinds of spaces opened up by the texts for transformation to occur. The question is always whether the “mode of experience” created by the theatrical event can productively be called a sacred experience. Sacredness is re-thought and re-positioned in each section, so that, in relation to Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* and the theme of gender games, the sacredness is posited as “the experience of ‘during’ as a space of inter-being that compels us to break out of a doubled reality mediated by representation – even

while using representation as a means” (92). In relation to Genet’s *The Screens*, sacredness is linked to an otherness that passes through emptiness requiring the “abandonment of the known or normal self which owns or has a place; or a location of the contours of the material in the not quite manifest realm of the imaginary” (144). Any attempt to define the sacred is difficult and the strength of the book is its insistence that the sacred be conceptualised in relation to how it works and what it produces (30).

The last chapter addresses questions of sacredness in a non-academic register by relating experiences from workshops, performances, actor training techniques and many years of applied theatrical work. Perhaps because of the multi-vocal approach to this collaborative book (the various authors reference each other, highlighting the inter-relatedness of the texts), the writers point out topics they have overlooked or which might be taken up by someone else. The discussion ranges freely and incorporates individual questions and comments which are not necessarily answered.

Anyone interested in the playwrights mentioned or political readings of texts will find *Sacred Theatre* a good starting point. The use of the word sacred in the title is perhaps misleading, but Yarrow does admit that performance resists solid frameworks when discussed in such broad strokes. Recent publications such as *After the Death of God* by John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo show that the concerns raised here are in step with the contemporary return to religion across disciplines. There is much more to be explored in this area of research and this book is a welcome starting point.