

Book Reviews

The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen: Critical Approaches from 'Snow White' to 'Frozen' by George Rodosthenous, ed.

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017, 257 pp. (paperback)

By Laura Robinson

In a faraway land, long ago, there lived an editor with the task of building upon the huge breadth of cultural studies literature written on the global corporate brand of Disney. Carving a niche in this saturated market by compiling the first critical treatment of the Disney mega-musical; a genre that crosses the animated screen, the Broadway stage, and the live-action remake, George Rodosthenous's anthology expands on scholarly work that situates Disney as popular entertainment and globalized commercial product. Guiding the reader chronologically from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *Frozen* (2013), whilst also stopping off at lesser known junctures, including the live-action remakes of *Cinderella* (1957, 1965, 1997) and the musical stage production of *Newsies* (2012), the book caters for both Disney fans and critics. It provides musical theatre students and scholars further insight into the production techniques of the Disney machine, as well as critiquing the socio-political impact of these globally recognised and historically situated animated, screened and staged cultural products.

Rodosthenous sets out three main frameworks in his introduction for reading Disney films in stage and film incarnations: 'firstly a political tool for enhancing our understanding of race, sexuality and gender, secondly an educational tool for younger audiences and thirdly as a place for artistic innovation' (2). Somewhat confusingly for the reader, the book does not directly follow these methodologies as structure, with the genealogical format of the musicals themselves dictating the chapter format. Instead, the book is separated into three main sections: *Disney Musicals: On Film*, *Disney Adaptions: On Stage and Beyond*, and *Disney Musicals: Gender and*

Race. Natural overlaps occur across chapters, with weighting firmly placed on studies of identity politics within the Disney Musical. Nonetheless, the structure enables the study of the Disney musical through the lenses of film theory, musicology and semiotics, and is particularly effective in the following areas: the close analysis of the relationship between the Disney musical score and the animation/live action, the detailed insight into the production techniques and the capitalist commercial practices of the Walt Disney Company and its associated business units, as well as the critical gravitas of its analysis of race, hetero-normativity, masculinity and femininity.

In terms of the relationship between the musical score and the animation, Elizabeth Randell Upton explores the 'pursuit of cinematic realism' (18) in her chapter on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), and includes a close musicological study of the songs participation in the Disney artist's strive for stylised human characters. Likewise, Raymond Knapp's analysis of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) reveals how 'the balletic and leitmotivic dimension of Tchaikovsky's music to styles and tropes then prevalent in musical theatre' (32), provided consistency and cohesion to the spiky animation style and its dislocated depictions of the sublime and the earthly in its characterisation. In a live-action contemporary context, Paul Laird's analysis of *Enchanted* (2007) in Chapter Four illuminates how the postmodern and self-reflexivity commentary of film's narrative is replicated in the musical score, including the pastiche of musical styles, and the creation of 'parallel dramatic situations with earlier Disney features' (66).

Further highlights include the detailed research within studies around Disney's production techniques in its staged, televised, and outreach activities linked to the Disney musical. Olaf Jubin's chapter on the film and European and U.S. staged versions of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) explores the issues with the 'Disneyfication' (104) of Victor Hugo's romantic and political 1831 novel, whilst Barbara Wallace Grossman's study of the staged musical *The Lion King* (1997) reveals the artistic risks undertaken through

Julie Taymor's vision and direction. It is Stacy E. Wolf's chapter on Disney's outreach musical theatre projects, Disney Jnr and Disney Kids, that stands out in both its acknowledgement of the problematic and for-profit operation of Disney's musical theatre ventures with schools, whilst also exploring their 'uniquely progressive – artistically, pedagogically and socioeconomically – potential' (136).

The anthology excels in its theoretical engagement in the third section of the book, 'Disney Musical: Gender and Race', as well as in the other numerous chapters that tackle Disney's global influence in identity construction. With a focus on gender, Dominic Symon's study tackles representations of conservative gender roles within the 'post-millennial, post-feminist utopia' (171) of Disney's television musical *High School Musical* (2006). Tim Stephenson's analysis of *Mary Poppins* (1964) in Chapter Three and Sarah Whitfield's study of *Frozen* (2013) in Chapter Thirteen, on the other hand both consider the feminist potentiality of these films and their borrowing of genre tropes established within musical theatre. The multi-authored study of the musical theatre version of *The Jungle Book* (2013) is a particular highlight in its dense reading of structures of power and Orientalist discourses embedded in its production of pleasure and entertainment. Similarly, Sam Baltimore's study of Queer Orientalism in *Aladdin* reveals how director Howard Ashman's interpretation was a gesture of solidarity, but still recirculated the exoticization and eroticisation of Asian and Black performers. Geoffrey Block's earlier chapter on four of Disney's made-for-television musicals also explores how Disney responds to target markets in its reflection a revised vision of America, embarking on historical comparisons that reveal processes of integration, colour-blind casting, and a 'revisionist interpretation' (94) of Broadway television adaptations from the 1950s.

The anthology falters in its reliance on identity politics to cover its critical treatment of Disney. In the Introduction, Rodosthenous raises interesting ideas of Disney's role in childhood nostalgia, memory, and the viewers' affective relationship with the screen. These ideas warrant further exploration through the lenses

of affect theory, fan theory, and cultural memory studies but are not given space within the strict structure of the book. A further oversight is the consideration of the role of dance within these musical theatre productions. Aaron C. Thomas's study of the musical theatre production *Newsies* (2012) provides an interesting account of boyhood and masculinity within the musical, and also situates this construction through vivid descriptions of the virtuosic choreography. This movement/music focus, however, is lacking in other chapters.

As a whole, the anthology promotes the cultural richness and scholarly significance of musical theatre entertainment, whilst beginning to situate these ideas within the corporate stronghold that Disney has in its global domination of screen and staged entertainment. In the wake of recent profitable live-action musical theatre remakes, including *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), the press and social media hype surrounding the future live-action remake of *The Lion King*, due 2018, and Disney's buying of 21st Century Fox's entertainment assets for £39.1 billion, this anthology could go further in places to realise the link between the family-friendly Disney magic created on stage and screen and the global reach and influence of the techno-capitalist machine of the Disney corporation. Dreams really do come true in the Disney mega-musical, but at what cost?

The Sixth Sense of the Avant-Garde: Dance, Kinaesthesia and the Arts in Revolutionary Russia, by Irina Sirotkina and Roger Smith, London: Bloomsburg, 2017, pp. 217. (hardcopy)

By Lisa Moravec

In focusing on the sixth sense (kinaesthesia), the Russian and English authors of this book originally contribute to the existing body of literature on the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde. They make a clear claim for the dominance of body-based, hence situated knowledge and embed it within a broad spectrum of renowned Russian Formalist and Futurist artistic practices—including, amongst

others, Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Viktor Shklovsky, Konstantin Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold—and compare it to the postmodern American dance practices of Isadora Duncan, Merce Cunningham, and Yvonne Rainer. In doing so they shift the existing narrative of Russian avant-garde art away from the visual domain and to notions of tactility and kinaesthesia, setting it up in a global context. Although the authors shed compelling light on a selection of well-known Russian artists and elegantly move the reader through related psycho-physical theories, their points and references, which are key to develop a scholarly understanding of kinaesthesia, could have been explored in more detail. Instead, they cover a vast amount of material. As their intention and argument is clearly stated and demonstrated throughout the seven chapters, the book nonetheless remains accessible when the authors quickly move through the practices of myriad artists.

The introduction and the first chapter both examine the notion of kinaesthesia by drawing on a number of philosophical accounts, commencing with Aristotle and guiding the reader from the science-based debate of the seventeenth-century all the way to phenomenology and into poststructuralism—ranging from Derrida and Husserl back to Nietzsche and Pavlov. It is here that the authors argue that the artists of the avant-garde all danced and studied movement in various ways, without primarily considering movement as their own main practice. At the core of the book lies Kurt Goldstein's and Nikolai Bernshtein's critique of the behaviourist Pavlov, who argued that education of movement skill does not come about through repetition but instead depends on the intent of executing the movement task (158). The manner in which the authors expand on the notion of kinaesthesia—not limited to avant-garde dance—is effective but also confusing at times. Their argument becomes most transparent when examining Meyerhold's actor training and dance techniques, since the body of the actor or dancer is the medium of such body-based art practices. When establishing a link between tactility and kinaesthesia, Sirotkina and Smith skilfully flesh out that

kinaesthesia gives “unmediated contact with the world, while the other senses offer a mediated relationship” (4). The first, according to them, comes about through direct relationships between subjects and objects, with dance being “the most powerful metaphor” and becoming “the reality, of unmediated being alive as part of a world” (5).

Although the authors voice a supremacy of dance movements within the arts, they give it little attention throughout the book. The following chapters ‘Expression in Dance’ and ‘Speaking Movement’ focus on the distinction between the American expressionist dance of Isadora Duncan and Merce Cunningham in comparison to the Russian dance tradition, and continue with broadening the spectrum of movement-based dance through a discussion of more or less danceless bodily gestures. This approach unfolds differences that operate between scripted, improvised dance, and poetry. This line of investigation then leads to examining the contemporary state of what accepted knowledge is and how its understanding has changed over time.

Dedicated to language and poetry, the fourth chapter draws attention to the authors’ concern with the troublesome distinction that still operates between embodied, hence practiced and lived, and what is considered intellectual knowledge, such as theory. The authors write themselves into the art of kinaesthesia by thinking with and through their own and others’ bodies, simultaneously demonstrating their understanding of the science of psycho-physiology and biomechanics. The book, therefore explores how and what kind of comprehension different body-based artistic “techniques” (Russian *priem*) have contributed to the movement of the Russian avant-garde of the twentieth-century.

Keeping the notion of technique rather loosely-defined allows the authors then to move into another original direction: they discuss how yoga and esoteric practices influenced the work of these Russian artists. This further broadens the amount of material the book brings together and expands their analysis of kinaesthesia in movement-

based practices. On the one hand, this demonstrates the authors' deep knowledge of various practices and how they are all connected, but on the other, this framework results in a fragmentary narrative of the avant-garde at the turn of the twentieth-century. For example, the only reference they provide to Russian classical dance is in the passage discussing the ballet *Struggle of the Magician*, performed in Moscow by Jeanne Salzman's female students, in order to illustrate the drilling characteristics of ballet training. While classical dance is not their focus, a comparison with modern and postmodern dance might have strengthened their argument concerning what kind of influence free American (expressionist) dance had on the Russian dance tradition, and consequently on the avant-garde.

Concluding the last chapter 'Art as Bodily Knowledge' with Shlosky's call for the deconstruction of techniques (158) gives way to the book's boldly underlying claim: namely that its approach towards dance and poetry is "new" (165). On a whole, *The Sixth Sense of the Avant-garde* contributes a new methodological approach to how to look at art that came about in Russia at the turn of the twentieth-century that goes beyond object-based and conceptual art. The book's focus on the immaterial movement sense—that bridges the gap between dance, gesture, and writing—is however not "new". For a methodological comparison see for instance Carrie Noland's latest book *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures, Producing Culture* (2009). The English's version *The Sixth Sense of the Avant-Garde* (Russian, 2014) brings dance and performance studies, the history of art and literature, as well as the history of science together within the field of visual culture. Half a historical and half a visual studies analysis, this book contributes to heated debates concerning performance within the field of visual culture and demonstrates why embodied knowledge continues to matter.

***Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre* edited by Adam Alston and Martin Welton**

London: Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 283 (hardback).

By Jessica Worden

Adam Alston and Martin Welton's *Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre* is the first book to address increasing experimentation with darkness and obscured vision in twenty-first century theatre practice alongside the aesthetic, cultural, and historical implications of low light. The editors intend to "rescue the plural pleasures and intrigue of shadow, gloom and blackout from the nominalised determinism of 'the dark' and to open up rather than foreclose a field of research" (4). The scope is therefore broad, including considerations of the relationships between differing understandings, perceptions and materialities of darkness (9). The plurality of critical approaches employed by contributors (many of whom use first-hand observations to communicate experiences resistant to visual documentation alongside conventional critical analysis) embed the immateriality of darkness within the experiential realm and makes space for sensory-focussed critical examinations of contemporary theatre.

Materiality is the starting point for *Part One: Dark Aesthetics*, beginning with a historiography of the use of artificial light in Western theatre by Scott Paler which emphasises the relationship of darkness to the material conditions of live performance. By articulating the workings of aesthetics in relation to performance, authors Adam Alston and Liam Jarvis identify ways in which the immateriality of darkness interacts with and transforms relationships to materiality. In his analysis of how dining in the dark commercial enterprise *Dans le Noir?* fails to transform social relations and perpetuates commodification, Alston identifies how darkness, despite its immateriality, can be used to reframe perceptions of the material world and the relationships that come into being through it. Jarvis' chapter "Creating in the Dark: Conceptualizing Different Darknesses

in *Contemporary Theatre Practice*” focusses on the performativity of engineered darkness - a focus that foregrounds further discourse on the materiality of darkness through haptic and other sensorial readings.

The sensory turn is most apparent in *Part Two* due to experience-focussed dialogues with theatre and performance makers. It opens with the notable conflation of different modes of sensory perception proposed by Lynne Kendrick, who proposes how the act of listening reconfigures our ability to make meaning in the dark. These ideas are discussed further in “Darkness, Perceptual Ambiguity and the Abyss”—an interview with performance maker Tom Espiner (*Sound & Fury* theatre company) and performance scholar George Home-Cook on considerations made by performance-makers who use total darkness and sensory deprivation to achieve ambiguous emotional experiences, such as loneliness, loss, collectivity, and anticipation. The inclusion of interviews with practitioners at this juncture reiterates the performative potential of darkness in contemporary theatre practices (88). Challenging perceptions of visual impairment, Amelia Cavallo and Maria Oshodi describe how the performing arts company *Extant* (comprising of blind and visually impaired performers) employs total darkness and diverse interactive, haptic, and aural techniques to transform the sensory landscape.

In “Missing Rooms and Unknown Clouds: Darkness and Illumination in the Work of Lundahl & Seidl”, Jo Machon proposes (part in dialogue with artists Christer Lundahl and Martina Seidl) how haptic approaches to sensing generate a holistic model. The discourse shifts beyond what can or cannot be seen to encompass all sensory perception. Experimentation in sensory modes stretches the definition of what theatre can consist of as well as how darkness augments these processes by directing perception beyond the visual and dislocating the audience from the site of performance. Although Espiner and Home-Cook describe how darkness perpetuates collective experiences of loneliness, darkness to them facilitates and condenses multi-sensorial techniques (particularly in the work described by

Cavallo and Oshodi). And furthermore, they draw attention to how these can be experienced collectively and generate non-hierarchical ways of sensing and making meaning in live performance.

Part Three: Shadow, Night and Gloom focuses on collective meanings and experiences produced by shadow and low-light in theatre. Matthew Isaac Cohen challenges Platonic thought on the transience of shadow through Heraclitus, and argues that shadow play “allows special access to a plastic reality of continual change” in cross-cultural shadow puppet theatre, including traditional Indonesian *wayang kulit* and contemporary uses of screens and shadow in Western theatre (216). Communal transcendence through darkness in performance event *Mycenae Polytopon*, as discussed by Marina Kotzamani, reallocates ocular hierarchies of meaning-making to the sensory collective. The democratising effect of darkness dislocates meaning-making from mimesis and repositions the role of the audience in perceiving and sensing. Welton concludes the section by questioning how gloom and faceless performers produce opportunities for considering the ethics of “theatrical encounters” and counteract rising alienation in visual culture (247-248). Welton contrasts these “befuddled” modes of seeing to contemporary hypervisibility, a proliferation of visual representation in contemporary and social media, to propose how these thresholds of peering might facilitate encounters between the self and the other despite the perceived facelessness of performers in these darkened productions.

Contemporary theatre faces difficulties in producing documentation of darkened productions and this reproduces darkness in the archive through the inability of productions to visually represent their work in a conventionally coherent way. The book does not focus on how darkened theatre resists visual reproduction but several authors document performances through first-hand multi-sensorial written descriptions. Although challenges to documentation are not addressed at length, it is demonstrated by how the authors resolve the lack of ocular representation for experiences that—in a literal, photographic sense—cannot be seen. However, for many readers, the

works discussed here will never be experienced. Although some social implications of darkness and blackout in contemporary theatre are addressed, and most clearly in terms of disability, what is missing is how, due to socio-economic conditions, these performances may not be democratically accessible – especially by those lacking an expendable income. In this sense, the collection overlooks how the financial strain of facilitating black-out performance might generate conditions that impair access to the work and consequently reproduce exclusion through darkness. While it is understandable that access was excluded, a more rigorous analysis of the relationship of darkness to representation and the archive would have been welcome. It feels lacking in comparison to the detail and texture afforded to other aspects of darkness.

However, several authors show innovative thinking about perception and the senses – particularly Machon who builds her argument around sensorial experiences as a source of knowledge. Similarly, Kendrick proposes listening beyond the readily understood to discover how we might engage with an experience that doesn't readily lend itself to representation. For researchers and students, it is this approach that offers significant innovation: a comprehensive overview of different relationships to darkness and gloom that at the same time establishes diverse ways of thinking and writing about theatre's resistance to visual representation. The sensory turn that Alston and Welton foreground in the introduction establishes critical approaches to practices that may otherwise be difficult to disseminate through conventional critical modes and proposes different ways of sensing, and making sense of, theatre experiences that withstand conventional ways of 'seeing' a performance.