

## Book Reviews

### *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe*

edited by James Reynolds and Andy Smith

London: Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 288 (softback)

By Richard Ashby

*Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe*, edited by James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith, sets out to provide “a timely and much-needed re-evaluation” (1) of Howard Barker and the theatre company founded to stage his work, The Wrestling School. The timeliness and necessity of the collection is, in part, due to the more “practice-orientated” (1) focus of its various contributions. Where previous studies and collections have tended to concentrate on the “literary qualities” (1) of the Barker text, *Wrestling with Catastrophe* treats the play-text as a “template for performance” (1) – reflecting on the unique practical challenges (and opportunities) posed by the Barker text.<sup>1</sup> Yet the “timeliness” and “necessity” of the intervention is, for Reynolds and Smith, also owing to the present state of UK theatre. The relative underrepresentation of Barker in the UK theatre landscape and the increasing marginalisation of The Wrestling School – culminating in the withdrawal of Arts Council funding in 2007 – is for Reynolds and Smith “a damning indictment of the residual cultural conservatism of the UK theatre industry” (15).

*Wrestling with Catastrophe* sets out to challenge the “myths” (2) and “misperceptions” (17) which have led to that marginalization, challenging the routinized idea that Barker is

---

<sup>1</sup> Previous collections include *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker* (2006) and *Howard Barker's Art of Theatre: Essays on his Plays, Poetry and Production Work* (2013).

“difficult to do” (2) and that his theatre has no discernible “relationship with contemporary trends” (3). Barker is, Reynolds and Smith aver, not “difficult to do” but “different to do”, so that if the “possibly unique challenges” his work presents are properly identified and resolved, his plays “present no more difficulties than the staging of a classic text” (17). The idea that Barker does not address “contemporary trends” is also given short shrift: Reynolds and Smith make the case that his plays can be seen to be relevant to both “contemporary global processes” and “more localized, theatrical phenomenon, such as that of New Writing” (3).

Part One (entitled “Howard Barker and the Wrestling School”) provides a range of interviews, testimonies and essays from key Wrestling School figures and practitioners. These pieces are engaging, insightful and (on occasion) very funny – particularly when actors recall the reactions of at once bewildered, angry and euphoric audiences. Barker has also traced the history of the Wrestling School and the development of its unique “house” style in *A Style and Its Origins* (2007); but *Wrestling with Catastrophe* provides the space for other, often unheard voices to offer alternative perspectives on that history and style. What emerges is a somewhat less ‘autocratic’ portrait of the company than Barker paints in *A Style and Its Origins*. Where in that work Barker, writing under the pseudonym Eduardo Houth, states that “the authority of Barker as interpreter of the work was beyond interrogation” with all aspects of “production under his direct control” (21), Part One of *Wrestling with Catastrophe* tends to underscore the openness of the Barker text, where the various practitioners involved with the company are afforded the opportunity to ‘wrestle’ with the creative and practical challenges posed by the text on their own terms. This would imply that

the theatre-practice of The Wrestling School is perhaps more democratic than Barker would have us believe, even while the company is driven by a strong, *auteur*-led vision.

Part Two (entitled “Readings/Inversions”) also offers new perspectives on Barker, providing a platform for both recognised and emerging scholarly voices in the world of Barker Studies. This section broadly contests the idea that Barker and The Wrestling School are peripheral to the main concerns of UK theatre and culture, showing that Barker engages with and is relevant to both national and international cultural trends, from New Writing (James Hudson) to the shift toward “de-secularization” (Peter A. Groves). The ‘stand-out’ pieces of Part Two (and the whole volume) belong, however, to Reynolds and Smith, whom convincingly relate both playwright and company to vital aspects of contemporary aesthetics and culture (Smith by concentrating on the photographic practice of Barker, Reynolds by concentrating on the spatial aesthetics of recent Wrestling School productions).

Part Three (entitled “Other Barkers”, though it may also have been called “Choices in Reaction”) offers a fascinating insight into the ways in which various non-Wrestling School practitioners have approached staging Barker’s plays. What the contributors all share is a common conviction that the Barker text calls for a non-naturalist style of performance – though the way in which that might be achieved naturally varies. If, as Hugh Hodgart states in his interview with Mark Brown, the Barker text is never immediately “accessible”, it is nevertheless “open”, presenting “a series of dramatic opportunities and possibilities” (218) which resist the finality of any singular stylistic approach. This section also shows that the international reputation of Barker is growing beyond France, Spain and

presenting “a series of dramatic opportunities and possibilities” (218) which resist the finality of any singular stylistic approach. This section also shows that the international reputation of Barker is growing beyond France, Spain and Scandinavia, where both Barker and The Wrestling School have drawn plaudits for quite some time.

*Wrestling with Catastrophe* is a very welcome contribution to Barker Studies, providing new insights into the unique relationship between Barker and The Wrestling School and the evolving theatre-practice of both playwright and company. The collection of emerging and recognized scholars, practitioners and the national and international scope of the volume reflects the increasing diversification of Barker Studies – a field that, until fairly recently, tended to be dominated by a few critical voices and (it has to be said) by Barker himself. It may even be tempting to see Reynolds and Smith playing a role in the world of Barker Studies akin to that once played by Wrestling School founder Kenny Ireland in the world of theatre, if not quite “popularising” (6) Barker, then ‘democratising’ him, opening his work out to include “new perspectives” (1) while dispelling the myths that have hampered the reception of his plays. This, however, points to something of a contradiction at the heart of *Wrestling with Catastrophe*: if Reynolds and Smith set out to demystify Barker, it can hardly be ignored that many the myths surrounding Barker and The Wrestling School – obscure, marginal, ‘difficult’ – have been fostered by Barker himself, a playwright who has spent no small time crafting his own *mythos*. It is not simply that Barker is the victim of a culturally and ideologically conservative UK theatre industry (though he has most certainly been that): Barker has also embraced his marginality and insists on the ambiguity – indeed the painful *difficulty* – of plays that challenge the limits

of both practitioners and audiences. *Wrestling with Catastrophe* represents a truly innovative contribution to Barker Studies. Yet if the volume aims to fully interrogate the myths that surround Barker and The Wrestling School, opening both playwright and company up to new perspectives and voices into the bargain, that process might necessarily entail demystifying – even interrogating – Barker himself.

### **Works cited**

- Barker, Howard and Houth, Eduardo. *A Style and Its Origins*, London: Oberon Books, 2007.
- Rabey, David Ian and Gritzner, Karoline eds. *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker*. London: Oberon Books, 2006.
- Rabey, David Ian and Goldingay, Sarah eds. *Howard Barker's Art of Theatre: Essays on his Plays, Poetry and Production Work*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013.

### ***A Good Night Out for the Girls: Popular Feminisms in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 218 pp. (softback)  
By Cath Badham

Originally published in 2012 and now made available in a paperback version, *A Good Night Out for the Girls* offers a detailed examination of where feminisms and feminist theories might be currently be positioned in relation to what Aston and Harris identify as popular “unmistakably women-centred shows.” (2) It offers very personal accounts from both Aston and Harris as to their own experiences both as feminist scholars and performance

spectators, making this a valuable addition to the fields of feminist studies and performance studies. The inclusive tone of the writing allowed me to easily engage with unfamiliar concepts. Each chapter is written by either Aston or Harris - they underline the personal nature of their writing by identifying themselves as either 'Elaine' or 'Gerry'. The introduction (Chapter One) and the final section (Chapters Eight and Nine) are co-authored.

The personal tone is evident immediately, when Aston and Harris describe not only their own travels to see theatre shows but their observations of "a larger 'movement' of women across the country" (1). However, this tenor does not detract from the academic nature of this book, as demonstrated by the introduction. A detailed discussion of the second and third wave (post-) feminisms, how they may be defined, and the problematic nature of the variety, differences and similarities of these generational perspectives are explored. Aston and Harris position themselves as intergenerational scholars, stating that as they "came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s and so apparently fall 'in-between' the second and third waves, feminism and postfeminism, [they] often find [them]selves wavering between positions on these debates" (7).<sup>1</sup> This enables them to consider each case study from more than one theoretical perspective, constantly cross-referencing between chapters, allowing discussions to be neatly threaded throughout the book. The variety of theorists whose work is included in this book is evidenced in the twelve-page bibliography. These theorists are not only employed in terms of performance analysis but also in terms of spectatorship and it is this approach which consolidates Aston

---

<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on my introduction to feminist theory as an undergraduate/MA Student (1988-1992) I found myself identifying with being caught between two waves of feminist thought as the books on my shelf indicate – no Butler, but Greer, Millett and Moi.

and Harris's consideration of boundaries between generations of theorists with their determination to site this study in the real world of women's experience today.

Each chapter focuses on a specific framework relating to the popular performances explored. Chapter Two concentrates on the stage version of Tim Firth's *Calendar Girls* (West End, 2009 & Tour, 2010) and it begins to illustrate "the idea of popular feminism as a 'flow of communication'" (Le Masurier qtd in Aston and Harris: 24.) It specifically focuses on the critical and gender bias often demonstrated against what Aston terms "the sentimentally conceived good-night-out-for-the-girls show" (24). Aston links this idea through to the fourth chapter and its concerns with ageing femininity. Opening this chapter with an assessment of the treatment of Susan Boyle on *X Factor*, Aston considers representations of older women and the ageing process as displayed in productions of *Grumpy Old Women Live* (Tour and West End, 2005-2006) and *The Virginia Monologues* (Edinburgh, 2009). In particular she suggests that these shows allow the female audience, through comedy, to escape from the despondency that Western women often feel as part of the ageing process and "raise[s] the question of age liberation as an important issue for feminism" (73). In between, Chapter Three concentrates on the audience in relation to shows performed by the male stripping troupe The Chippendales (2009) and Dave Simpson's *The Naked Truth* (2007), which centres around a village hall pole-dancing class for women. Here, Harris explores notions of the passive/active audience and how these may overlap with ideas about class in respect to art versus entertainment, ultimately applying these thoughts to how they may connect to class distinctions within gender.

Chapter Five concerns itself with Joanna Mur-

ray-Smith's *The Female of the Species* (2006) and Nic Green's *Trilogy* (2010), both of which Harris argues need detailed consideration as they are, unusually, "directly concerned with exploring the 'legacy' of second-wave feminism." (93). In Chapter Seven, which Harris signposts in Chapter Five, the definition of popular entertainment is expanded by considering the transition of New Burlesque from a marginal genre in the early 2000s into a mainstream, accessible entertainment. Harris explores the political aspects of this genre, in particular questions of whether or not it is feminist and the reasons behind the constant "oscillation" (Derrida qtd in Aston and Harris: 136) between these positions.

Chapter Six concentrates on the "chick megamusical" (118) *Mamma Mia!* (1999). Aston proposes that writer Catherine Johnson<sup>2</sup> has, within a genre designed to entertain, provided a space where the difficulties of both second and third wave feminisms can be exposed and subverted by the narrative as well as the audience reaction to the show. Aston also suggests that although there is some political comment within the musical, it is the very act of presenting an entertaining female-centric narrative that is a political act (130). Recognising the sheer enjoyment of the "dancing queens" (128) in the audience, Aston suggests this real-life experience may invite "more inclusive, heterogeneous modalities of 'belonging'" (132). Throughout, Aston relates debates discussed here with those in other chapters, notably Five and Three.

The final chapters offer explorations of two distinct forms of popular entertainment: stand-up comedy and a fair-

---

<sup>2</sup> Aston, importantly, also notes that Johnson, producer Julie Craymer and director Phyllida Lloyd have been able to break through the glass ceiling of male-centric commercial production companies.



ground ride. In Chapter Eight Aston and Harris concentrate on the work of Shappi Khorsandi and Andi Osho, which ensures balance within a book that, up to this point, has engaged with analysing white audiences and practitioners (158). They base their analyses of these two performers around nuanced interpretations of intersectionality, which “attempts to recognise uneven and unequal power relations within the category of ‘women’, accounting for ‘multiple’ discriminations and oppressions but without necessarily placing these in a fixed ‘hierarchy’.” (161-162). In the final chapter, Aston and Harris use their experience of Marisa Carnesky’s *Ghost Train* (2010) to consider issues that could be said to haunt the book such as the political difficulties and potentials of the shows and “their representations of, emotional investments in and engagements with women’s experience” (184).

Coherent, intellectual, discursive and detailed, this book offers exactly what Aston and Harris intend: a piece of distinguished scholarship that reflects the idea of “feminism as a ‘mixed form’, a form replete with inconsistencies (Snitow, 1990:9) and based in an affective solidarity that allows for differences *and* similarities” (21, original emphasis). The personal, woman-centred tone deftly reflects the complex nature of the theoretical positions, performances and audiences being discussed.

***The Illuminated Theatre: Studies on the Suffering of Images*  
by Joe Kelleher**

Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, 181 pp. (softback)

By Marina Ní Dhubháin

In *The Illuminated Theatre: Studies on the Suffering of Images*

Joe Kelleher offers a timely publication in which he considers how the theatrical performance gives rise to new knowledge production both during and after the theatrical experience. The focus of Kelleher's analysis is the consequence of the ongoing negotiation between spectator and actor as they struggle together in the porous labyrinth of contemporary experimental art. This contribution arrives at a time when critical literature relating to twenty-first century audience engagement and spectatorship has been largely consumed with the dominant tropes of co-authorship and embodied participation. Kelleher frames the aesthetics of relationality as one spectator's conscious sensibility of those performances, seen or perhaps only heard-tale-of, but nevertheless, performances which have "stuck" (3) and which will hereafter be borne or suffered.

In his analysis of the theatrical image, Kelleher draws on a wide range of literary, critical and philosophical theorists, from a variety of backgrounds and time periods. This includes the work of Marie-José Mondzain, Gillian Rose, Adi Ophir, W.J.T. Mitchell and T.J. Clark. The theatrical image is not the stage picture; rather in Kelleher's thinking, the image is understood as an ambivalent, diaphanous, and live entity (although possibly not for long). The image will be *of* the art work in which it was imagined, certainly, yet ultimately autonomous of it. It is also not necessarily of a visual domain, but the image which survives will be inscribed by a beholder (a spectator) with symbolic meaning. At once, or perhaps later, after some time has passed, there will be questions to be asked of the image and subsequently the possibility for the generation of other meanings. Patterns of knowledge production evolve as linkages and relationships begin to assemble. In time, a matrix of collaborative associations between images, between other sources of

knowledge, from various time frames and disciplines may cohere. The image is understood to function as a “sort of operator of relations, or a kind of pre-verbal or - post-verbal – currency circulating between the stage and the auditorium” (5) and also between the moment of production and reception, and the great many moments which follow.

*The Illuminated Theatre* is structured as an interrogation of a meticulous selection of imagistic bricolage of one person’s intensive spectatorship at shows, dances, plays, actions, films, pictures, literature and performances. Kelleher presents this work as a part academic treatise, part structured meditation – it is one person’s attempt to “make sense of particular performances that have stuck with me [...] And not just stuck with me but bothered me” (3).

Kelleher’s process of ‘making sense’ includes a meticulous account of his experience at each production, described with the joyous fascination of the committed theatre-goer, one who is consciously in the moment-to-moment sensibility of the theatrical encounter. His evocative descriptions convey a subjective intimacy with art, such as is rarely found in an academic publication. These beautifully written passages are as much a surprise as they are a representation of a central thesis – the significant afterlife of an image as it is subsumed into a general discourse through memory and re-telling, report, citation and critical analysis.

Performances are selected from the great many cultural events which the author has witnessed over the course of a decade or so of intensive theatre-going. Many are from companies in the United Kingdom, others from European based companies producing work in various venues, occasionally theatres, across the continent. Among the range of artists and theatre companies

who are discussed in this publication are Dickie Beau, Rosemary Lee, Wendy Houston, Field Day Theatre Company, Kinkaleri, Forced Entertainment, Romeo Castellucci and Desperate Optimists. Kelleher suggests that despite the diverse nature of the produced work, all the productions appear to be “niggling at certain shared concerns” (4). These concerns are also primary to the author, that is to say “concerns about actors and spectators and what circulates between them. About the insidiousness, the seduction and the waste of images; about the spectators who generate images upon the bodies of the actors and then suffer the images to haunt them, to bother them; about the actors, the figures in the images, who bear up the images, who suffer the images to exist, but who might – you sometimes feel – disengage if they could” (5).

In an analysis of the work *LOST in TRANS* (2013) by the performer Dickie Beau, Kelleher quotes Maurice Blanchot who suggests that, on the subject of Greek myths, they do not say anything. Rather “they are seductive because of a concealed, oracular wisdom which elicits the infinite process of diving” (33). Kelleher observes that when dealing with Greek mythology, “whatever lessons we derive, we bring them ourselves, after the fact” (33). It may be suggested that each of the performances discussed in this book operate in this manner, to greater or lesser degrees. This is represented as a successful strategy towards framing a relationship between performer and spectator which assumes a reciprocal dedication, or an equality of commitment, as a basis for the co-creation of images.

Current critical literature on the issue of spectatorship in the new millennium remains influenced to a large extent by Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) whose seminal re-invigoration of conceptions around the performer/performed-to binary fore-

grounded an art and performance practice which was committed to the aesthetic education of the spectator-participant within a new relational framework. Such a pedagogical impulse is notably absent in the productions discussed in *The Illuminated Theatre*, as are considerations of participatory or embodied forms of spectatorship. In both his selection of particular performances, and in those attributes of subjective autonomy which he foregrounds therein, Kelleher may be read as offering a strategic opportunity for the re-appropriation of the traditional watchful, thoughtful spectator into the contemporary critical discourse. In this way he may be building on aspects of the work of Bruce McConachie (2008) and Jacques Rancière (2011). The relational arena, as advocated in *The Illuminated Theatre* is committed to the profound presumption that we recognise that ‘we’ are in this together. After all, Kelleher reminds us, in the theatre foyer the hired actor in a gorilla suit wears a sign inscribed with the words “if you don’t laugh I don’t get paid” (66).

### Works Cited

- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2002
- McConachie, Bruce. *Engaging Audiences – a cognitive approach to spectating in the theatre*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliot. London: Verso, 2011

***Voice and New Writing 1997-2007: Articulating the Demos* by Maggie Inchley**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 204 pp. (hardback)

By Lucy Tyler

*Voice and New Writing 1997-2007* is a welcome addition to scholarship examining the relationship between New Labour and new writing. Although there is certainly no lack of theoretical engagement with British theatre during the Blair years<sup>1</sup>, Inchley's work shifts the focus. *Voice and New Writing* analyses how voices were "scripted, trained, performed and perceived" between 1997-2007, and, moreover, how these changing "voicescapes" were informed by ideological shifts occurring in party politics (135). Voice under New Labour was, according to Inchley, becoming more central to both political performance and to policy. This was most notable in Blair's attention to his performance of a more "'sofa-style' vocal delivery – said to be modelled on the informal and empathetic style of US President Bill Clinton" and an endeavour to vocalise policy through new 'trusting and inspiring tones' (21). A version of the same phenomenon was also evident in New Labour's attempts to inspire open conversation and liberal diversity through the creation of a Habermasian dialogic democracy in which a more tolerant and accessible Britain might be socially engineered through an emphasis on vocal empowerment. Inchley describes how voice became a mechanism in creating the Blairite "regime of empathy" (3), but *Voice and New Writing* is most interested in applying

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, Rebellato, Dan (ed). *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009*. London: Methuen, 2013; D'Monté, Rebecca and Saunders, Graham (eds). *Cool Britannia: British Political Drama in the 1990s*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Sierz, Aleks. *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s*. London: Methuen, 2012.

this understanding of the politicised concept of voice to an examination of new writing.

The ubiquity of the phrase ‘new voices’ to describe new playwrights and new plays – then and now – is cultural evidence for how ideologies of voice work in theatrical as well as political contexts. If an emphasis on self-expression and vocal empowerment was being engineered by the New Labour government in order to effect social change and to gain votes, then the same might be said of theatres: new writing theatres created a rhetoric of inclusion, diversity and access through programming. Yet, while it is important to acknowledge the way voice was manipulated during this period and to explore when voice (particularly Blair’s) faltered in its appeal to the public, an understanding of how strategies of vocal empowerment and the promotion of self-articulation were deployed does not necessarily imply that this rhetorical shift was negative. In fact, as *Voice and New Writing* shows, there were several positive evolutions in new writing culture because of the emphasis on showcasing voices and the proximal relationship of this agenda with a Blairite “regime of empathy” (3).

Over six chapters, Inchley demonstrates how the new writing culture during the 1997-2007 decade aligned itself to the same ideological principles of New Labour through a subtext of social compassion, accessibility and diversity, achieved through a persistent prioritisation of the work of new writers who represented certain social strata, demographics, or minorities. A side effect of this mission was the aesthetic shift towards a representational realism, but, as Inchley argues, new writing sought not only to appear unmediated in its portrayal of genuine British voices, but also in the heterogeneity of the voicescapes it sought to represent. Inchley focuses her work around sever-

al case studies from the time: the post-devolutionary Scottish voice in the plays of David Greig and Gregory Burke; the voice of BAME playwrights such as Kwame Kwei-Armah, Roy Williams and Debbie Tucker Green; the representation of marginalised British youth in the plays of Tanika Gupta, Mark Ravenhill and Enda Walsh and, interestingly, the voices of women who kill children in plays by Deborah Warner, Fiona Shaw, Beatrix Campbell, Judith Jones and Dennis Kelly. Before moving into these territories, however, *Voice and New Writing* answers some key questions surrounding how the roles of the writer and actor in the playmaking process were reconfigured in view of the transitioning concept of voice.

The academic study of English Literature and associated fields have long deployed ‘voice’ as a method of interpretive discourse in order to discuss creative work. Inchley comments on how the analysis of playwriting through ‘voice’ is both problematic for the writer and the text and, perhaps, has resulted in the plethora of self-help writing guides and playwriting pedagogy, prolific from 1997, which focused on the idea of the emerging playwright ‘finding their voice’ – a “very commonly used rarely examined phrase” according to Inchley (37). But Inchley doesn’t restrict her analysis to the methodological problems in the field of playwriting pedagogy; instead, the trajectory here extends to an examination of how new writing impacted on the actor’s voice during this period.

Inchley argues that “the surge in new writing called upon actors to embody stigmatised groups of individuals, a development that de-emphasised the role of fine articulation and tone, and in particular disturbed the role of the RP as the industry norm” (49). This argument raises interesting questions about how new writing contributed not only to the polycentricity and



levelling of class distinction to which New Labour aspired, but how this was also working, in microcosm, in the theatre industry itself. As a result, Inchley presents the ways in which the actor's voice was forced to evolve over the decade in order to represent adequately the new voicescapes that new writing theatres were commissioning playwrights to provide.

These arguments are original, interesting and convincing. However, most pertinent to the book's thesis is Inchley's examination of the work of Kwame Kwei-Armah, Roy Williams and Debbie Tucker Green and her interrogation of the way the 'cultural prestige' offered to these writers by theatres such as the National and RSC was given in exchange for these 'institutions' claims to cultural diversity' (98). In coming to this conclusion, Inchley articulates the way voice functioned ideologically during this period. In order to include and support the articulation and development of voices that have been historically marginalised, both new writing and New Labour set up an exchange value around these voices. Society and new writing theatres might have made space for 'new voices' to be heard during this period, but this was always in order to satisfy their own necessity for cultural diversity as much as it was to genuinely empathise, include and represent. In this sense, Inchley's work is an important one, not least because it reappraises these playwrights' voices outside the rhetoric of the new writing culture.