

Applied Theatre Research
Volume 1 Number 1

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BOOK REVIEWS

ACTING TOGETHER: PERFORMANCE AND THE CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION OF CONFLICT, VOLUMES 1 AND 2, CYNTHIA E. COHEN, ROBERTO GUTIÉRREZ VAREA AND POLLY O. WALKER (EDS), (2011)

Oakland, CA: New Village Press, Palgrave Macmillan, 200 pp.

Volume 1: ISBN 978 0 9815593 9 1, US\$21.95;

Volume 2: ISBN 978 1 61332 000 6, US\$21.95

Reviewed by Serge Loode, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict is a two-volume anthology including fourteen case studies dealing with the relationship between performance and conflict transformation. Before I start this review, it is necessary to disclose my own relationship to the text. I am a close friend of one of the editors, Polly O. Walker, and have shared an office with her at the University of Queensland for a number of years. I remember many conversations about the work on the anthology during which we discussed our deep respect for the constructive effects that performance can have on conflict transformation. While I do not know the other editors and curators (the term the editors introduce to refer to the chapter authors), I am delighted to review the product of their collaboration. I hope to contribute a review through the lens of a conflict resolution practitioner and academic, but – like any view – it is certainly influenced by my relationship with both the editors and the topic. Because of the size of the anthology and the diversity of performance projects discussed, it is impossible in this review to refer to all the chapters or case studies. Therefore, only one example will be provided and more focus will be put on the analytical frameworks of the anthology.

Weaving together fourteen chapters of case studies from fifteen countries, including but not limited to Serbia, Uganda, Argentina, Peru, Sri Lanka,

Cambodia, Australia, Israel and the United States, and working across professions with actors, directors, peace activists and scholars, the process of creation that preceded this much anticipated anthology must have been an exercise in conflict transformation and cross-cultural dialogue in itself. And like most memorable conflict-transformation processes, it highlights one central element that cannot be absent from any meaningful engagement with conflict, violence or difficult social change: the importance of preserving or rescuing the voices of the people involved and affected. These shine through strongly in the chapters of the anthology.

Djana Milošević opens the kaleidoscope of examples by highlighting how DAH Teatar, the first theatre laboratory in Serbia, became much more than just a creative hub for engaging citizens throughout the violence of the Balkan wars when the government brutally suppressed any kind of opposition or critical public voice in the country. The theatre turned into a sanctuary for artists who came every day, despite constant fear of death during the NATO bombardment of Serbia, to develop the play *Documents of the Times*. The play was performed on the staircases of museums, libraries, schools and theatres to engage the audience in the creative process. Milošević remarks that it provided healing and sanity for performers and audiences alike in the midst of the chaos. The performance set up an encounter with the unexpected to a new space where people could meet without the 'masks' of the theatre and social life (Vol. 1, 34). The theatre changed perspectives, experiences and energies of spaces through the ability to capture the conjunctions of people and ideas, physically and metaphorically. This is only one of the many stories that strike the heart of the reader and showcase the power of performance to provide solace in the midst or aftermath of violent conflict, and which contribute to peace-building and positive social change.

Acting Together is published in two volumes. The fourteen case studies (nine in volume one and five in volume two) are framed by introductory and analytic chapters by the three editors. Cohen, Varea and Walker have separated the case studies into three sections: performance in the midst of direct violence; peace-building performance in the aftermath of mass violence; and performance in the contexts of structural violence, social exclusion and dislocation. Sections 1 and 2 make up the bulk of the first volume, while section 3 is published in the second volume. Volume 2 also contains two chapters of reflections and recommendations and three chapters with resources for practitioners and scholars. While the resource section is useful for performance and peace-building scholars in working with the books and also for planning peace-building performance projects, it is presented predominantly as lists of discussion questions, and not as a toolkit of exercises or activities for performers or peace practitioners. True to the connecting spirit of performance, the editors have also published a DVD documentary (Lund et al. 2011) and tools for continuing the conversation, which are available separately and extend the material beyond the written page.

The idea for the anthology grew out of collaboration between Brandeis University and Theatre Without Borders. The editors then found and selected curators for the chapters through the networks of these organizations. While the scope of case studies is extensive and ranges from ritualistic and ceremonial performances by community elders, through performances in public squares and other places to performances in the National Theatre

of Uganda, it is necessarily limited in its scope, and has to exclude other valuable projects. It focuses on embodied performances that are developed, rehearsed and performed by 'live practitioners', and usually witnessed collaboratively by an audience. The editors differentiate between traditional ritual, community-based performance and artist-based performance. The diverse performance projects described are embedded into summaries of the political and social context of the performance. Mostly as insiders, the curators describe the conflict situation in the particular country and then explain how this gave rise to the creation of artistic performance. The editors also asked them to reflect on performance practices through the lens of conflict transformation, understood as the work of building just and lasting peace. Through this lens, conflict is seen as a natural catalyst for social change, and not as an undesirable state of tension. Peace is considered as more than just the absence of war. It requires the presence of social justice and human security, and sometimes means escalating conflict by mirroring injustices and structural violence through performance. These definitions of conflict and peace are well aligned with contemporary conflict-resolution and peace-building theory, and will be easily understandable to practitioners and scholars in the field.

Unlike other conflict transformation and peace-building interventions, creative performance can capture some of the unexpected effects of conflict transformation processes, and help people entangled in conflict reflect on what is going on at a level that is different from cognitive problem-solving approaches. Performance can also play a major role in healing trauma and assisting reconciliation. Actors can symbolically slip into the roles of perpetrators to remind later generations of incidents of violence, or they can facilitate collective mourning over historical grievances and atrocities. Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani worked together with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Peru to assist victims in working through the traumatic experiences of remembering violence and persecution. Performers can also shine a spotlight on issues of structural violence that are otherwise swept under the carpet of allegedly humane and equal societies. An example is the structural and epistemic violence suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, which were highlighted in the reconciliation ceremonies described by Walker. In these situations, performance can excite audiences and escalate latent conflicts towards more insistence on equality and equity. The intrinsic aesthetic of ritual and ceremony can change participants and encourage them to progress the collective reconciliation process.

Inspired by the individual chapters, the editors provide an analysis of the relationship between performance and conflict transformation in Volume 2. They use the metaphor of a 'permeable membrane' – similar to the nucleus of a cell and its protecting membrane – to discuss performance as a fluid and dynamic sphere of activity that is part of, but separate from, the rest of life and society:

Propelled by commitments to create moments of beauty and sacredness, to ameliorate suffering and to enhance social justice, elements from everyday life cross through a porous boundary and enter the space/time of ritual and theatre ... We propose that in peacebuilding performances this boundary consists of the aesthetic and ethical sensibilities of artists and cultural leaders, animated by the moral

imagination – the capacity to be in touch with, and grounded in, the limitations and suffering of the real world, and simultaneously to imagine and work toward a more just and more life-enhancing imagined order.

(Vol. 2, 162)

This metaphor reminds me of Djana Milošević's suggestion that the actors of DAH Teatar were left unharmed by soldiers and officials during their critical performances in the middle of Belgrade while other voices of dissent were brutally suppressed. The performers were protected by the aesthetic quality of their work while still interacting with society.

For me, the idea of a permeable membrane separates performance and society too strongly. What struck me about the different stories told by the curators was how much the different types of performance were influenced by and embedded in social patterns and narratives unique to their societies. Artistic performance contributes to creative conflict transformation when it is deeply embedded into these narratives and elevates suppressed voices to public consciousness through embodied performance and symbolic interaction with the audience. While the metaphor of the cell nucleus is too alien for my understanding of performance, which is deeply connected with people and interpersonal communication, the framework explains how social narratives enter the space of performance, are emphasized and made visible through the creative act and then re-enter the 'bloodstream of social energy' by transforming audience and performers alike.

Following the analytical chapter, the recommendations of the *Acting Together* project are clear, grounded and convincing. The editors have demonstrated that performance can significantly contribute to the transformation of violent conflict, and can reach audiences that are inaccessible by other means. It also has the potential to support communities in mourning, those dealing with trauma and those celebrating resilience. Aesthetic excellence reinforces socio-political effectiveness if the integrity of the artistic process is respected. This comprises a strong argument for more peace-builders to recognize and incorporate performance into their initiatives and for artists and peace-builders to explore their respective practices together. The recommendation of respecting the integrity of the artistic process will hopefully be a reminder for funders and NGOs to trust that the creative process of the performance will provide a transformative experience without the need for heavy-handed programmatic messages to be incorporated into the end-product.

Finally, the anthology fills an important niche in connecting performers and peace practitioners. In the field of conflict resolution, artistic and creative initiatives are still seen as somewhat exotic, and are sometimes questioned with regards to their effectiveness. This has led to feelings of isolation and self-doubt among some practitioners. This anthology opens the curtain to showcase the beneficial effects of performance for creative conflict transformation and validates the courage, skill and determination of its proponents. For the first time, the anthology and the *Acting Together* project provide a platform for peace-building artists to connect and to reflect on their work together with other scholars and practitioners. That in itself is already a significant achievement of the editors and curators of this complex and fascinating collection.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The reviewer acknowledges the contributions of Ms Erica Rose Jeffrey, MIS (Peace and Conflict) student at the University of Queensland and dance professional.

REFERENCE

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THEATRE IN HEALTH AND CARE, EMMA BRODZINSKI (2010)

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 200 pp.,

ISBN: 13 978 1403 9970 81, £52.50

Reviewed by Deborah Mills, Arts and Health Foundation, Sydney, Australia

This book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on arts and health. Its value lies in the scope of the theoretical platform the author brings to her analysis of practice and her rigorous scrutiny of the book's case studies of theatre in health care.

Brodzinski's case studies are riveting. With the artist's unflinching eye, she dissects and analyses theatre practice in four different settings. Some of the introductory theoretical material is a little heavy going, but once she gets her teeth into the practice, her theoretical and practice analysis is sharp and cogent. Her clear and detailed descriptions and analysis of the way in which the theatre companies under discussion frame their practice locate that practice within a particular context, and the questions raised for them as theatre practitioners are terrific.

Hailed as a 'truly global treatise' in one testimonial, it is a shame that Brodzinski's resources limited her case studies to work taking place in the United Kingdom, the United States and Asia, and did not permit her to visit Australia, as both our theatre practitioners and her work would have been enriched by her insights into arts and health practice in this country.

The first set of case studies all take place in acute hospital settings. 'Theatre-Rites' is a UK-based company formed in 1995, and its intention in *Hospitalworks* was to 'inhabit the body of the hospital and take their audiences within it'. As Brodzinski describes it:

They worked directly with the materiality of the building, with the conceit being that the objects within the ward – beds, lamps, pillows, etc. were not well ... This did appear to be magical for the audience; for example one child reported that her favourite piece of the show had been the snoring pillow.

(43)

Brodzinski, however, asks about the extent to which this award winning performance encouraged the audience to see the hospital through a new perspective.

The Big Apple Circus Clown Care Program is based in New York, and works within the subversive circus tradition, seeking to make a direct connection with those with whom the program interacts (patients and staff), dissolving the barrier between the performer and the 'audience'. They are also very well organized, with a formalized training programme for all members of the troupe, a set of documented principles to which they adhere, professional debriefings with health care personnel, their own therapeutic sounding boards to help them cope with the emotional impact of their work and an administrative structure that keeps track of everything.

IOU is a breakaway group from Welfare State International. Influenced by the neo-avant-garde work of the 1960s, its principal concern is to occupy and investigate the possibilities of space, a challenging concept in an acute health-care institution. I got the sense that the patients were both the subjects and objects of their work, and that their needs came a poor second to IOU's ambitions for their theatre practice.

Brodzinski's second group of case studies examines the effectiveness of narrative as a teaching tool, in particular in a health-education – or what we would understand in Australia as a health-promotion – context. Her case studies include the work of The Nite Star Program, a New York-based company working with young people on AIDS prevention and the Nalamdana ('Are you well?') theatre company working in Chennai (previously known as Madras) to disseminate health messages across a range of issues, including AIDS. For me, the strength of this chapter lies in its exploration of the origins of health promotion as a branch of health practice with an emphasis on the 'self-reflective, self regulating individual' who will take an active role in their own health and that of their community. Brodzinski is interested in whether theatre practitioners working in this area of health education/promotion support or subvert the work of official health-care agencies. Her short description of theatre and social change, and the influences shaping this type of practice – in particular, Modernism – creates a pertinent context through which to examine her case studies. In her conclusion to the chapter, I think Brodzinski rather begs the question of whether theatre workers support or subvert officialdom, noting that if the work is not compelling artistically, it will fail because the audience will disengage. Well, yes.

In her third group of case studies, Brodzinski applies her penetrating gaze to the subject of the rights of people with an intellectual or learning disability to advocate on their own behalf for their health-care needs, and looks at

the role theatre can play in facilitating – or, more insidiously, mediating – that advocacy. Brodzinski examines the work of Mind the Gap, a professional theatre company based in Bradford, West Yorkshire and The Lawnmowers, an independent theatre company for people with learning difficulties based in Newcastle, both in the United Kingdom.

Mind the Gap sees itself as presenting professional theatre by disabled people, not unlike Australia's Back to Back Theatre Company. Mind the Gap's work is framed by the teaching of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, together with the belief that the theatre should 'not seek to indoctrinate or 'ventriloquise', but to provide a forum for discussion and promote the idea of participant citizenships where the theatre event allows for the discovery by the citizenry of what they carry within them' (97).

Lawnmower's work is framed by a blend of Boal's techniques and those developed by Dorothy Heathcote, a renowned theatre in education pioneer (see obituary in this issue), creating performances with accompanying workshops that advocate for change.

In her final group of case studies, Brodzinski examines the role that theatre can play in teaching health practitioners their art and craft.

Despite my reservations about some of the conclusions that Brodzinski draws from her analysis, I unreservedly recommend the book for its case studies, and for the historical and philosophical context within which she locates the practice she examines. This type of writing about community theatre, let alone about theatre within a health context, is all too rare. What we are more used to seeing is either descriptive or promotional rather than analytical or academic, which can fail to capture the essence of theatre work. What is interesting and important about this collection of case studies is the author's deep understanding of theatre practice and its philosophical context, and her unflinching honesty in examining performance against practice ambitions and objectives.

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Deborah Mills is a policy adviser who is working with the Arts and Health Foundation to facilitate an inclusive conversation around the development of a national arts and health policy framework.

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