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Drama**

Theatralia. 2016, vol. 19, iss. 2, pp. 156-159

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/135866>

Access Date: 22. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Three Books on New Dramaturgy and Adaptation from Bloomsbury Methuen Drama

Pavel Drábek

Margherita Laera (ed.). *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. 284pp.

Katalin Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochran (eds.). *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. 275pp.

Katalin Trencsényi. *Dramaturgy in the Making: A User's Guide for Theatre Practitioners*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. 326pp.

[reviews]

The three books under review here – two edited volumes and a monograph – were published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama within a two-year period. Katalin Trencsényi's book on *Dramaturgy in the Making* was thoroughly reviewed in last year's issue of *Theatralia* (18.2). I have included it in this group review for the sake of context and because these three publications form a notional series whose individual titles complement each other – circumnavigating around the processes of theatre-making from the perspectives of those who: adapt, adopt, adjust, translate, rework, rephrase, appropriate and give form to the creative concepts underlying individual productions, whether based on a dramatic text or other sources. The three volumes cover a wide and fascinating range of recent practices and compile a very useful body of knowledge about contemporary theatre and performance including dance, new media, various cross-genres and experimental performance. Margherita Laera's edited volume *Theatre and Adaptation* is a set of 17 interviews with theatre-makers and companies' directors, conducted by scholars specialising in the work of the respective artists. Laera's collection

is in many ways the most thought-provoking, as it confronts the reader with a 'warts and all' view of the practitioners. At times the interviewers propose concepts that the artists don't use themselves or have difficulties accepting.

The central concept of the collection – *adaptation* – is often a stumbling block. Practitioners from different cultures with very different working practices – and their own refined intellectual epistemologies – grapple with the critical and academic concept. As Katie Mitchell observes: 'I thought I was directing the play but many folks viewed these productions as radical adaptations' (215), and 'When I was preparing the production I didn't know that we would depart from the original as much as we did' (214). Similarly, Daniel Veronese of the Brazil company El Periférico states: 'I modify what I need to without keeping the original too much in mind. I ought to mention that these versions are created because I have every intention of staging the text' (66). Others deny or reject the perspective of adaptation, such as Ivo van Hove from Toneelgroep Amsterdam. When Peter Boenisch asks the question: 'Adaptation – is this

a term you use at all when you think about your work as theatre director?’ the reply from van Hove is: ‘To be honest, not really.’ (51)

A similar response comes from Latvian director Alvis Hermanis. His interviewer, Alan Read observes that ‘in preliminary communications adaptation and its various lives had elicited no direct response’ (181). The Japanese Noh master Udaka Michishige states: ‘I can only speak for myself, but I think that “adaptation” is not a term Noh actors use as frequently as practitioners of other art forms would’ (82). The concept is pushed by the interviewer Diego Pellicchia as he enquires into the adaptation process of Michishige’s new plays, written for Noh. But Michishige retorts: ‘there was no intellectualization in the creation of the play’ (84). Conversely, there are theatre-makers who completely identify with the concept of adaptation and it has become the ‘bread and butter’ of their work. Such is the case with Simon Stephens (who among others dramatized Mark Haddon’s novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*). Stephens is a special case in many ways. As a history graduate (University of York) and a teacher, he shares the cultural discourse of the discipline. In his interview with Duška Radosavljević, he ticks all the boxes, so to speak, as he shares the academic jargon and adapts himself to the discourse. This interview is fascinating for its thoroughness in addressing theoretical issues. Other interviews reveal moments when artists and academics are at odds in their outlooks. It is telling that in the opening interview with four members of the Hand-spring Puppet Company, it is Jane Taylor – a full-time academic – who is most in keeping with the discourse set up by the

interviewer Nadia Davids. (I don’t want to cause divisions in exaggerating this point; many of the interviewees are theatre practitioners themselves. So there is not a rift in essence, only the *official languages* of the activities differ.)

Laera states the mission of her collection:

Through conversations between theatre and performance academics and internationally renowned ‘serial adapters’ working in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa, this book wishes to explore a variety of approaches and contexts in which stage practitioners make theatre by constantly returning to, rewriting and repeating their methodologies, histories and inherited narratives. (2)

Despite this, the volume is effectively less about adaptation and more about the artists’ own practices and the cultural and artistic contexts in which they work. It is also worth pointing out that the practices documented in the interviews defy the notion of ‘repeating their methodologies’. There is always an element of difference and novelty that doesn’t fit the pattern.

The concept of *new dramaturgy* has been around the field of theatre studies for a number of years. Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt dedicate a section to it in their book *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Palgrave 2008). Arguably, like so many *new-isms*, it is trying to tackle theoretically a certain paradigm shift – though the sceptic in me would claim that this paradigm shift has always been present in one form or another, what has actually changed is that some performance practices have broken out of the so-called

spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann) and have entered the theatre studies discourse, becoming a talking point in the field and necessitating that the scholarly patterns and concepts be revisited and renewed. Editors Katalin Trensčényi's and Bernadette Cochrane address this type of 'newness' in *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*. The collection of 15 essays and interviews include a range of authors: academics, theatre-makers, an actor, a choreographer and a composer. Many of the texts probe what *dramaturgy* actually means, and are concerned with accounts of current practices in a range of theatre forms. The model here is one of revising an aging term and giving it a 'makeover' – hence *new dramaturgy*. It is a term that encompasses practices that 'are *post-mimetic*' (xii). These practices 'embrace *interculturalism* and they are *process-conscious*' (xii). Such a perspective gives the term the thrill of being fresh, modern, exciting and trendy (e.g. intercultural, participatory or process-conscious theatre), though it is uncertain in what way the 'old' *dramaturgy* – as opposed to *new dramaturgy* – has become obsolete. First, as theatre is so closely connected with a particular company, its audience and its culture, attempting an international or intercultural reach smacks of an ideological agenda – see also Clive Barker's critique of interculturalism as a version of cultural colonialism in Patrice Pavis's *Intercultural Performance Reader* (Routledge 1996, p. 250). Second, in English-language theatre studies, the term *dramaturgy* that 'has become synonymous with the totality of the performance-making process [... and] is now considered to be the inner flow of a dynamic system' (xi) – whatever this poetic image should mean – is relatively recent. From the per-

spective of the collection in the book, *new dramaturgy* can be seen as a 'buy one, get one free' offer. Because adoption of term *dramaturgy* wasn't too successful on its first attempt, this *new dramaturgy* 'packages' it with other trends, i.e. postdramatic theatre (Joseph Danan's essay), ecology (Peter Eckersall, Paul Monaghan and Melanie Beddie), performance studies (Duška Radosavljević), science (Alex Mermikides), cultural hybridity (Rachel Swain), and participatory theatre (or relational dramaturgy, as Peter M. Boenisch's essay promotes it; an alternative approach offered by Pedro Ilgenfritz). In and by themselves, the individual contributions in the collection are thought-provoking, incisive and original as intellectual probes into contemporary theatre practice; but grouping them under the aegis of the editors' agenda – *new dramaturgy* – goes somewhat against their argument. A more germane approach would be to document and reflect on the variety, range and riches of theatre and performance; trying to harness it all of the practices under an umbrella term is limiting. And since many of the authors (including the editors) are dramaturgs, it seems the project is also tinged with an anxiety of influence and some missionary ambition and vanity. In other words, the word *dramaturgy* is so abstract and volatile that its persistent usage in this volume almost turns into a 'quasi-Holy Ghost' – absent yet present, elusive yet real – 'everyone in the creative process contributes to dramaturgy, but not everyone is, or wanted to be known as, a dramaturgy' (18).

Trensčényi subtitles her *Dramaturgy in the Making* as a *user's guide* and structures her chapters dealing with dramaturgical practices as stages: 'Stage One: Marking out

the field of exploration' (134), 'Stage Two: Creating and shaping the material' (139), 'Stage Three: The work begins to take shape' (153), and 'Stage Four: The work gains its own life' (157). She evidences these stages with examples from a range of countries and theatre companies. The details she brings together are very interesting and informative with regard to individual cultural specifics and theatre-makers' working practices. At the same time, they bring the effect of being lost in a labyrinth – not in the lucidity of the style or Trensényi's approach but rather in explaining what dramaturgy actually *is*, and what a dramaturg actually *does*. I would argue that in the nature of the activity – its immanence and the immateriality and evasiveness of the creative processes of theatre-making – nothing is fixed, and there is no grounding in which to root the terms. In learning what a particular dramaturg did in creating a production or performance project, one gets a story that is unique and unrepeatable. Given that theatre brings audiences a novel and as yet unknown set of experiences – and the dramaturg is arguably at the heart of this – the dramaturg's job description is difficult to capture, in experimental theatre at least. Of course there is a caveat: in some types of popular theatre that are based on what Peter Brook calls 'deadly theatre', the fixed role of the dramaturg could be found, though the practitioners themselves would probably argue that there is artistic progress in their theatre too, only of a different type of epistemic novelty. And since the dramaturg is the theatre's in-house ideologist and – though often unacknowl-

edged – is frequently the one who is 'responsible [...] for the face and image of the theatre' (Lawrence Olivier's words to Kenneth Tynan; cited by Trensényi on p. 22), their role is commensurate with the image they create. That makes the role and its practising even more elusive. And especially so for scholars operating in the often hermetic academic discourse.

Coming back to a point made above, there is a kind of Tower of Babel looming between practitioners and academics – each group naturally pursuing different objectives and therefore diverging in their language. As Martin Welton asks Emma Rice of Kneehigh in Laera's collection: 'Given that diversity [of your productions], is it fair to assume that you have a general set of principles that you're looking for when you approach a new source for a work?' Rice replies: 'I think that there are lots of principles and voices that I listen to but there's never a formula' (229).

Similarly, Adrian Kohler of Handspring Puppet Company asserts: 'if you simply repeat what you did last time it won't fit the new story' (33), and Daniel Veronese of the Brazil company El Periférico, 'I don't have any criteria other than my instinct at the moment of selection' (67). Theatre practice and theatre studies have different aims; scholars are looking for and finding patterns while artists pursue novelty and explore new grounds. That means incessantly redefining what theatre, performance, adaptation and dramaturgy are. That is the greatest contribution of these three books in documenting such ongoing developments in theatre dramaturgy.

