

Book Reviews

Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance

by Catherine Silverstone

New York: Routledge, 2011, 175 pp. (hardback)

By Charlotte Keys

Catherine Silverstone's *Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance* is a fascinating consideration of the ambiguous ethical and political implications of enactments of trauma in Shakespearean performances. Silverstone chooses to explore four productions which were significant interventions in the performance histories of these plays: Gregory Doran's 1995 production of *Titus Andronicus*, set in South Africa; the 2001 film, *The Maori Merchant of Venice*, made in New Zealand; Philip Osment's 1988 play, *This Island's Mine*, which was performed by the London-based theatre company, Gay Sweatshop, and incorporated scenes from *The Tempest*; and Nicholas Hytner's 2003 production of *Henry V*, which sought, through its aesthetic of realism, to represent the trauma of Britain's military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. All these productions deliberately set out to engage with specific, violent events and histories, and thus were intentionally charged with presentist politics. By focusing on these particular examples, Silverstone argues that the representation and reproduction of trauma on stage can both critique *and* reinforce the operation of violence. Her book is informed by her subtle awareness of the 'tension between the way in which Shakespeare's texts can be co-opted as part of a narrative of healing and reconciliation in response to trauma and how such narratives can work to elide or obscure inequalities – and thereby produce further violence' (5).

Silverstone's monograph is a timely meditation on this important topic and coincides with a recent special issue on trauma in the journal *Performance Research* (March 2011). In their editorial remarks to the issue, Mick Wallis and Patrick Duggan note that performance can be regarded 'as a privileged site for the exploration of trauma' (1). As it involves processes of replaying, reliving and re-representing events, trauma is bound up in ideas of performance and performativity. In the words of Wallis and

Duggan, 'trauma theory suggests a performative bent in traumatic suffering itself' (2). Further to this, in her more intriguing approach to developing analogies between trauma and performance, Silverstone claims that performance criticism is inherently traumatic, as it constitutes a return 'to that which it cannot fully grasp or account for' (18). She supports this view by considering how performance archives contain traumatic traces of the 'live event' of performance, and in her analysis of the four productions, she draws on a vast array of archival materials, including films, videos, DVDs, play-scripts, programmes, reviews and photographs, as well as some less frequently used but equally illuminating materials such as actors' diaries, rehearsal notes, audition tapes and prop lists. Rather than attempting to use these resources to reassemble an image of the original performance, Silverstone insists that she is more concerned with how the performance event is mediated by its material and documentary traces. These traces, she goes on to observe, are interesting and revealing because they 'privilege some subject positions and exclude others' (20).

Over the last twenty years, analyses of trauma have produced a rich and multifarious field of research, and Silverstone's book enters into a productive dialogue with other critical studies of trauma, one of the most significant being Cathy Caruth's seminal monograph, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1995), in which Caruth examines the complex interrelationship between trauma, communication and the unknowability of the event. The originality of Silverstone's study, however, stems from her nuanced historicism, not of Shakespeare's texts themselves, but of contemporary performances of Shakespearean drama that consciously tap into particular narratives of trauma. She clearly delineates the parameters of her study, stating that she does not wish 'to identify Shakespeare as an early modern trauma theorist' and is not 'interested in speculating on what his views about trauma and ideas of "treatment" might have been' (21). Many previous studies on the relationship between Shakespeare and trauma have endeavoured to contextualise notions of trauma in the early modern period. In *Performing Early Modern Trauma from Shakespeare to Milton* (2006), Thomas P. Anderson explores the 'historical transmission' (1) of trauma in early modern literary texts. By focusing on the twentieth and twenty-first century cultural and

historical circumstances that give rise to certain trauma-conscious performances instead, *Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance* makes significant critical advances.

The fundamental strength of Silverstone's study, and what sets it apart from other studies in the field, is the way it insists that the negotiation and communication of trauma through Shakespearean drama is a difficult and open-ended process, often producing effects that are at odds with a production company's original intentions. Contemporary performances of some of Shakespeare's most traumatic plays are sometimes optimistic and hopeful, allowing an audience to consider 'how trauma, perhaps perversely, provides the ground from which communities might mobilise themselves to redress injuries' (24). But at the same time as allowing an audience to envisage these 'affective and effective community relationships', some performances also reveal how these new communities 'can work simultaneously to marginalise others' (24). In some ways, Silverstone's work follows Christina Wald's *Hysteria, Trauma and Melancholia: Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* (2007), a study that is deeply concerned with the incorporation of trauma in contemporary performance (but does not focus on performances of Shakespeare in particular), and Timothy Murray's *Drama Trauma: Specters of Race and Sexuality in Performance* (1997), an extensive, provocative study of the traumatic workings of ideology in early modern performance and contemporary performance, television, video and installation art. But in other ways, Silverstone's book encourages a fresh look at the issue of trauma in performance, acting as a forceful and convincing reminder of the inherently traumatic relationship between the past and the present. As Silverstone puts it, 'performances of Shakespeare's texts and their documentary traces work variously to memorialise, remember and witness violent events and histories, but (...) these processes are never neutral. Performances offer a way of remembering violent events and histories and invite spectators to witness these events' (3-4).

Overall, *Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance* is a useful and valuable contribution to both performance criticism and Shakespeare scholarship. The book's fluid prose is accessible and easy to follow. The study's primary thesis is outlined in the introduction and compellingly developed

in the subsequent four chapters. Anyone who has watched violent, 'traumatic' performances of Shakespeare and considered the uncomfortable, difficult ethics and politics of such performances will find Catherine Silverstone's new book a thoroughly enlightening read.

Works Cited

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***Disaster Capitalism; Or Money Can't Buy You Love: Three Plays* by Rick Mitchell**

Bristol: Intellect, 2011, pp.299, (softback)

Review by Melina Theocharidou

Rick Mitchell introduces his trilogy by outlining Naomi Klein's notion of 'disaster capitalism': 'catastrophe has become a convenient rationale for gutting social and public programs, as well as for weakening safeguards meant to protect people and communities, such as union contracts, civil liberties, and environmental laws' (9). The playwright then sets out to tackle occurrences of disaster capitalism in a 'post-9/11 comedy' (19) set in Afghanistan, *Shadow Anthropology*, a play set in New Orleans and spanning the last two centuries, *Through the Roof*, and a 'sacrilegious comedy' (203) set in Los Angeles during the 1980s, *Celestial Flesh*.

The author explores the complexities of human intervention

in nature and the role it plays in precipitating or aggravating what we call 'natural disasters', as well as ways the socio-political landscape, made of conflicting state policies mixed with rogue individuals' interests, enacts capitalist exploitation resulting in the victimization of the masses. The plays are written in a post-dramatic form; Mitchell lances out against psychological realism in his introduction and defends the use of devices that favour reasoning over empathy: the 'big picture' over individual characters' plights. He is clearly an exponent of the Brechtian model but he insists that theatre should be first and foremost 'aesthetic' (13) and only thereafter political. So, are Mitchell's plays successful as pieces of theatre and does their scrutiny of the notion of disaster capitalism have depth and breadth?

The first work of the trilogy, *Shadow Anthropology*, focuses on the War on Terror in Afghanistan and the effects of US military policy on the native population; the crux of the play deals with the US government's attempts at brain-washing the population through the employment of anthropologists who collect and subsequently rewrite core stories and songs of communities. The spread of propaganda is coupled with the spread of poppy-seeds by drug warlords encouraging farmers to produce opium at a time when drought is killing off their produce: a practice that seems to be enabled and fortified by the military forces. An Afghan farmer and his university-educated daughter are jostled around by a Puerto-Rican, American-sent anthropologist with doubts as to her mission, an American soldier more interested in having a good time and profiteering than anything else and a warlord who is determined to get the upper hand. Songs and puppet shows punctuate the play, reflecting events, satirizing them, and the latter perhaps offering a meta-theatrical commentary on the politics of the play, deriding a simplified assessment of the situation. Mitchell successfully intermingles comedy (through repartees as well as situational, slapstick and phallic humour in the puppet shows) with despair and a compelling plot with unexpected twists and turns. The anthropologist's stance, however, seems inconsistent rather than consciously contradictory and the resolution feels contrived rather than earned. Finally, although dealing with how the US aids and abets (on a policy as well as a rogue soldier level) drug lords in Afghanistan who are using the drought as an opportunity to spread

the cultivation of opium, the play only in part explores the effects of 'disaster capitalism' per se.

Celestial Flesh is even more problematic in this respect; to the author's own admission in his Introduction, the play is not relevant to the concept of natural disasters, although it does grapple with the devastating effects of capitalism exercised ruthlessly by the state, without concern for human life, in tandem with vigilantes. A Central American immigrant community faces attacks by an extremist group from the community – US-supported drug dealers sending their profits to rebel groups in Nicaragua – and at the same time, the priest and a group of nuns from a Church in which the immigrants seek sanctuary are being threatened with ousting by a Cardinal in tandem with big business whose plans of profiteering are put in question. The play, an anathema to religious and state establishment and an ode to sex and love, has elements of high farce including exaggerated characters and situations, misunderstandings, slapstick, puns and a pair of misplaced spectacles. The author's formal accomplishments in terms of the comedy and his insights in terms of the subject-matter come together harmoniously, but *Celestial Flesh* does not in effect belong to a volume that explores the specific concept of 'disaster capitalism'.

Through the Roof is, in my view, the best encapsulation of the thesis that lends its name to the volume and, indeed, a play written with real panache. It cleverly juxtaposes the floods arising from dams breaking in California to the floods induced by levees breaking during Hurricane Katrina and aggregates a group of characters from three different eras – mid-nineteenth, late nineteenth and twenty-first century – all paralleling each other as 'different...but in many cases not *too* different', as the author notes (112). The thread of events runs back and forth through time, tracing the African-American Faustean character, his pregnant wife and his mistress (each in three different incarnations, one in each era), as well as a Mephistophelean character, always ready to exploit the floods for his own gain and often pairing up with the local police force and the state. Many of the scenes occur in flooded houses and flats, with the water rising by the second and characters fighting against drowning: a gift to the imagination of the audience and a challenge to the skills and ingenuity of the director, design team and actors. Mitchell has put together complex characters, in

complex situations, set in an ambitious and highly effective pan of history delivered through a medley of text, potent visuals and song. The notion of 'disaster capitalism' could not be better uttered than through this dialogue – simple, pure and astute:

FAUST: We don't know what that dam's gonna do.

RODRIG: It's gonna hold the water back, and channel it to wherever it's needed, for very low prices.

MARELA: So the water's kinda like migrant workers?

RODRIG: No, it's not... Because the water does exactly what we want it to do.

FAUST: Water has a mind of its own sometimes.
(137-138)

And therein lies the nucleus of what the writer set out to explore: the exploitation of the working, vulnerable population in capitalist endeavours that manipulate nature in ways that are bound to boomerang, as well as the victimisation of this same group when the natural disaster inevitably strikes.

The resolutions of all three plays are precipitated by self-defense murders of the oppressors by the oppressed – certainly controversial in so far as it is a recurring motif – and conclude optimistically for the latter; this, no doubt, aims to give spectators a sense of empowerment and an urge to action against the forces of subjugation and misery. Through diegesis and character profiling, Mitchell successfully targets his stories against the inhumanity of capitalism today, but only in *Through the Roof* do his arrows land bullseye on Disaster Capitalism. Nonetheless, throughout the volume, he provides an all-encompassing theatrical experience; he authoritatively orchestrates pathos, comedy, tension and the element of the unexpected using all the tools at his disposal – dialogue, imagery, music and song. Too often, theatre that engages with the socio-political *zeitgeist* sacrifices form to argument and fails to engage its audience as a piece of drama. Rick Mitchell avoids this pitfall; he proves that, just like Brecht, his 'primary concern ... [is] to create powerful theater' (17) and he presents us with a trilogy that is in turn funny and heart-rending, but always unabashedly political.

***Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice* by Penny Francis**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 192 pp. (softback)

By Jeremy Bidgood

Despite the meteoric rise of puppetry in European theatre practice during the last fifteen years, comparatively little writing of any note is readily available to the student, researcher, or critic who wishes to explore it further. The academic discourse that does exist tends to be 'scattered in anthologies, journals and other publications of limited circulation' (3). Previous publications such as *The Language of the Puppet* (1990) and John Bell's *Puppets and Performing Objects* (2001) have provided collections of writings with some critical insight into puppetry, but they are far from comprehensive introductions to the field.

This eagerly anticipated book, therefore, seems timely. However, Francis' book, apart from chapter six, is not a reader in the sense of a collection of significant writings on puppetry. The majority of the book is Francis' sometimes more personal than academic (see p.68 and her discussion of humanette puppets for example) account of her experiences of puppet practice, theory and history in Western Europe and North America. Frequently, this becomes almost exclusively a discussion of British puppet practice. Such Anglo-centricity is not acknowledged but quickly identifiable; for example, sixteen of the twenty-four illustrations in the book are of British productions, including two of student productions, which seem oddly out of place considering the wealth of British and international companies not referenced.

Francis is relatively open about some of the limitations of her book, admitting that the puppet practices of non-occidental countries are only discussed in relation to the influence they have had on 'modern west European' puppetry (1) and that her 'book's focus is on puppetry's evolution from the 1990s to the present' (1). The occidental focus seems a shame given that non-occidental theatre provides some of the world's most vibrant puppet forms, from the *ningyō jōruri* of Japan to the *wayang* of Indonesia, as well as equally interesting contemporary practitioners such as the recently deceased Hoichi Okamoto. Such an occidental skew again indicates the primacy of Francis' personal experiences in her writing

and makes the universality of her book's title seem rather crass.

However, universality is very much Francis' aim. Her book is aimed at every 'category of theatrophile' (4), or at least those interested in western European puppetry. Given its broad target audience, the book is not written as an academic treatise. There is no sustained argument. Instead, each chapter offers an introduction to an aspect of puppet theatre, except for chapter two which deals with related art forms: Masks, Ventriloquism and Automata. The other six chapters deal with a broad range of issues to do with puppetry, from definitions of puppet types, to the history of puppetry in Western Europe, to discussion of modes of performance and dramaturgy.

The stand-out moments of this book are when Francis starts to explain the systems that make the puppet function. Her exploration of the concept of writing in puppet theatre, which relies heavily on the ideas of Basil Jones of Handspring Puppet Company, is excellent and clearly lays out the extra layers of writing that make up the 'visual' text of the puppet theatre (79). Chapter one deftly deals with some of the issues surrounding the semiotic function of the puppet before moving on to discuss the puppet's differing enunciations as animated figure and animated object and the moment at which an object comes alive through breath (22). Chapter three explores the various types of puppet by methods of manipulation. Francis clearly identifies all the major forms of puppet, briefly explaining their modes of performance and construction, including a helpful discussion of the current prevalence of what Francis dubs 'rear-rod puppets' (often referred to as Bunraku-style or tabletop) (70).

The five articles Francis chooses to reproduce in full in chapter six are all worthy of inclusion and will probably be familiar to many who have a pre-established interest in puppetry. Kleist's *On the Marionette Theatre* and Barthes' *On Bunraku* in particular are often reproduced and referenced in other works. This chapter is a valuable part of the book and Francis offers brief but informative introductions to each essay that frame their context and author.

The final chapter's potted history of world puppetry provides a much needed introduction to the development of the art form. As with most of the book, the focus is on Western Europe. Whilst it is not as detailed as Jurkowski and Francis' 1998

two volume work *A History of European Puppetry*, it brings the narrative more up-to-date and provides an easily accessible history to the newcomer that charts the puppet's development from specific animist origins (145) to its common use by 'directors and designers who, despite a lack of any specialist training, are nevertheless discovering new dramaturgical uses for puppetry' (175).

Much of this book is useful but given its slim profile it is not surprising that it is not entirely satisfactory. As an introductory book, for the relative newcomer, it is informative. It provides many useful descriptions and insights from Francis herself and her years of experience of puppetry, as well as excerpts from many of the most prominent practitioners and theorists of the puppet theatre. While it is useful to have these collected together into one volume it is at times frustrating that more of these disparate articles have not been reproduced in full to enable the reader to engage with them first-hand rather than mediated through Francis' musings. A broader, more comprehensive puppetry reader to collate the 'scattered' (3) articles on puppetry is still very much needed. Although this book will probably become a standard text in British libraries, its Anglo-centric focus may prevent it finding universal acceptance. The personal nature of much of the writing also makes it feel less accomplished than previous works. For these reasons, despite its broader scope, Francis' book is probably destined to sit alongside, rather than supplant, *The Language of the Puppet* (1990) and John Bell's *Puppets and Performing Objects* (2001). However, it is a welcome addition to the field and will, I am sure, become one of the standard reference points for those wishing to gain a brief introduction to puppet theatre and its theories.

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