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Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change
by Dani Snyder-Young

Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, xiii + 156 pp, ISBN:
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Dani Snyder-Young's *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change* is an unflinching work focused on bravely putting forward the charge for artists and activists to look critically at 'whether *theatre* is the intervention their circumstances and goals require' (p. 132). *Theatre of Good Intentions* is unified by a focus on applied theatre practices which Snyder-Young defines as 'a wide range of participatory dramatic activities and/or theatre performances [that] are used for a broad set of purposes including education, community building, rehabilitation, conflict resolution and advocacy' (p. 4).

Snyder-Young's work joins in dialogue with a recent cluster of publications in the field of theatre and performance studies on the politics of community, arts collaboration and the participation of non-professionals in relationship to the expansion of neoliberal economies. These works include Shannon Jackson's *Social Work: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Routledge, 2011), Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, 2012), Grant Kester's *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Duke University Press, 2011) Jen Harvie's *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), and Nicholas Ridout's *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism and Love* (University of Michigan, 2013). These groundbreaking works however had carefully avoided a focus on the field of applied theatre as a discrete area of practice or theory. Snyder-Young expands this literature by providing a multi-perspectival account of applied theatre from participant and spectator vantage points.

In doing so, *Theatre of Good Intentions* furthers understanding of the material structure of applied theatre's production and effects. Snyder-Young's analysis of applied theatre practice extends to not only participants and facilitators, but the audiences and administrators who also support and produce the work. She moves deftly between sketches of the material infrastructures of performances in sites ranging from prisons to charter high schools to post-Katrina New Orleans and nuanced and deep-close readings of performances that blur the boundaries between professional and community-based work. This approach allows *Theatre of Good Intentions* to consider infrastructural and theoretical issues simultaneously.

Snyder-Young repeatedly returns to lived daily experiences of the intersection between the personal and the political that define the lives of applied theatre practitioners, participants and audiences. Chapter 3 for example is focused on Chicago's Storycatchers Theatre who have 'been creating original musicals with incarcerated girls since 1996' and in residence since 2004 at 'IYC Warrenville, a locked residential youth center for incarcerated teenage girls in the suburbs of Chicago' (p. 59). Snyder-Young argues that their 2010 musical *Mom in the Moon* idealizes relationships between the girls and an incarceration staff member named Ms. Punch in the absence of reliable mother figures by using 'musical theatre conventions

to argue in favor of authority, discipline and control rather than “radical freedom” (p. 61). Despite this critique of the musical’s political aims, however, she stresses that while the goals of piece are ‘not radical’ and ‘reinforce existing systems of power,’ ‘they may be *useful* to the girls, who will need skills in negotiating these systems of power’ (p. 77). This multi-sided argumentation characterizes Snyder-Young’s approach throughout the book as she calls on readers to recognize that ‘[c]ollaborative relationships must be maintained for programs to be sustainable. Funding levels must be maintained to continue to pay staff. The material conditions of applied theatre production require artists to engage productively with institutional authority’ (p. 78). This ‘productive engagement’ then may not always fulfill the efficacious and transformative expectations often attached to the highest ideals of ‘theatre for social change.’ Snyder-Young suggests that this may not be such a bad thing as utopic ideals may cover over relationships of privilege and exploitation whereas adjusted expectations make political infrastructures visible.

Snyder-Young’s approach to constructing this study provides a model not only for those working in, making and writing about the field of applied theatre, but all scholars theatre and performance studies more generally. This book gives us a methodological framework for theorizing how the work of theatre operates as part of a network of what Shannon Jackson calls ‘acts of support.’¹ Snyder- Young’s analysis moves between considering subjective experiences of participants, facilitators and audiences, and situating their engagement within the framework of institutional structures and their material necessities. In doing so, she answers Jackson’s injunction to emphasize, ‘rather than being embarrassed by- the infrastructural operations of performance.’² In doing so, Jackson offers that scholars might ‘find a different way to join aesthetic engagement to the social sphere, mapping a shared interest in the confounding of insides and outsides, selves and structures’³ and *Theatre of Good Intentions* delivers on this possibility.

Theatre of Good Intentions does not shy away from asking hard questions about the ethics and efficacy of applied theatre work, and indeed theatre in general, in its capacity to inspire or incite social change. *Theatre of Good Intentions* asks readers to ultimately look most critically back at themselves as Snyder-Young asks, ‘When we say we want *change*, how radical a change do theatre artists want, embedded as we are in systems of power, intertwined with institutions, enjoying our privileges?’ (p. 135). Despite this critical incisiveness, the book is no weaker in its support of theatre making as an optimistic and useful act. Snyder-Young attends forcefully to ‘the limitations of theatre’s attempts to build community and bridge this social divide’ (p. 96) while still foregrounding the way in which ‘these moments’ of theatre ‘change lives’ (p. 139). *Theatre of Good Intentions* advocates for a more honest assessment of the material effects of our good intentions not only on the theatre projects we participate in, and the participants that we work with, but the social and institutional infrastructures we support through pursuing the work in the first place. By asking us to look beyond the theatre, Snyder-Young in fact ultimately gives us more theoretical tools to work ethically within it.

¹ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p. 29.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

