

**Book Review: Liz Tomlin. Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory, 1990–2010. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, ix + 226 pp., £ 65.00.**

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## Book Reviews

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**Liz Tomlin.** *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory, 1990–2010*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, ix + 226 pp., £ 65.00.

The title, *Acts and Apparitions*, can be read as an answer to the question Liz Tomlin pursues throughout her book: What is the current status of ‘the real’ in contemporary performance practice and theory? Technology and mass media “create and disseminate versions of the real” that are “undistinguishable from any other reality,” and “the notion that a mediated image might be ‘authentic’ is [...] no longer widely held as credible” (1–2). As Tomlin shows in her introduction, questions of ‘the real’ are more urgent than ever as the twenty-first century gets underway.

Three features stand out in this timely and much-needed study of discourses on the real in performance practice and theory during the 1990s and 2000s. The first is the thorough demystification of what Tomlin identifies as the avant-garde narrative of “radicalism” and the ideological dramatic / postdramatic binary the narrative has engendered. The second is the deconstructive rigour of *Acts and Apparitions*, reflecting the author’s notable commitment to Jacques Derrida’s call for a self-reflexive practice that constantly interrogates its own premises. Third is Tomlin’s critical sensitivity toward the diverse ideological frames within which different recent models of performance practice can be said to operate. Her book covers a lot of ground here, from the work of the Wooster Group and Forced Entertainment to verbatim practice, performance walks, and the participatory practices of Adrian Howells and Ontroerend Goed, all of which Tomlin discusses in relation to notions of the real.

Tomlin begins by outlining the historical avant-garde movements that laid the foundation for the new postmodern performance models examined in her study. Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, Brecht’s epic theatre, the Living Theatre, the Situationist Movement, and the neo-avant-garde models of Allan Kaprow and John Cage are just some of the many forms considered by Tomlin as the predecessors of the postmodern / postdramatic performance types under discussion in her book. Arguing that these avant-garde discourses all had in common the “tendency to develop a narrative of radical opposition through challenges to received notions of the real” (19), Tomlin embarks on a detailed interrogation of the ideas of the real at work in these forms (and their postmodern descendants) and

suggests that the narrative of “radicalism” may not be the best way to account for the diverse phenomena coexisting under this umbrella. Not only is the vision of a radically ‘non-representational’ theatre, in which most forms of postmodern / postdramatic practice all have their roots, implicitly contradictory, as Tomlin argues in her first chapter, but the binary configuration, initially propounded by Hans-Thies Lehmann, of the postdramatic as radical and its dramatic ‘other’ as politically conformist is likewise untenable. Chapters 2 and 3 argue this point via an in-depth re-interrogation of the poststructuralist project of Derrida, which Tomlin believes has too often been misapplied to a naive conflation of the notions of ‘poststructuralist’ and ‘postdramatic.’ Comprising a detailed return to Derrida’s writings along with an overview of the diverse strands of avant-garde practices that have contributed to recent models of performance, the theoretical part of *Acts and Apparitions* offers a comprehensive and insightful account of the conflicting ideological / philosophical discourses that continue to surround attempts to make art that is radical and oppositional. Several pertinent issues are revisited by Tomlin in this context: the avant-garde’s complicity with the capitalist logic of the commodity; the shift from a revolutionary, ‘modern’ politics that seeks to overturn the capitalist structures to a ‘postmodern’ politics of resistance that is, self-reflexively, implicated within these structures; the problems of anti-mimetic movements of adaptation in an age where, granted Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum, there may no longer be any original to which the notion of adaptation can apply; and the real as a traumatic event that resists symbolisation, a concept that Tomlin aptly traces back to Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory.

In what follows, I concentrate on Tomlin’s treatment of participatory practice as a response to this ‘impossible-traumatic’ real to indicate but one of the ways in which Tomlin goes on to apply the argumentation developed in her theoretical part to individual case studies. In Chapter 5, Tomlin conducts an examination of specific performance models that move away from representational practice and toward a framework that “engage[s] the participant [...] in a more direct and experiential relationship with their own subjectively constructed reality” (144). One of the pieces Tomlin analyses in this connection is *After Dubrovka*, a theatre installation produced by Neil MacKenzie, Mole Wetherell, and Spencer Marsden, based on the historical event of the siege of the Dubrovka theatre in 2002. Amalgamating a selection of existing works in the field, Tomlin notes that the installation piece, which refuses to represent the real event in any way, “reject[s] both the narrative form of history and the specular emphasis of our mediated culture” (166). Her argument states that where the medial images of the Dubrovka siege merely showed the corpses of Chechen rebels dying in the theatre, offering a spectacle of violence that viewers could passively consume, *After Dubrovka* enabled the participants to “rethink the real event for [themselves]” (167). Tomlin concludes that it is

precisely this eradication of all possible mediations of the real that enables the piece's "radical engagement with the real event" (169).

But does this kind of ethico-political radicalism which could be said to link *After Dubrovka* with the great line of politically radical, avant-garde theatre from Artaud to Brecht to Augusto Boal, which Tomlin detailed in the first part of her study, hold for all recent models of participatory performance explored in *Acts and Apparitions*? In Chapter 6, Tomlin argues to the contrary. Here she highlights the potential for a linkage of the recent wave of participatory practice with the commercial trend for participation as it can be observed in a wider, corporate context today – a trend quite foreign to the narrative of radicalism advanced by Artaud, Brecht, or Boal. Drawing on the work of Claire Bishop, Maurya Wickstrom, Elinor Fuchs, and Philip Auslander, among others, Chapter 6 offers a closely argued account of the increasingly problematic status that discourses of democracy, radicalism, and empowerment have come to assume in an era when, as Tomlin perspicaciously notes, "the corporate world has latched onto the marketing potential of immersive performance" (197). Picking up on Bishop's idea of an "experience economy," "the marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences" (qtd. in Tomlin 195), Tomlin suggests that contemporary performance projects such as Forced Entertainment's *Instructions for Forgetting*, Stan's Cafe's *Radio Z*, and Uninvited Guests' *Love Letters Straight from Your Heart*, where networking devices and digital communication are commonly used to solicit personal contributions from the audience, may be seen to resemble rather closely the marketing strategies of big brands such as Disney, Nike, and Coke. The latter, following Wickstrom's observation, is now inviting consumers to share their personal "Coke Stories" in films to be screened in in-store theatres (cf. Tomlin 196). In a context in which people's increasing need for 'real' encounters with 'real' people can be exploited economically, both *Love Letters* and the Coke design team are potentially "drawing on the same cultural mainstream that fetishes the authenticity of the 'real life stories' of 'ordinary' people who are then empowered to star in their own show" (196). Tomlin does not conclude from this that all recent immersive or interactive performance seeks to "manipulate[e] the pleasure principle of the consumer" in the way that the multinationals do. However, she proposes a more refined ideological analysis of today's participatory practices, one that makes a point of "distinguish[ing] such examples from those that attempt, in the very different traditions of Brecht and Boal, to utilize participation in order to enable the participant to better embody positions of active and critical resistance to cultural forms of oppression" (197).

Beyond the clear political commitment, one feature that emerges from Tomlin's book is the extent to which its *modus operandi* is consistent with the self-

reflexive, performative imperative of Derrida's poststructuralist project. Indeed, the poststructuralist idea that seeming binaries such as 'participatory' / 'text-based' and 'theoretical' / 'experiential' do not form mutually exclusive categories but can interact with each other in productive ways is not only argued but effectively put into practice in Tomlin's book. A case in point is Tomlin's discussion of Uninvited Guests' *Love Letters* from her dual perspective of scholar / participant. Incorporating her personal experience as a participant in this interactive performance, Tomlin writes at one point: "My over-riding feeling was that I had been coerced to conspire in a performance text that had imposed on me new 'ways of being together' with strangers that had reconfigured my own role and identity in ways I found less than desirable" (182). Clearly Tomlin's self-reflexive, personal mode of writing at such instances, which momentarily suspends the dividing line between 'theorising' scholar and 'experiencing / feeling' participant, resonates with the overall poststructuralist imperative of her book to practice, as Tomlin puts it in her afterword, a form of "self-reflexivity that can serve to always and already destabilise its own manifestations of authority, wherever these may lie" (207), giving her book a degree of theoretical performativity seldom seen in other scholarly work claiming to adopt a poststructuralist perspective.

Nevertheless, there are parts in the book that could use a little more contextualising. Particularly where Tomlin aims to make productive the social and ethical potential of the Lacanian Real, the author misses out on important opportunities to link her study with recent positions in contemporary Lacan criticism. Adopting from Slavoj Žižek, the most prolific contemporary theorist of the Lacanian Real, 'only' his definition of ideology and his view on what criticism of it may look like today (Tomlin 3–6; 208), Tomlin at no point mentions Alenka Zupančič's work on the *Ethics of the Real*. Yet Zupančič's book is an essential point of reference for any contemporary discussion in the field, bringing together Kant's and Lacan's theories to develop an ethics of the real in which the 'impossible' real potentially *happens*.

Although Tomlin's study would have benefited from a detailed engagement with the works of Žižek and Zupančič inasmuch as both increasingly tend to link the real with concepts of the *act*, at times suggesting that participation in the real is inherent in any act of *determining meaning* in much the same way that Tomlin does towards the end of her book (cf. Tomlin 205–6; cf. also Zupančič 210–11),<sup>1</sup> *Acts and Apparitions* makes a valuable and significant contribution to three quite distinct areas of interest: Firstly, it is key reading for anyone interested in the

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1 For Žižek's notion of the act as a withdrawal from symbolic reality see his book *Enjoy Your Symptom!* at 43–44.

ethico-political potential of (notions of) the real in the context of the always ideological, ever shape-shifting reality of a late capitalist world. Secondly, it restores a method of analysis (deconstruction) that in the context of performance studies has often been reduced to challenging the dramatic model of theatre to a context in which the aim “to shake [every] totality” (Tomlin 5) is as central as it was in Derrida’s work. Thirdly, it breaks new ground in the scholarly discussion of radical performance practice by combining insightful and stimulating readings of some of the most innovative pieces to have emerged in recent years with critical reflection on the different ideological predicates that are framing the performance act in each case.

## Works Cited

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