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3x on New Dramaturgy and Adaptation at Bloomsbury Methuen Drama

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

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

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

The three books under review here – two edited volumes and a monograph – were published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama within less than a two-year period. One of them, Katalin Trencsenyi'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 (in no order of priority) 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 too. Margherita Laera's edited volume *Theatre and Adaptation* is a set of 17 interviews with 17 theatre-makers or companies and conducted by scholars specialising in the respective artists. While it is impossible to make a telling representation of the range, Laera's collection is in many ways the most thought-provoking (at least for me) as it confronts the reader with the practitioners so to speak warts and all: at times the interviewing scholars propose concepts that the artists don't operate in or have difficulties accepting.

In a way, the central concept of the collection – *adaptation* – is often a stumbling block as practitioners from different cultures and/or with very different working practices and their own refined intellectual epistemologies grapple to engage with the critical/academic concepts. So 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 who says "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 the perspective outright, such as Toneelgroep Amsterdam's Ivo van Hove:

Peter M. Boenisch: Adaptation – is this a term you use at all when you think about your work as theatre director?

Ivo van Hove: To be honest, not really. (51)

Similarly the Latvian director Alvis Hermanis (Alan Read observes that "in preliminary communications adaptation and its various lives had elicited no direct response"; 181) the Japanese Noh master Udaka Michishige: "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). Though the concept is adhered to by his interviewee Diego Pellecchia while he inquires into the adaptation process of Michishige's new plays written for the Noh. But

Michishige retorts politely: “[T]here was no intellectualization in the creation of the play” (84). Conversely, there are theatre-makers for whom adaptation is the bread and butter and they identify with the concept of adaptation. Such is the case of Simon Stephens (who among others dramatised Mark Heddon’s novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*). At the same time it has to be pointed out that Stephens is a special case in many ways – not only in his academic-friendly idiom but also in that he shares the cultural discourse of the discipline – he is a graduate in History from the University of York and worked as a teacher for some time. In his interview with Duška Radosavljević he – so to speak – ticks all the boxes as he shares the academic lingo and makes adapts himself to the discourse. This interview is fascinating for its thoroughness in addressing the theoretical issues; other interviews show much more that there are moment when artists and academics are at odds in their outlooks. It is in a way telling that in the opening interview with Handspring Puppet Company, represented by four artists, it is Jane Taylor – the one who is also a full-time academic – who provides replies most readily and most in keeping with the discourse set up by the interviewer Nadia Davids. (I don’t want to cause divisions in exaggerating this; many of the interviewees are theatre practitioners themselves so there is not a rift in essence, only in the *official language* of the activities differ.)

Laera formulates her collection’s mission that

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 mission, 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 practice documented in the interviews defies 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 wandering around the discipline for a number of years. Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrnt dedicate a section to it in their *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 changed is that some performance practices have broken out of the so-called *spiral of silence* (Noelle-Neumann) and have become a talking matter in the discipline, necessitating that the scholarly patterns and concepts be revisited and renewed. It is this type of newness that addressed in Katalin Trencényi’s and Bernadette Cochrane’s collection of 15 essays and interviews from a range of authors (academics, theatre-makers, an actor/translator, a choreographer and a composer) entitled *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*. Many of the texts probe what *dramaturgy* actually means and concern themselves – if not with a definition – with an account of current practices in a range of theatre types. The model here is one of revising an aging term and giving it a makeover – hence *new dramaturgy* and one that encompasses practices that “are *post-mimetic*, they embrace *interculturalism* and they are *process-conscious*” (xii). Such a perspective also gives it a thrill of the fresh, the modern, the exciting and the trendy (intercultural, process-conscious) – though it is uncertain in what way the *old dramaturgy* has become obsolete. First of all, since theatre is so closely connected with

a concrete company, its audience and its culture, attempting an international or intercultural perspective smacks of an ideological agenda – cf. Clive Barker’s critique of interculturalism as a version of cultural colonialism in Patrice Pavis’s *Intercultural Performance Reader* (Routledge 1996, p. 250). Secondly, 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 that poetic image should mean – is relatively recent. It is a more of a newcomer or “adoptive citizen” than an integral part of the theatre practice-theory reality. From this perspective, *new dramaturgy* can be seen as a buy-one-get-one-free offer – since the first wave of the migration (of the term *dramaturgy*) wasn’t too successful, this *new* wave is to package it with other trends – be it the postdramatic (Joseph Danan’s essay), ecology (Peter Eckersall, Paul Monaghan and Melanie Beddie), performance studies (Duška Radosavljević), science (Alex Mermikides), cultural hybridity (Rachel Swain) or the 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; grouping them under the aegis of the editors’ agenda – new dramaturgy – goes somewhat against their argument. Rather than documenting and reflecting on the variety, range and riches of theatre and performance, trying to harness it with one 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 dramaturg” (18).

Trencsényi subtitles her *Dramaturgy in the Making* as a *user’s guide* and structures her chapters dealing with dramaturgical practices as stages – such as “Stage One: Marking out the field of exploration”; “Stage Two: Creating and shaping the material”; “Stage Three: The work begins to take shape”; and “Stage Four: The work gains its own life” (134, 139, 153, 157). She evidences these stages with concrete examples from a range of countries and theatre companies. The details she brings together is very interesting and informative on the individual cultural specifics and theatre-makers’ working practices. At the same time it brings a lost-in-the-labyrinth effect – not in the lucidity of the style or Trencsényi’s approach but rather for an understanding of what dramaturgy actually is and what it is a dramaturg actually does. I would argue it is in the nature of the activity – its immanence, the immateriality and evasiveness of the creative processes of theatre-making – that there is nothing fixed and solid to root the terms in. In learning what a particular dramaturg did in realising a concrete production or performance project, one gets a story that is basically unique and unrepeatable. Given that much theatre brings the audiences a novel and as-yet-unknown set of experience – and the dramaturg is arguably at the heart of this novelty – the dramaturg’s job description is difficult to capture, in the 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’ a 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 unacknowledged – is frequently the one who is “responsible [...] for the face and image of the theatre” (Lawrence Olivier’s words to Kenneth Tynan; cited by Trencsényi 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 my initial point there is a kind of Tower of Babel looming between the practitioners and the academics – each group naturally pursuing different objectives and therefore diverging in their languages. So Martin Welton asks Emma Rice of Kneehigh:

[Martin Welton:] 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?

Emma Rice: 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 are after different aims; scholars are looking for and finding patterns while artists bring in the difference and explore new grounds. And that means incessantly redefining what theatre, performance, adaptation or dramaturgy are. That is the greatest contribution of these three books in documenting such ongoing developments in theatre dramaturgy.