

[Review] Dani Snyder-Young (2013) Theatre of good intentions: challenges and hopes for theatre and social change

Article (Accepted Version)

Price, Jason (2017) [Review] Dani Snyder-Young (2013) Theatre of good intentions: challenges and hopes for theatre and social change. *Performing Ethos*, 7 (1). pp. 43-61. ISSN 1757-1979

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/56487/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change, Dani Snyder-Young (2013), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 156 pp., ISBN 978-1-137-29302-2 (hbk), £50.00

Writing in *The Kenyon Review* in the early 1960s, Eric Bentley challenged widely held assumptions about the efficacy of political theatre. While not denying that theatre could affect individuals (emotionally, intellectually, etc.), he questioned whether it could actually generate wider societal change. He pointed out that when compared to rebellion or revolution, the theatre is woefully inadequate, cynically observing ‘The rebel artist customarily plays just as subservient a role in rebellion as his brother plays in conversation’ (1961: 77). For Bentley this is not problematic because such claims about the socio-political significance of theatre are overstated and unproven – although he clearly believes they are – but because they overshadow the very real impacts that arts practices are known to have, which he describes as ‘small, internal, personal and hard to describe’ (1961: 86).

In the fifty years since Bentley’s article first appeared, the debate around the value and impact of theatre has intensified, fuelled significantly by the growing interest in applied and community practices since the 1970s. Dani Snyder-Young’s *Theatre of Good Intentions* is the latest academic study to enter the debate. Instead of focusing on theatre’s ability to engender social change, her book seeks to critique its limitations. The study comes on the back of what might be seen as a broader shift in the field over the last decade, in which impact claims have started to be scrutinized more carefully, as can be seen in Merli (2002), Etherton and Prentki (2006), and Balfour (2009), to name a few. Here, the problems around impact are critically explored from two perspectives – that of participants and audiences. Broadly, the text grapples with questions around participant freedom, power relations and human agency. Snyder-Young’s aim, however, is not to discredit the good work being done

in the field, but to unpack some of its limitations in order to, in her words, ‘engage in a productive discussion of [its] strengths’ (2).

The first part of *Theatre of Good Intentions* focuses on participants. Chapter 1 explores the problem of privilege and power in applied theatre and TFD contexts, concentrating on the unavoidable and ineradicable imbalances of power that characterize participant-facilitator relations. Central to the chapter is a discussion of how privilege rears idealism, sometimes fuelled by guilt, motivating individuals to become involved in socio-political causes in cultures outside their own, which they do not fully understand. The author evaluates the shortcomings of the practical tactics typically used by practitioners to overcome these power and cultural tensions, including participation, dialogue and collaboration; and it is shown how one’s good intentions cannot mitigate against the complex power dynamics embedded within these practices. The discussion of power is carried over into Chapter 2, which interrogates the conflicts that can occur between a project’s progressive agenda and the popular positions that often inform participants’ creative choices. The focus here is on Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, which the author argues *assumes* critical consciousness, but cannot guarantee it. Describing a situation from her own practice, the author demonstrates the difficulty of engendering sustained critical consciousness in a group of subaltern American teenagers, whose forum theatre performances drew on popular cultural narratives and myths which tended to reinforce, rather than counter, hegemonic norms. It is subsequently shown how work that empowers participants by giving them the freedom to pose their own solutions to problems cannot guarantee progressive social change. The final chapter of Part I addresses the impact institutional agendas can have on applied theatres. The chapter is concerned with performances developed in prisons, and focuses on the widely acknowledged contradiction that exists between project facilitators who seek to empower or provide other therapeutic services for inmates, and the disciplinary institutions that fund and host this kind of work.

The strength of this chapter rests in its close reading of Storycatchers Theatre's original musical *Mom in the Moon*, developed by female inmates about their relationships with their mothers. While sympathetic to the goals of the project, Snyder-Young expresses her concern about the way the musical advocates institutional authority through its narrative and characters. Instead of privileging the inmates' emotional or psychological needs, the performance appears to prioritize the institution's interests by validating its methods of correction, and subsequently reinforcing its power.

In Part II, Snyder-Young turns her attention to audience reception. In Chapter 4, she teases through her complex emotional and intellectual responses to the Belarus Free Theatre's production of *Being Harold Pinter*. Drawing on familiar arguments by Aristotle, St Augustine, and Brecht, as well as more recent psychological studies, the chapter meditates on the question of whether our emotional or intellectual responses to a performance are likely to motivate us to take political action. Ultimately, it is argued that while empathy may make us care more about political issues, and critical distance might get us to think more critically about systems of power, neither is likely mobilize us in the ways needed to engender serious social change. The discussion of spectator agency is developed further in Chapter 5, which considers ideas around theatre as community-builder and the benefits that have been attributed to this. Victor Turner's 'communitas', i.e. the formation of a temporary utopian community around the shared experiences of a ritual, a concept often utilised by scholars and practitioners to theorise the benefits of community-based work, is challenged throughout the chapter. It is argued that this concept ignores individual ontology that inevitably acts as a barrier to community development. To demonstrate this point, the author discusses her experience of observing several audience groups as they watched a performance developed with housed and homeless participants. Barriers like identification, difference and believability (or truth) impacted the way that she and others responded to the work, thereby

inhibiting their collective union. Chapter 6 looks at the professional theatre's role in addressing contemporary issues in a hyper-mediatised world, focusing on the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and two theatrical responses that emerged some time later. Here it is pointed out that while the theatre cannot respond as swiftly or robustly as major news outlets to major crises, it can prolong discussions about and help us remember important events in a way that ratings-focused news, quick to move to the next big story, tends not to. Here the theatre's uniqueness – its liveness, its separation from the everyday – is emphasised and shown to be one of its key strengths. While the theatre cannot make people think critically or act on the issues it represents, it can, as Snyder-Young acknowledges, 'arrest their attention for a period of time' (131). In our media-saturated world, this kind of uninterrupted focus may prove more valuable than we currently appreciate.

Throughout this well-written and thought-provoking book, it is issues of power – imbalances of power, privilege, popular culture, and the media – and how they influence and shape theatre and our understanding of it that comes across most strongly. Despite its focus, the text gives a positive, hopeful diagnosis of popular and applied theatre practices. Readers may find the introduction and early chapters of Part I a bit too cautious, as it is frontloaded with responsibly announced privileges and methodological justifications, leaving arguments a little flat. On more than one occasion in these early chapters I was left wanting more detail and critical depth. This cautiousness is less present by Chapter 3, however, which offers one of the more rigorous critical readings in the book. Part II is sharper and I think readers will appreciate Snyder-Young's insightful and honest discussion of her intellectual and emotional responses to *Being Harold Pinter* in Chapter 4. While no one is likely to be surprised by the issues explored in the book, I believe they will value the author's intelligent take on them.

The book's conclusions share similarities with those articulated by Bentley over fifty years ago. The author believes that the theatre is capable of producing many remarkable

effects on those fortunate enough to get to see or take part in it. However, these effects are small and personal and, on their own, unlikely to produce significant social change. With this awareness, Snyder-Young invites practitioners to think very carefully about the kind of change they would like to make and to consider whether the theatre's unique qualities are right for the task.

Jason Price, Sussex University

Citation:

Bentley, Eric (1961), 'The Political Theatre Reconsidered', in *The Kenyon Review*, 23 (1), pp. 75-90.