Book Reviews

***Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain and Being* edited by Nicola Shaughnessy**
London: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 320, (softback)
By Jessica Beck

Nicola Shaughnessy's book is the first edited collection to directly address cognitive science and performance since Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth's Hart's *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn* (2006). Aiming to explore the interchange between science and theatre, Shaughnessy's collection promises to 'create bridging discourses, playing within intermediary spaces to explore and conceptualise the creative and critical middle ground in which the work is deliberately situated' (19). While *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science* ultimately delivers in this regard, the connections between each chapter and the focus of the publication is not always clear.

Shaughnessy's general introduction contains a fascinating discussion of Reckless Sleepers' *Schrödinger* (2011), which is intercut with a brief history of the so-called 'cognitive turn' in performance studies. This coupling creates an odd tension, as the analysis of *Schrödinger* would warrant a chapter of its own, consequently the interweaving of both discussions dilutes (rather than enhances) the critical capacity of each. However, what the overall introduction lacks in clarity is reconciled by the introductions to each of the book's four sections, penned by leading voices in the field.

Part One, 'Dances with Science', is introduced by Evelyn B. Tribble and John Sutton and includes chapters discussing partnerships between performance and cognitive science. Tribble and Sutton address ideas such as conceptual blending, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), and mirror neurons and their implications for performance. Part Two, 'Touching Texts and Embodied Performance', is introduced by Amy Cook and contains chapters that explore embodied communication in a variety of texts, while Part Three, 'The Multimodal Actor', prefaced by Rhonda Blair, offers insights on how cognitive science can enrich our understanding of many aspects of performance. The introductions by Cook and Blair engage most with the title of the book. Cook's opens with the admission that she struggled with the terms 'cognitive' and 'affect', fearing that the pairing implies 'that they are complementary terms – rather than overlapping theoretical areas' (83). Blair also grapples with affect theory and cognitive science, suggesting that 'Affect' is used to identify dynamic states such as emotions, moods and sensations, depending on the particular context. She goes on to compare affect theory to feminist theory, in her view 'best understood as affect *theories*, a myriad of approaches to studying and understanding flows of affect' (141; my emphasis). This acknowledgement of multiple approaches is useful for researchers navigating the fields of cognitive science and affect theory. Indeed, it serves as an effective reminder that in the field of affective neuroscience there is still no agreement on what constitutes a basic emotion, let alone a definitive list, though popular neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio would lead

us to believe otherwise.

Both Blair and Cook discuss an important theme of the collection : 'situated cognition', an approach that 'views mind in three modalities' (139). The first is that cognition is embodied, rejecting Cartesian dualism and acknowledging the significance of the body in cognition. Second, there is embedded cognition: an argument that 'cognition uses the environment' (both natural and social) (85). Finally, there is extended cognition: 'the mind leaks out into the world and cognitive activity is distributed across individuals and situations' (140). The recognition of the role of the environment is significant as it productively challenges the dated computational theory of mind that the brain and mind operate like a computer running software, independent of external stimulus. This idea of situated cognition is also impressive as it opens up cognitive science to theatre practitioners, enabling discussions on topics such as embodiment, kinesthetic experience and tacit knowledge, and features (though not always explicitly) in many of the chapters across all four sections. This is a move that strengthens the book by allowing a trade, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, to operate between both discourses (science and performance) that fruitfully enables the development of a better understanding of each.

Finally, Part Four, 'Affecting Audiences', led by Bruce McConachie, interrogates immersive audience spectatorship. McConachie's fine introduction 'Spectating as Sandbox Play' uses enaction, or dynamic systems theory (DST), as well as Jaak Panksepp's view of emotions, to discuss cognitive dy-

namics of spectating.

Chapters of particular note include John Lutterbie's 'Wayfaring in Everyday Life: The Unravelling of Intricacy' from Part Two, which contains a clear and enlightening overview of dynamic systems theory and his argument that 'gesture does not illustrate or augment the spoken word but is instrumental in the formation of thought and the articulation of discourse' (110). Building further on Lutterbie's ideas - and an excellent example of situated cognition in practice - Neil Utterback's 'Embodied Memory and Extra-Daily Gesture' from Part Three explores two empirical studies with actors exploring gestures and memory that reveal the importance of embodiment to memorisation. Utterbeck concludes that memory 'is not merely the mental activity confined to an isolated brain but a rich interaction of the body within a contextualized world' (152) and defines gesture as a 'holistic embodied and contextualized cognitive process' (154).

In this way, cognitive science is providing researchers and theorists with a remarkable array of new ways to contextualise their work, but what impact does this have for the everyday person? Two chapters in particular represent an exciting phenomenon to emerge from the cognitive turn: how theatre and performance can contribute to the medical profession and improve lives. Gabriele Sofia's chapter 'The Effect of Theatre Training on Cognitive Functions' from Part Three cites a study revealing 'patients with Parkinson's disease who attended theatre workshops showed continual improvement on all clinical scales' (172). Discussing body-schema as 'a non-conscious system of processes that constantly regulate

posture and movement' (175), Sofia asserts that through theatre training it becomes possible to '*embody* a different body schema' (177). Though in early stages research, there is evidence that 'theatre training causes remarkable neuromotor alterations' (179), which has exciting implications for patients who suffer from degenerative diseases.

Concluding Part Four, Melissa Trimingham's chapter 'Touched by Meaning: Haptic Effect in Autism' explores outcomes from The Imagining Autism Project, which produces sensory immersive performances for autistic children between the ages of eight and eleven. Trimingham makes an important point regarding autism and Theory of Mind: 'If we accept the embodied model of cognition, then sensory difficulties are fundamental cognitive issues, impacting on emotion, empathy, imagination – all associated with the triad of impairments in autism. This is because the mind is formed literally by being 'in touch' with the world' (235) Trimingham offers specific examples of how theatrical experiences using touch and interaction help participants make new meanings and understanding of social exchanges, concluding: '[The participants] became aware of the shared cultural and social embeddedness of these objects, in a mutual flow, however brief, where individual consciousness and the extended mind became impossible to distinguish' (240). Discoveries from projects such as Imagining Autism and Sofia's research illustrate the importance (and life-changing potential) of collaboration between performance and science, an inspiring call for more multidisciplinary research. Shaughnessy presents an ambitious anthology; the fact that not every

chapter sits as comfortably as others in this edition may also serve to highlight some of the challenges and complexities we are faced with when attempting to discuss ideas in such a vast arena. Despite this, the ultimate effect is stimulating and the diversity of contributions ensures there is something of value to be found for every student and researcher working in this burgeoning multidisciplinary field, not to mention the ripe 'real world' potential that the collection holds.

***Worlds Bodies Matters: Theatre of the Late Twentieth Century* by Valentina Valentini, trans. Thomas Haskell Simpson**

Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2014, 156 pp. (softback)

By Cara Berger

Valentina Valentini's *Worlds Bodies Matter* (translated from the Italian by Thomas Haskell Simpson) – kicks off an ambitious new series of Performance Research Books entitled Thinking Through Performance that will feature a selection of publications dealing in critically innovative and interdisciplinary ways with theatre and performance. If Valentini's book is an example to go by, this series will bring exciting ideas to the contemporary scholarly scene, not only because it will primarily feature translations not yet available to English-speaking readers, but also because it creates a space for methodologically pioneering works that engage in more creative and explorative modes of writing than thesis-driven publications .

In line with the serie's aims, Valentini is less interested in constructing a totalising narrative or 'handy descriptive catalogue' (xv) of theatre at the end of the twentieth century, but is instead more concerned with offering provocations for the reader to take on and develop further. Refusing simply to slot the practices and aesthetics it engages with into theoretical arguments, the presence of critical theory – especially that of the poststructuralist canon – is often more implicitly felt in the writing than explicitly invoked. The advantage of this method is that Valentini is able to consider the haecceity of individual works and oeuvres, in consequence avoiding what Laura Cull has termed the 'problem of application'. Cull warns that applying theoretical standpoints to theatre runs the risk that 'a fixed idea is superimposed upon a pliant example' (21), with the result that performance is positioned as a secondary activity, merely serving the apparently higher pursuit of philosophy. Valentini circumvents this problem throughout as theatre is taken seriously as a mode of thought in its own right.

This does not mean, however, that Valentini's survey is unsystematic or lacking in theoretical pedigree. As she explains in her introduction, her method builds on Michel Foucault's view of historical progression that suggests we see history unfolding over a series of discontinuities. By paying attention to the 'irruption of the singular event that overwhelms sequential temporality' (xvi), Valentini draws a picture of late twentieth-century theatre that is polymorphous, multidirectional and resistant to linear explication through terms such as influence or tradition. Consistent with this rea-

soning, Valentini's discussion of an eclectic group of practitioners ranging from directors such as Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, Carmelo Bene and Robert Wilson, to authors like Sarah Kane and Heiner Müller, and theatre companies including The Wooster Group and Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, shows little regard for the logic of time and place. Instead she elaborates upon a series of reflections grouped into three chapters, each shedding light on a thematic or formal feature from various angles: the founding myths of late twentieth-century theatre, the interconnections between theatre and other media spanning visual art, television and cinema, and the relationship between character, body and actor, respectively.

In place of an overarching argument or thesis, the book presents a rhizomatic network of ideas that allows the reader to pursue those most resonant with their own interests and specialisms. Still, some of Valentini's core ideas stand out particularly since they provide original insights relevant to ongoing conversations in the field. Of note is her discussion of what happens to tragedy in the late twentieth-century, which features as a coherent thread through most of the first chapter. Valentini tracks various traces of the tragic, expanding her earlier proposal that Heiner Müller's plays might be understood as being 'tragic without tragedy' (92) into a more wide-ranging assessment of the period. She asserts that the tragic form is replaced by a 'tragic vision of history' (5) that paints the world as disordered, violent and orgiastic. In this Valentini's ideas correspond with Hans-Thies Lehmann's recent thinking on the tragic, in which he

suggests that postdramatic theatre figures 'human existence as essentially transgressive, thus risky, inherently disastrous and potentially self-destructive' (92). However, whereas Lehmann develops a notion of the tragic through the theoretical formulations of thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche and Bataille, Valentini's perspective crystallises through a sustained engagment with diverse theatre practices, with the result that a more nuanced spectrum of tragic manifestations and their residues emerges.

A further point that may be of particular interest is Valentini's in-depth discussion of the interconnections between the theatre and visual art that makes up much of the second chapter and suggests that 'theatre takes on spatial qualities, and visual art assumes temporal ones' (52). Her contemplation of how abstraction figures in theatre, in which she draws on early twentieth-century visual artists including Wassily Kandinsky, László Moholy-Nagy and Oskar Schlemmer as well as later abstract expressionists, is an important argument. Valentini provides a range of imaginative insights, such as her suggestion that Wilson's visual dramaturgy realises, at the end of the twentieth century, the tendency towards abstraction begun earlier in the visual arts, while the emergence of time-based visual arts – including Land Art, *arte povera* and performance art – signal a convergence of theatrical and visual art strategies. Finally, the third chapter focuses in on various configurations of body, actor and character after the dissolution of the humanist understanding of the subject, including discussions of the cyborg and the Deleuzian body without organs that produces new images of the body as a

non-organic organism.

Although Valentini's broad approach does justice to the varied landscape of twentieth century theatre, at times her case studies are treated unevenly, with the effect that some feel lacking in detail. The Wooster Group's *To you the Birdie! (Phèdre)* is dealt with in a page-and-a-half, for example, while Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* is summarised at length. More transparency in such decisions would have helped to guide the reader and clarify the purpose of each case study. While occasionally her discussion of well-known practitioners can seem light, what is particularly enjoyable about Valentini's choice of practices is that she draws attention to Italian theatre groups beyond Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, that are often overlooked in Anglophone scholarship such as Studio Azzurro, Teatro Valdoca and Rem & Cap. Here, Valentini's fusion of poetic-descriptive and theoretical registers of writing, alongside the excellently selected production photographs that colour the reading of the text they accompany, is especially captivating, leaving the reader longing for more.

Readers seeking an all-encompassing description or coherent narrative of late twentieth-century theatre may be disappointed, as Valentini's mode of writing gleefully throws up more questions than it answers. But in accordance with Valentini's intention to act as a spur to thought, *Worlds Bodies Matters* is a valuable resource for scholars looking for fresh perspectives on theatre at the end of the last century.

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***Performance and Community: Commentary and Case Studies* by Caoimhe McAvinchey**

London: Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 256 (softback)

By Julie Rada

In the introduction to *Performance and Community,* Caoimhe McAvinchey characterizes the text as a 'bringing together' of artists and organisations working somewhere along the spectrum of 'performance' and 'community' and articulates a desire to give both of these hefty and nebulous terms 'equal importance' in the book (1). To this end, McAvinchey frames the book as an inquiry into two primary research questions: first, if in considering the practices of selected artists, possibilities of performance as a social or political act may be revealed and second, if through this examination of performance, the idea of community may be reconfigured. Working through these queries by alternating case studies with interviews, positioning a range of artists and commentators in close proximity to one another, McAvinchey effectively opens up for the

reader a range of insights tied to the similarities and contrasts that emerge between artists working in disparate milieus. In this way, McAvinchey acts as a curator in a gallery, placing snapshots of various artists in the same exhibition, leaving it up to the viewer (or reader) to connect the dots between their shared and different thematics, composition and intent. The combined effect of the contiguous case studies and interviews that comprise this volume result in a thorough, accessible and engaging read for practitioners and scholars alike. The case studies oscillate in scope: zooming out to provide historical overview and context for the artist, zooming in on particular projects to demonstrate working methods and process. The interviews, on the other hand, are primary research with practitioners on the front lines of the field, speaking as reporters from community-based performance settings.

The practitioners profiled in the book are conscious of the limitations of theatre-making as an antidote to oppression and marginalisation. They jointly express the critical inquiry necessary to avoid a well-meaning but ineffectual 'theatre of good intentions,' to quote Dani Snyder-Young, while simultaneously striving to address social concerns. I commend McAvinchey's curatorial prowess in compiling a volume of twelve essays, none of which profess the kind of missionary zeal that can plague applied theatre practice, which sometimes risks drifting into arts-therapy or rehabilitative modes of practice. The authors are careful and responsible in their descriptions. They foreground the quality of the artists' work, making few claims at community interventions, except inasmuch as the art is the intervention itself evidenced notably in

the work of Anna Ledgard and Mark Storer in Chapter 10, or in Ali Campbell's case study of the Lawnmower's Independent Theatre Company, stating simply that 'no professional standard is compromised' in this company comprised mostly of artists with intellectual disabilities (Campbell 77).

Addressing the problem and potential of community, the artists profiled in *Performance and Community* generally eschew notions of community that portray it as simple. By attacking the idea of community as 'an idealized state of all being well with the world,' in the introduction, McAvinchey repeatedly complicates notions of community, driving the conversation more toward complexity, rupture, uncertainty and renegotiation (19). Taking this range of possibilities further, the essays elucidate that for these artists community is highly contingent and temporary, inclusive of difference and exists ephemerally in the service of the creative project at hand: (summed up by Sue Mayo as an almost mathematic equation consisting of the formula: time + space + place = a temporary community bound up in a creative project, converging in a shared purpose) (Mayo 35; 41). While Mayo's writing describes a performance as a 'container' for community and Bobby Baker describes community as a source for 'collective knowledge,' Martin Welton of Common Dance waxes utopic; in an interview with Rosemary Lee, he notes that his work is 'trying to illustrate community, or to reveal what community might mean or could be' (Baker 110; Lee 147). This revelation hints at the aspirational underpinnings of the work of many included in this book: to utilise performance to expand on the possible and to maximise per-

formance as a mode of claiming public space and 'making visible' a 'living process' of creation (Mayo 219). If anything binds these artists, perhaps it is a politics of celebration as the foundation for community-based practice. Frequently the artists and organisations cite humour and play as modes of unlocking artistic possibilities, such as in Magic Me's intergenerational rehearsals, in the work of the Lawnmowers, in the dances and installations of Bobby Baker and the London Bubble's tactic of engaging audiences through 'inside jokes' (Mayo 42; Campbell 84, 88; Baker 113-114; Owen 165). This irreverence destabilises hierarchies between professional artist, community member and audience and challenges applied drama practices that attempt to provide answers and solutions to those perceived to be in need. Instead, *Performance and Community* revels in the foibles, failures and achievements of the shared human experience.

Most prescient, McAvinchey notes that 'practitioners working in these contexts need to be mindful of whether or not the people living, working, or attending these institutions recognise them as communities, or if they wish to be identified in *relation to* (emphasis added) it' (3). (Emphasising agency, she goes on to characterise community as an active relationship to an idea, set of principles, or project elevates the tangled notion of community above rigid identity politics and further expands upon what is possible, that each individual may uncover potentials not otherwise explored.) A chapter later, Lois Weaver reinforces this idea, noting that in her work she learned that artists did not want to '*be* someone else, they wanted to *do* something else' (31). Essentially,

the 'community' is created in the creative work itself, not because of an extant placement within a particular geography, socio-economic group, or membership of some kind of club. As individuals in a larger system, the creation of a performance piece allows for a commonality of purpose; (making theatre together is the 'doing of something specific' of which social networks and bonds are formed constituting community) (Kuftinec 64).

Given this idea of optional togetherness, of call and response, it is striking that nearly all of the artists and organisations profiled in the book articulate their work as an 'invitation' marked by neighbourliness and generosity. In the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research,* the authors of 'Social Capital and the Spiral of Silence,' define neighbourliness in terms of the frequency with which people living near each other exchanged or borrowed items, how often individuals visited one another and the frequency with which people assisted with small tasks (Dalisay et al. 327). In this way, neighbourliness is defined by assistance and exchange, evidenced in articles about Magic Me, the Young Vic and Tony Fegan (44; 192; 241). Mojisola Adebayo sums it by re-stating her attitude to participants in her performances: 'I am so glad you're here' (67). In fact, this kind of neighbourliness is imbued in the very form of the book, as a sharing or 'coming together', the profiles of artists nestled alongside each other seem to exchange ideas, help each other out and visit one another. So much so that the reader may glimpse the possibility of one's own membership of this community of practitioners united more by values than geography or a

distinct mode of making.

While acknowledging the strengths of her research, I question McAvinchey's heavy hand in the articles in the book, authoring five of the twelve essays in addition to the introduction. In an edited volume, the (over)presence of McAvinchey's voice evidences her knowledge and enthusiasm for the topic at hand, but limits a paradoxically broadly-titled book that is already restricted to mostly London-based artists. Though she is prolific, for some reason she does not conclude the book; instead it ends rather abruptly with an interview with Paul Heritage. In his final paragraph, he references Lois Weaver, the interviewee of Chapter One and mutual collaborator of McAvinchey, signalling their shared membership in the applied performance field – neighbours in the same small community. Nonetheless, this is not much by way of an ending and, bewildered, I yearned for a conclusion. With such a diverse collection covering a wide swath of ground, the lack of a conclusion seems a missed opportunity to reflect on the progressive insights developed throughout the text and to envisage a generative future of this approach to performance.

This book gestures towards an understanding and celebrating the oeuvre of makers who are diligently working, if only hopefully and pre-figuratively, at making the world a better place. It certainly achieves its professed aims of contributing to the debate of performance in the context of community, social value and aesthetics, privileging the voices of practitioners in this case. Both pragmatic and idealistic, it captures the complexity of this kind of work. Ultimately, *Performance and Community* assumes a hopeful position, acting

as an inquiry into possibilities, predicated on principles of 'intimacy, care, equity, and justice' (McAvinchey 20).

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Creating Musical Theatre: Conversations with Broadway Directors and Choreographers **by Lyn Cramer**

London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013, 283 pp. (softback)

By Adam Rush

Despite the slow development of musical theatre studies, something Dan Rebellato and Dominic Symonds insist we should no longer lament, there still remains little scholarship detailing, and even less analysing, the creation of commercial musical theatre (3). Through twelve disparate interviews with

leading directors and choreographers, Lyn Cramer's *Creating Musical Theatre* goes some way to fill this gap. Providing a platform for a select group of participants (whom she suggests represent the 'industry') to voice their opinions on their work, Cramer facilitates discussions that provide timely insight into the world of musical theatre practice. By turning the spotlight on the creative teams behind *Mamma Mia!* (1999) and *The Producers* (2001), amongst others, Cramer's interviews provide accessible and stimulating accounts of each participant's career and creative style. The book effectively highlights that although musical theatre may appear brash, thrilling and fun, there are harsh realities underlying the industry. The discussions that it offers provide fascinating insights into the general issues of the industry, such as training and work ethic, as well as providing specific accounts of song development, casting calls and opening nights. In many ways, this book is a charming and informative chat in paperback and is therefore likely to appeal to a variety of readers: researchers, performers, aspiring directors and choreographers, in addition to the general theatregoer.

However, the book is not without its problems. Significantly, the critical frame and intention of *Creating Musical Theatre* is unclear. Consequently, though Cramer's interviews provide detailed 'insight into how these artists work', this information is not developed into a particular argument or surmised to formulate a reflexive conclusion on the broader socio-economic and cultural issues of the industry. As a result, this text may be critically limited and better understood as a work of transmission, rather than analysis.

This approach is not necessarily problematic but, even regarded in this way, *Creating Musical Theatre* still presents difficulties for the reader. Each chapter begins with a headshot and brief biography of each interviewee, yet Cramer does not specify a date or location of the conversation. This lack of key information means that the reader must decipher a time and production framework from the hints provided throughout the interviews—I frequently found myself searching for the dates of certain productions online. This is an eventuality that clearly hinders *Creating Musical Theatre*'s efficiency as a research tool. There is also the risk that, in not contextualising the interviews, each participant's comments are granted a timeless quality. This gives rise to the problematic possibility that responses may be read as 'facts' that may be universally applied, rather than a fluid opinion given in response to a particular question produced in a particular context. For instance, those researching *The Book of Mormon* will find the interview with director and choreographer Casey Nicholaw enlightening and stimulating. Yet Nicholaw was not working on *that* musical when he spoke to Cramer. The failure to illuminate this contextual fact means that the particularity of his opinions, in this instance, may be wrongly applied across the entirety of his career - especially to his most famous piece - when cited in the work of future researchers.

Additionally, the thematic framework of this book presents challenges throughout. It is obvious that Cramer has rigorously selected her participants, edited and ordered their interviews, in addition to guiding her respondents towards certain topics throughout the interviews. Similar to the lack

of a critical frame, however, this labour, and the reasoning behind it, goes unacknowledged and unexplained. As such, even if we accept Cramer as an interesting but challenging transmitter, *Creating Musical Theatre* ultimately leaves a central question frustratingly unanswered: why is she transmitting this information and for what purpose?

While I do not wish to present a scathing review, the preceding issues with *Creating Musical Theatre* ultimately cause me to question its academic utility. Further, Cramer's work leads me to wonder whether an academic publication was the most appropriate form for this research to take. The prolonged scrutiny of academic publishing certainly has its benefits but, when interviews are being transcribed without critical follow up, I wonder if such rigor is necessary? As a comparative example, *Broadway.com's YouTube* series, 'Show People with Paul Wontorek', features interviews with performers and creatives about their current work, in a relaxed and light-hearted manner. Although not designed for an educational purpose, Wontorek presents much of the same insight as Cramer without the lengthy publication processes. His interviews are filmed and posted in a matter of days and provide an immediate snapshot of New York's theatre industry, effectively plotting its evolution over time. Many individuals have been interviewed on repeat occasions, thus their opinions remain fluid and determined by their current role. This is not to suggest that Cramer's research should not have been undertaken, I simply wonder whether the academic transcription of these interviews, with little critical consideration, was the most appropriate outcome for her laudable

efforts. As each chapter finished, I was left wondering what next? How do these interviews alter or construct our perception of contemporary musical theatre making? How might these interviews provide a deeper understanding of an industry that is often only visible within a proscenium arch? Ultimately, while the breadth and general appeal of *Creating Musical Theatre* render it an interesting source, its lack of framing and clear intention prevent it from developing further critical utility within this field of study.

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