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Performing Opposition: Modern Theater and the Scandalized Audience.

Westpoint, Connecticut, Praeger (2003). ISBN 0-275-98056-1 (hbk), pp. xviii + 228

□ Kattwinkel, Susan:

Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion and Performance.

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Reviews by Martin Barker

Studies of theatre audiences are hardly ten a penny. To discover these two substantial books – albeit at very expensive prices ($69.95 each) – was quite a significant find for me. To discover, more than this, that these are important contributions and that, in one case (at least in my view), we have here a major new contribution, made the discovery rather special.

It is important, I think, to approach these books in the awareness that they come from quite particular traditions. Unlike the majority of work on audiences which is influenced in one way or another by the difficult encounter between cultural studies and the social sciences, these two books begin elsewhere. Blackadder's study derives from a nexus between a discipline of historical scholarship, and a tradition in which theatre is seen, at least potentially, as a site of radical cultural intervention. Out of these comes its central question is: what happened at particular historical moments when radical forms of theatre encountered resistant audiences? Kattwinkel's collection combines some examples of this, with essays deriving from the very different tradition of practice-as-research. In these, the central question seems to be: how do, and how should, radical performances try to break the boundary between actors and audiences? Hardly present, and noticeable (at least to me) by their absence, are any of the persistent interests and influences of so many media audience studies: the problems of 'quality', of manipulation, of 'high' vs 'low' culture, various issues of method and conceptualisation (for example, issues of interpretation, our relations to objects of study, and so on).

Neil Blackadder's is, to me, a marvellous book. It is a study of a series of episodes between 1890-1930, in which particular plays in different countries roused passionate antagonisms. There are five case-studies of exceptional richness: of the premiere of Gerhardt Hauptmann's *Before Sunrise* in 1890; of Parisian audiences' first encounters with Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in 1896; of the week of protests which greeted J M Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* in 1906 Dublin; of a subsequent round of protests and confrontations which greeted Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926, but in

the very different context of post-partition Ireland; and finally of the sequence of provocations of, and to, Bertolt Brecht's plays in Germany between 1922-32.

Blackadder has gone back with great thoroughness through all the available sources for each of the confrontations, diaries, letters, newspapers, court records, and memoirs. Precisely because these were such controversial occasions, he is able to gather a substantial record of the complexity of audience responses. He not only weighs the sources against each other, he notes within them the operation of interested viewpoints, and how through their very languages we can see the operation of a system of *performances by audiences*. Following the events along a day by day development, he notes how different groups evidently prepared for the events, took part, and thought about it all afterwards. Rumours circulated about a likely provocation, and interest groups readied for the encounter. Afterwards, each had good reason to record their reasons and responses, as did many others less directly involved. But also, then, on an hour by hour basis he reconstructs, carefully but as fully as he is able, how audiences responded to different parts and moments within the plays. Sometimes surprised by what they encountered, even the most intentionally hostile audiences could fall silent, became engrossed – only again to 'find' the parts they had come expecting to hate. Just as sheer narrative of these encounters, this is marvellous stuff.

But at a wider level, this book recommends itself as a powerful new addition to the small corpus of books which seek to recover a history of audiences, and audienceing. Blackadder's book sits well alongside Robert Darnton's essays on the history of reading (in, for instance, his *The Great Cat Massacre*) and Richard Butsch's *The Making of American Audiences*. It is a qualitative leap beyond the dull, theory-driven teleology of Abercrombie and Longhurst's *Audiences*, which manages to make real history irrelevant and unnecessary. It is decidedly better, in my view, than the bitter, confrontational *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, by Jonathan Rose – an important book, but marred by its overwhelming will to dislike cultural studies work on popular media. What Blackadder offers, uniquely as I read it, is an exemplification of how we may combine several usually separate strands and, through the combination, effect a new mode of inquiry.

Let me illustrate this strong claim through one of his case-studies. In his study of Dubliners' reactions to O'Casey's play – a case which has of course been studied before in a range of ways – Blackadder interweaves a number of strands. He looks, first, at the rise of the Abbey Theatre, and its ambiguous relations to Irish nationalism; he also takes account of the theatre's architecture and internal design, and its administration of its audiences. He explores the tensions within that nationalism between urban rural sentimentalist, Catholic moralist, and urban socialist strains. He then looks at the specific intentions of O'Casey, and at the way these were embodied in *Plough*. He looks at the key protestors, notably Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, widow of one of those shot by the British after the 1916 Easter Rising. What emerges from this encounter is a way of posing a question which is not in itself new, but now becomes manageable and

researchable. What social processes go on among audiences as they watch a play? How do prior reputation, rumour, and expectation inform the encounter between text/production and the variously distributed audiences who attend? But also, how does the *'text' itself* as a complex cultural embodiment play into these contexts? Blackadder is willing to propose judgements: having explored in great detail Sheehy-Skeffington's arguments, he doesn't forebear to pass the judgement that, sadly, her railing against O'Casey put her on the side of that nationalism which her husband had refused to be part of. This is all subtly argued, and I came away from each case-study, and each set of conclusions, with a strong sense of understanding the relations of whole and parts much more deeply.

So, through the manner of his interweaving, he in effect arrives at the question: how, through these, do audiences themselves become performers? Not 'performers' in some rhetorical, Butlerian sense ('we are all performing a self all the time') but in very concrete senses – as when audiences *call out responses* to provocative lines in a play; as when they *engage in debate with fellow members* so that interpretations to the play are immediately given a context; even as when they *penetrate the space of the actors*, and interact with them (once or twice, violently). Even, he allows us to see some of the ways in which *writer, director and actors* become audiences to their own performances. When actress Ria Mooney was urged by the other actresses not to take on the role of prostitute in *Plough*, the grounds were not simply that she might thus damage her own career, but that she must see that she would thus become tainted with 'fallen womanhood'. And when, at the most troubled performance of the play, one actor appealed to the audience not to blame the cast, only O'Casey, other actors brought the curtain down in order to separate themselves from this 'betrayal'. The meanings of the term 'audience' here laminate into a series of researchable layers.

In a small way Blackadder's book disappointed me at the point where it attempts to generalise – and the reasons are germane to this Journal. Blackadder depends rather heavily on Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences*, a book which belatedly seized the Althusserian/theoreticist phase of cultural studies' interest in audiences and applied them to the *idea* of theatre audiences. Blackadder's reliance on this does not, in my view, much hinder him, but neither does it advance his investigation very much (while Susan Kattwinkel's acknowledgement in her Introduction that Bennett 'is virtually omnipresent' (p. xii) may tell a different story). I would hope that this Journal can begin to change the somewhat separation of audience research traditions that lies at back of this. But here I simply encourage *Participation*'s readers to enjoy, and learn from, this truly excellent book.

Kattwinkel's is a very different kind of book. A few essays aside (for example, Judith Fisher's essay on the ways in which audiences participated in the London theatre of the eighteenth century, and how factors such as play form, and theatre design contributed to an emergent 'passivity'; and Dawn Lewcock's study of pantomime audiences, which constructs a historical narrative of the rise of this most English form of theatre, and its

sedimentation of a special relation with its audience which, she argues, offer a sense of security and familiarity – a kind of 'safe interactionism'), most of the writings are exercises in the idea of radical performance. Often richly descriptive, they provide accounts of the demands made on audiences by particular projects in modern performance (both theatre and dance). Many proclaim themselves to be 'postmodernist' in orientation.

The range is wide. Apart from those I will discuss directly in a moment, there are essays on the radical magicians Penn and Teller (by Kattwinkel herself); on conceptions of the audience in Indian dance theory (Uttara Asha Cooralawala); on audience performances on-line (Nina LeNoir); and on the history of feminist performance (Judith Sebesta). For all the range and the differences, there are, it seemed to me, some commonalities – two, in particular. So, for example, Joshua Abrams recounts his experience of attending a performance of the German postmodern dance troupe Compagnie Felix Ruckert, in which members of the audience pay to be taken into a private space and danced to. The point of this, for him, is the political confrontation it invokes in him:

[M]y first time I was extremely unsure of the politics of the situation and found myself suddenly feeling very uncomfortable. I was purchasing a private dance – implications of prostitution, dime-dance halls, and sleazy 'gentlemen's clubs' call propriety into question. Having obtained the badge for a female dancer, I began to question whether I had chosen her based on my heterosexuality, yet the politics of the situation thrust any thought or question of desire from my mind. (p.5)

This profoundly personalised kind of writing was both interesting, and to me irritating. I couldn't avoid the feeling that under the guise of insisting on the impossibility of impartial description, one favoured *kind* of response was being privileged and indulged. It is very evident that the only worthwhile kind of 'audienceing' is active, reflexive, self-critical. And that is because this is in an important sense a *practitioners' manual*. The 'we' of the book is a community of committed performers. One author, Katherine Adamenko, proclaims this: 'We are at a critical time in performance studies where we need to view postmodern performance outside of the very same boundaries from which it is itself escaping. […] Not only do we need to continue to develop and explore new performance strategies, but we also need to shift our focus to what I like to call Reaction Tactics, to directly redefine the role of the audience member as a postmodern spectator' (p.15). The nearest analogy I can think of, weirdly, is an advertising agency's 'pitch' on how to capture product audiences. The political purpose is of course quite opposite; the sense of the 'audience' as a *task*, as a *singular* interestingly, and as a *problem to be managed*, is effectively identical.

Two problems inhere in the book's argument, from my perspective. The first is a conflation of passivity with domination, and activity with equality. In a very interesting essay reviewing the history of the Washington DC radical theatre group Living Stage, Susan Haedicke tracks its shifting fortune from critical acclaim to a point where its theatrical style was judged 'old' – and how it sought to come back from this. She recounts recent work by Living Stage in one of Washington's prisons, in which inmates

were encouraged to propose endings to a play about a mother and addictive daughter. After one moving anecdote of a woman inscribing hope into a proposed ending, Haedicke writes: 'The concept of participation used here rejects the traditional theatrical relationship of passive spectator (object) and active actor (subject) – an asymmetrical power dynamic – in favor of a more equal subject/object relationship where spectator becomes actor and so works alongside the professional actor to determine the theatrical event' (p.74). The implied damnation of 'traditional theatre' would easily extend to most other media and cultural forms and practices. The implicit model is pure, unconsidered Frankfurtism, and not very 'postmodern' at all ...

What is strange in these essays is to reflect on the almost impossibility of raising ordinary questions of *pleasure*. Is it appropriate to *enjoy or not enjoy* these performances? Is it reasonable of me to respond just to *reading about* audience members being made to 'dance with performers', and thus confront something about themselves and their relations with others, to feel that I want to stay away from such a cabal? These feel like insiders' accounts of attending the performances of friends and colleagues.

In some ways these two books are very alike, in others they are as apart as chalk and cheese. In an Afterword to his case-studies, Blackadder perhaps reveals how this can be. Discussing the significance of his own findings that the period he studied marks a fundamental shift towards audience 'passivity', he displays a studied ambivalence towards this. He sets up a contrast between Baz Kershaw's hard-line sense of defeat at the collapse of real audience activity, and its substitution by simple 'applause', and Susan Bennett's (post-Stuart Hall) acceptance that the audience, however passive, is really 'active':

> To some extent, the two critics arrive at such different conclusions because they adopt such different approaches: where Bennett writes about how audiences *in theory* receive the non-traditional theater she celebrates, Kershaw draws conclusions from evidence of *actual* audience response. My own consideration of theater scandals between the 1880s and the 1930s leave me sharing some of Kershaw's nostalgia for a time when theater spectators participated more actively in performance, yet suspecting that the kind of undemonstrative response Bennett describes might be more productive. (p.189)

It is in the space of such ambivalences that more good research may grow. Both these books are valuable additions to our knowledge and understanding of theatre audiences. But right now I believe we may learn more from Blackadder's non-committal position than from the already-over-committed position displayed by most of Kattwinkel's contributors. In particular, just as a researcher, I simply doubt very much Kattwinkel's prefatory claim that 'The study of theatrical forms employing audience participation is … more difficult than the study of more sedentary forms' (p.xi). I would argue that the only likely truth in that is that, in relation to more 'participatory' forms the researchers often have greater personal investment in the outcomes of any research – and that *is* a difficulty.

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