

Review

Kirsty Sedgman, *Locating the Audience: How People Found Value in National Theatre Wales* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2016). ISBN-10: 1783205717. £70.00 hc.

Sedgman's first monograph is an exceptionally valuable piece of work. It represents a major contribution to our understanding of how audiences for contemporary theatre and performance evaluate the work they experience through detailed and insightful analysis of audience responses to two productions from National Theatre Wales' first season: *For Mountain, Sea & Sand* (June/July 2010) and *The Persians* (August 2010). It asks how different audience members envisage the purpose and value of theatre; whether the fact that these two events were produced by a Welsh national theatre was considered important by the people who saw them; what criteria audiences were using to form an opinion on the productions; and how an individual audience member's relationship to the location in which these shows took place might inflect their assessment of it.

Sedgman makes excellent use of existing publications on audiences and spectatorship to frame her answers to these questions, evoking names that will be familiar to many (Jacques Rancière, Martin Barker, Deleuze and Guattari) as well as drawing on studies which may well be new to theatre studies scholars (such as Claudio Benzecry's ethnographic study of opera audiences, Frank Biocca's work on mass communication theory, or David Osa Amadasun's dissection of how social disadvantage inflects the experience of attending mainstream art galleries). She combines command of the latest scholarship in this field with a rich collection of data. The questionnaires that she invited audience members to complete after the performances of *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* attracted 196 responses – over 30% of the total possible audience; and 211 questionnaires were returned for *The Persians* – over 20%. Sedgman then undertook follow-up interviews with 22 of the respondents. She subjects the comments and observations made by these audience members to both qualitative and quantitative analysis, enabling her to identify trends and tendencies with confidence whilst also leaving space for consideration of telling phrases and individual experiences.

Her analysis of this material provides fascinating insights. It demonstrates how some audience members struggle to 'own' their response to a performance, as they adopt discursive strategies which function to delegitimise their reactions where they perceive that

they lack the expertise on which to base an informed opinion. It explores the way in which critique is often informed by an 'imagined alternative': a haunting vision of what a production should or could have been in the eyes of those audience members who are partially or wholly disappointed by a performance. It also provides an important and much needed refutation of the enduring belief that audiences cannot be both immersed in a performance and critically engaged at the same time.

One of the most significant and impressive aspects of this book is its methodological and ethical scrupulousness. Sedgman guides her reader through the methodological choices made (as well as those imposed upon her) with meticulous care. Indeed, the book is admirably explicit about the limitations of its reach and the claims that it is able to make. But it is far too modest about its achievements. Sedgman shows that it is possible to find meaning in a mass of responses, and to combine different forms of analysis without sacrificing nuance. We get tables and percentages here, but also evocative personal recollections of these ephemeral events: reflections on the significance of a rainbow seen in the sky above the Brecon Beacons where *The Persians* was performed; sheets hung out to dry on gorse bushes; performers on Barmouth beach waving to the audience, long after they had moved on.

The research is also impressive because it is so unusual. As Sedgman acknowledges, she occupies scholarly space which was all but empty when she began the research project that *Locating the Audience* documents: that of the theatre scholar using audience research methodologies drawn from cultural studies. Happily, there are now more researchers working in this field, yet substantial studies in theatre and performance studies which explore audience response by actually asking audience members for their thoughts and opinions are still few and far between. The book's telling preface, provided by the Artistic Director of National Theatre Wales, John E. McGrath, suggests why this may be the case. He acknowledges that he was sceptical about the project proposed by Sedgman at first, concerned that the introduction of an external element, such as a questionnaire, into the mix might 'feel like a bucket of judgemental cold water thrown on a flickering creative fire' (vii). However – fortunately for us – he reports that he was won over by his realisation that they shared a conviction that 'audience matters', and 'gave the go ahead for Kirsty's research on the basis that she "made herself useful and didn't get in the way"' (vii). He concludes his tribute to her work by emphasising her respect for all members of the audience, and the way in which she offers a 'a gentle, generous teasing out of audience members' diverse responses to the work' (viii).

Some indication of the challenges of this project become apparent in Sedgman's understated methodological appendix, in which she outlines what she sees as the shortcomings of the approach she adopted. The company's stipulation that she could carry out her research as long as she acted as steward, and the directors' refusal to allow her to distribute any information about her research to audiences before the performances inevitably left room for confusion about the nature of her relationship to the company – a situation which Sedgman acknowledges was not ideal. It is essential to note that there is

absolutely no hint of criticism in Sedgman's account of what she was and was not able to do. Indeed, she offers fulsome thanks to all of the practitioners – and audience members – involved. Yet the situation she describes is curious. Theatre scholars such as Sedgman are eager to speak to audiences; and audiences, it seems, are often keen to talk to us. But what of the theatre companies whose work is the subject of these conversations? Are researchers to be tolerated only if we make ourselves useful? Sedgman concludes her work with a staunch rejection of such instrumentalism. But I suspect that there is still much work to be done to convince some theatre makers that there is value in audience research which asks and explores questions beyond the merely 'useful'.

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