

Review: Kelsey Jacobson, *Real-ish: Audiences, Feeling, and the Production of Realness in Contemporary Performance*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023.

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As we continually slide down the track towards an era of post-truth/fact/real within the Global North, Kelsey Jacobson's monograph *Real-ish* builds upon the foundations laid by a range of academics within theatre studies and beyond (including Forsyth and Megson, 2009; Funk, Groß and Huber, 2012; Martin, 2013; Schulze, 2017) to examine the importance of the real in our contemporary culture. Quickly moving past both modernist attempts towards 'authentic' realism within performance and a postmodernist rejection of concepts such as truth and the real altogether, Jacobson defines a contemporary understanding of real-ness that is based on, within, and through an audience member's *feelings*. Her central argument is that what is perceived as 'the real' within contemporary culture is derived from the viewer's felt experience rather than ostensible truth or factual authenticity. In this sense, her book joins a developing interdisciplinary awareness that (a strive towards or an interest in) authenticity has become somewhat paradoxically central to a twenty-first century culture steeped in anti-realism and post-truth – has even 'become a fundamental value orienting consumers' taste in late modern capitalism' (Gerosa, 2024). *Real-ish*, therefore, offers a novel appreciation of how an audience's understanding of what *feels* real can help us understand the implications and importance of 'real-ish-ness' within wider culture.

For Jacobson, emotion and affect have become the new barometers of realness (xiii) and she links this explicitly to our own affective response to the 'perceptual realness of theatrical affect' (13); the bodily responses we have to what occurs onstage – 'racing heart, teary eyes, goosebumps or even boredom-induced sleep' (Ibid) – are, as Jacobson points out, 'real' responses to a somewhat 'unreal' experience. Within this, she embraces the paradoxical positioning of theatre as an inherently inauthentic medium that both strives towards authenticity and somehow – sometimes – *feels* real. How real? About '74% real' (3) is an audience member's at one honest and ironic response to Jacobson's enquiry after a performance by one of her case studies, and it is Jacobson's following definition of such felt

almost-real-ness as the ‘real-ish’ that evidences that she is not afraid of the contradictory, slippery, indefinable nature of the ‘real’ within a post-postmodern cultural framework.

In this sense, whilst Jacobson focuses on the ‘real’ within contemporary theatre, her book also helps examine one of the most urgent, wider cultural and political questions of our time; what, if anything, can be understood as *real* anymore? In part, this is because the study builds a thesis initially from outside of performance studies; starting, of all places, an episode of *The Colbert Report* in 2005, in which comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term ‘truthiness’ in order to, as parody of certain right-wing news commentators, express a form of unchanging ‘truth’ understood by particular voters that was derived predominantly from gut-feeling rather than empirical fact. From here, Jacobson takes us through an illuminating unpacking of the concept of the ‘real’ within culture – and specifically contemporary performance – intertwining her own fascination with the ‘real’ within recent theatrical practice and, supported by a plethora of rigorous first-hand audience research, succinctly traversing the ever-muddying positionality of such concepts within contemporaneous political and cultural discourse. To do this, *Real-ish* draws on a diverse range of case studies, largely from within the Canadian theatre landscape. Following Chapter One’s foundational theoretical framework, Chapter Two focuses on documentary theatre – offering a nuanced unpacking of the paradoxical in/authentic, non/fictional structure of Alberta-based Downstage Theatre Company’s *Good Fences* (2012) that explores the ever shifting notion of what is ‘real’ in their meta-theatrical performances. Chapter Three then looks towards Toronto company Tarragon Theatre’s production of the Berlin-based Schaubühne’s *An Enemy of the People* (2015) in order to unpack the complicated ‘real-ish-ness’ of participation within a political performance when an audience are invited to ‘perform’ themselves. Chapter Four focuses on historical re-enactment within site-specific performance, and the slippery interrelatedness between nostalgia and authenticity central to such, through a focus on Newfoundland-based Rising Tide Theatre’s annual *Trinity Pageant* (1993-present). Chapters Five and Six then turn towards the ‘real-ish-ness’ experienced within immersive theatre, in part juxtaposing the authenticity of an audience’s experiencing of any of the maximalist interactive set pieces of Britain’s foremost immersive company Punchdrunk and other forms of ‘real’ immersion felt by participants in Toronto-based theatre company Outside The March’s minimalist *TomorrowLove™* (2016), to argue that an audience’s understanding of ‘real’ engagement does not necessarily come from interaction with an environment, but with other people.

Part of the strength of this volume is that the central argument is built upon a wealth of audience research initially conducted as part of Jacobson’s doctorate, meaning that her understanding of ‘real-ish-ness’ as based in felt experience is not only supported by her *own* understanding and experiencing of each of the theatrical case studies offered throughout this volume, but from a wide-ranging archive of interviews with audience members about *their* understanding and experiencing of such. Therefore, whilst Jacobson’s focus on forms such as documentary theatre, immersive theatre and participatory theatre does, at points, re-tread similar ground covered by previous scholars concerned with the authentic in contemporary

theatrical practice (Martin, 2013; Schulze, 2017), her analysis of the ‘real-ish-ness’ of such performance strategies being based upon qualitative data obtained from extensive interviews with audience members and theatre makers offers a novel, grounded, and well-supported understanding of how audience members *feel* – and therefore experience – ‘real-ish-ness’ through such strategies.

In her unpacking of the paradoxical realities within *Good Fences* (a particular highlight), Jacobson identifies what she terms an *affective* real; a sense of real-ness that ‘feels real but is paradoxically unresolved, fragmentary, unstable and entirely subjective’ (31), arguing that the staging of ‘multiplicity, instability, and multiple truths, can actually come to produce a strong sense of felt realness for audiences’ (Ibid). I am left questioning how Jacobson’s assessment of this affective real translates to our ever increasingly digitalised culture and the field of digital/augmented performance. Following advancements in digital theatre following the pandemic, at the time of writing, Apple’s infamous Vision Pro Augmented Reality (AR) headset has just been released and, despite my own reticence towards this particular product, it illustrates how it is becoming ever more evident that AR will have an increasing role to play in our cultural consumption of, experience of, and performance of ‘reality’. In this sense, though, whilst the definable ‘real’ becomes ever-harder to define, Jacobson’s book serves to highlight how an audience’s experiencing of *felt* authenticity – even through paradoxically unstable, subjective and unresolved forms – leads to an understanding of realness as an embodied *feeling* over definable fact. It is by turning to theatre, and understanding how performance structures serve to solidify this feeling, by which we can understand how contemporary realness – in an increasing culture of unreality – is created, the knowledge of which, as Jacobson herself explains, has ‘important implications for the production of *political* belief structures in the [as she somewhat ironically labels it] *real-world*’ (31 – emphasis my own).

Biographical Note

Tom Drayton is a Senior Lecturer in Acting, Performance and Directing at The University of East London, UK. His research interests focus on metamodern cultural forms, theatre of the millennial generation, and contemporary political performance. Tom’s writing has been published in *Performance Philosophy*, the *European Journal of Theatre & Performance* and *ArtsPraxis*, and he is the author of *Metamodernism in Contemporary British Theatre: A Politics of Hope/lessness* (Bloomsbury, 2024).

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