Book Reviews

Carl Lavery, ed. *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?* Abingdon: Routledge, 2018, xiv + 118 pp., £115 (hardback).

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2020-0025>

Across different publications, Carl Lavery has shown a consistent commitment to “greening” theatre discourses, bringing nature, the environment, and climate crisis into dialogues (in the sense of both critical encounters and creative exchanges happening between writer and reader, or between different academics/practitioners within an edited volume) that concern drama, theatre, and performance in their various iterations and broad parameters in ways that are remarkable. Lavery’s work is always important because of how aptly it combines the experiential with the critical, engaging with issues of perception in a way that is epistemologically sound without sacrificing the value of the first-hand account. This principle shines through as a methodology across his previous work, especially in Roberta Mock’s edited volume *Walking, Writing & Performance* and in Claire Hind and Clare Qualmann’s edited collection *Ways to Wander*. It also clearly informs *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?* which began, as those who follow the field will know, and as Lavery clarifies, as essays originally published in 2016 in a volume of *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*. This was indeed an important intervention in the field at the time, and it is particularly welcome to see the volume in the form of a hardcover publication with Routledge now, as conversations concerning our agency in environmental matters and particularly vis-à-vis climate emergency are gaining traction in theatre studies and, of course, also in everyday discourses in the social and political domains.

The volume features an introduction authored by Lavery, who has also written one of the essays, plus five more essays by Karen Christopher and Sophie Grodin, Minty Donald, Baz Kershaw, Wallace Heim, and Deirdre Heddon. In his thoughtfully written opening section, Lavery is very mindful of the challenges involved in the claim that scholarship concerning theatre and ecology can deliver actual change. Lavery strikes me as pragmatic and sincere, as much as he comes across as profoundly engaged in the issue – and in my view this is very much where we ought to be with our claims. So, when Lavery proposes that “it is telling that the essays [. . .] make no great claims for theatre and performance’s efficacy; on the contrary, they are at pains to show that theatre’s doing [. . .] is always to some extent an ‘undoing,’ a coming to terms with weakness and inadequacy” (5),

he sets the tone for this volume in a way that is entirely on point. I also greatly value Lavery's follow-up statement, which is, of course, true of theatre and performance more broadly, but certainly so of theatre and performance that specifically seek to deliver an environmental interjection: "As an art of weakness, theatre's role is not to produce the real, it is to corrode it, to make the world problematic, multiple and complex" (5). Lavery also points out the importance of liveness and performativity, assessing how ecologically-geared theatre discourses tend to work and what they have the capacity to deliver. Generally, I would invite readers to engage with the statements that Lavery makes in this part of the book, because they impress me as especially lucid and important in our ongoing discourses, recognising both the necessary limitations and the unique opportunities of theatre as a medium.

The first essay by Christopher and Grodin, "On Creating a Climate of Attention: The Composition of Our Work," examines, as the editor notes, "an area of performance practice that standard models of ecocriticism and ecodramaturgy have yet to pay much attention to: namely, the ecological sensibility that informs the rehearsal and compositional processes of devised performance" (9). Christopher, who has a substantial background with Goat Island (a group at the forefront of the performance and ecology discourse), and Grodin, who has collaborated with Christopher, discuss the practice of the company Haranczak/Navarre, developing an argument that offers nuance to the dialogues of the volume as it considers the ecologies of relationality. The process of the ecologies of relationality informs how individuals enter creation and exchange with one another in performance-making contexts, but also how the attentiveness, sincerity, and time investment of this working method with a view to making theatre is in itself an embodied vehicle for establishing an intersubjective mode of connection with the world beyond the space of rehearsal – *interdependence* is a term that comes up, I find, quite aptly (11). *Ecology*, then, becomes amplified as a term to denote a richer mode of seeking and maintaining a connection to that beyond the self – whether human or nonhuman. The company works that are discussed as part of the conversation (the essay could also be described as epistolary, in a sense, embodying its very own exchange process as it documents it) are *Control Signal* (2013) and *miles & miles* (2016).

Donald, whose essay "The Performance 'Apparatus': Performance and Its Documentation as Ecological Practice" suitably follows, offers readers space for the helpful continuation of such discussions. It also brings us even more specifically into the consideration of how the ecologies embedded in the interactions of performance with the elements – here, water – and the maker's and spectator's agency intersect. In addition to the ecology of performance in senses both broad and specific, this essay will also be particularly useful to those concerned with the

ephemerality and documentation of creative practice, especially when agents involved – see, here, the water – bring their own inescapable transience. In a context where conversations around the environment are still too often human-centric, Donald's text, reflecting on her project *Guddling About* (2013), offers a welcome disruption to suggest that the "unruliness of the universe" (23) is a factor that we must always be cognizant of. Referencing Lone Twin's "river actions," Donald proposes that her project "shares Lone Twin's desire to explore human-environment interdependencies through an investigation of the fuzzy boundaries of human-water interrelativity" (31), while engaging with Karen Barad's concept of the "apparatus" so as "to question presumptions that bodies, subjects and objects pre-exist and, therefore, that they can mingle" (31).

Following Donald, Kershaw's "Projecting Climate Scenarios, Landscaping Nature and Knowing Performance: On Becoming Performed by Ecology" builds on the dialogue (and, of course, on Kershaw's own considerable work on ecology and performance). Kershaw's interdisciplinary essay is concerned both with tracing the current environmental crisis and with addressing the hindrances of understanding, of acceptance, and of action when it comes to this issue. Kershaw considers the challenges that lie in bringing this discourse – beyond fearmongering – to the layperson in a way that will deliver a genuine understanding of how crucial, and dramatic, our current moment is and why it cannot be contextualised on the basis of anything that we might describe as "normal" environmental shifts through time. In other words, Kershaw is dealing with the twin crises of recognition and of engagement – we might argue, the concern at the very heart of environmentally alert performance. Kershaw's examples are *Green Shade* (2004), *The Iron Ship* (2000), and *A Meadow Meander* (2011) – as with previous examples in the volume, the point is not eminence, but, rather, locality, immediacy, and community.

Heim's "Theatre, Conflict and Nature" in a way treads on similar principles but, at the same time, brings us closer to the text by considering canonical examples (Sophocles's *Antigone*, Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, 1882) and, among other concerns, how their repositioning against audiences through time serves as reminder of the potency and poignancy of conflict. The very semantic and social nuance of the term emerges as a primary consideration and framing device – a term given to difficulty, but also possibility. As Heim notes, "[the] intention is not to promote works that show or rehearse scenarios in which conflict is resolved, or even dissected as if by a neutral observation, but to ask of theatre praxis that it understand conflict in ways that problematise efforts for resolution and full disclosure" (64). Similarly, in the ensuing "Theatre and Time Ecology: Deceleration in *Stifters Dinge* and *L'Effet de Serge*," Lavery expands further on discussions on the limitations and possibilities of drama, opening up more specif-

ically to the postdramatic. Lavery delivers an important discussion regarding the extent to which certain forms might be more suited to specific endeavours – and indeed delves into one of the more slippery issues, which is how time, and its perception by a spectator, may be deployed aesthetically and socially to carve out a space where the impact of the event might transcend the weaknesses of the medium, not least in relation to durationality, whether in terms of timeframe or of capturing history in an affective way, challenging sequential linearity and – once more – facile resolution.

The volume closes with Heddon's "Confounding Ecospectations: Disappointment and Hope in the Forest." I agree with Heddon that while affect has been receiving considerable attention in theatre and performance scholarship, it is not necessarily the case that the less desirable manifestations of affect – namely disappointment – have received equal attention. Disappointment, of course, has as weighty an impact as any positive iterations of affect and as such merits attention; so Heddon's question "What sort of affect, or force, is disappointment?" (96) is an important one, as is her proposition that "If disappointment is figured as the space created between expectation and disconfirmation, then that space in between is the necessary place of hope's reappearance" (96). This seems an appropriate note on which to close a volume which does not claim that performance and ecology intersect at the level of providing the satisfaction of resolution or similarly conclusive emotions. Heddon's case study is *Forest Pitch*, the only work through which Scotland participated in the 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Discussing *Forest Pitch* as Heddon does, Lavery's opening remarks on the weakness of performative representation echo – not least in heightening, as Heddon also clarifies, the role of the spectator; that a work disappoints does not automatically presuppose a failure for the parameters it set for itself, and one state is not to be conflated with the other. It is an intriguing note on which to end, raising the question as to which of our participatory spectatorships may result in disappointment. And is this not an act of optimism and engagement in itself – precisely because it is preceded by anticipation – especially when the cause is as crucial as the environment?

It is a complex line of reasoning, perhaps, but it suits a collection that has not given itself an easy task, nor does it work, despite the detectable through-lines, on laboured accord between the contributors. This is a collection that allows itself space to develop and track thoughts across different canvasses and through some considerable theoretical complexity. But it is its investment in the subject matter, precisely, that does not make it daunting, or introspective, but rather honest, engaging, and a wholly worthwhile contribution.

Works Cited

- Hind, Claire, and Clare Qualmann, ed. *Ways to Wander*. Axminster: Triarchy Press, 2015. Print.
- Mock, Roberta, ed. *Walking, Writing & Performance: Autobiographical Texts by Deirdre Heddon, Carl Lavery and Phil Smith*. Bristol: Intellect, 2009. Print.