REVIEW

***DISOBEDIENT THEATRE: ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO INSPIRE, ANIMATE AND PLAY* BY CHRIS JOHNSTON (2017)**

London: Bloomsbury,

ISBN: 9 7813 5001 4558, 238 pp., A\$18.99

Reviewed by Michael Balfour, Griffith University, Australia

Chris Johnston (1951–2017) was a restless theatre maverick who invented and experimented with form and approach, but always with a commitment to social justice. In prisons, schools and a wide range of communities, he was a forensic listener – critical and probing, but always creative and compassionate. *Disobedient Theatre* is a characteristically thorough book that divides itself between scrutinizing the impulse and spirit of subversive play and providing a hands-on guide that includes games and exercises for like-minded creatives. Johnston seeks to define cultural disobedience as the ‘unbridled spirit of impulsiveness’ (2017: xv), not because he is interested in rephrasing practice into a new movement, but because he is interested in exploring eclectic examples of theatre practice that he sees as fuelled by a concoction of imagination, political passion and creative innovation.

Johnston is careful to distil the unifying features of the practice he is seeking to define: it is more often facilitator led than director led; it often breaks down traditional conventions of form between performer/teacher and audience/participants; and it places radical social and political concerns at its centre. Citing Mouffe, Johnston argues for an art that ‘ferments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate’ (2017: xvi). Given the historical reach of the book, the specifics of the revolutionary cry necessarily change and shift with the times, but Johnston is interested in highlighting the interplay between radical principles and the tactics that follow in order to trace the elements of practice that continue to be relevant, alive and reflexive to the times. One of the distinctive features of the book and the writing is that it is informed by a compelling conceit that

there is a constant battle for culture and that arts practice lies at the heart of the fight. 'Create or be created' is the watch-cry, and it is this concern that lies at the heart of the book.

The book is divided into two parts, 'In the World' and 'In the Room', with the first being a theoretical exploration of ideas and the latter a proposal for games, exercises and practical applications. The first part carefully lays out some principles that might inform disobediences, including well-informed discussions on the nature of defiance, provocation, transgression, de-identification, equality and prefiguration. These primarily theoretical explorations give way to more tactical ideas of animation, adaptation, responsiveness, immediacy and un-timing. Johnston's thesis is not devoutly historical or orthodox; rather, it is playful and fragmentary. In print, as in life, Johnston's intellectual promiscuity is never flippant about the diverse sources and practitioners he tracks down. In one breath, he discusses the pioneering work of Dorothy Heathcote and in another, he connects her ideas to the playfully transcendent Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army.

The practice and examples are fluid and fluent, unified by a rigorous and well-constructed argument that never loses the reader. The book guides us through a familiar history of radical and community-based theatre and arts practice, but frequently retraces and reorients the discussion to the genealogy of the ideas rather than a logical development of practice. The notion of disobedience as a cultural trend is constantly revisited and re-examined.

In the second part, the book provides an adventurous guide to Johnston's restless practical experiments. The book adds to his previous *House of Games* (1998), which alongside Keith Johnstone's *Impro* is one of the best publications on the philosophy and practicalities of facilitator-artists. In *Disobedient Theatre*, Johnston has gone digging for the roots of these complex and performative tricksters' motives. He never lets the reader get away with looking at a game or exercise as an isolated act, carefully unpacking and revealing different possibilities within the exercise to surface and explore. There are some old chestnuts in here for sure, but also some new ideas, capturing at least some of the practical experiments explored in his work.

Johnston was always dismissive of 'applied theatre' as a term, just as he was with other convenient theatre movements. These arguments get raised in the book, because he argues that the labels and 'fields' become a distraction from the work of creating spaces for dangerous ideas. There are times in the book when, in the rush, the ideas stumble over one another, and interesting practices are dealt with fleetingly. The fizzing energy of eclecticism can sometimes be both a strength and a limitation. The extensive interviews with practitioners are interesting, but sometimes quite limited in their exploration of why the practice connects with the central themes. These minor misgivings aside, the book is a fitting testimony to an ARTivist and restless intellectual. It is a book designed to provoke with mischievous ideas, but also with a profound concern for compassionate practice that might make a genuine difference to a world currently so unsure of itself.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Michael Balfour is a multi-award winning university researcher and teacher who is Chair of Applied Theatre in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. His research is concerned with the social applications of theatre. He has worked on

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