Book Reviews

Marissia Fragkou. *Ecologies of Precarity in Twenty-First Century Theatre: Politics, Affect, Responsibility.* London: Bloomsbury, 2019, xi + 233 pp., £67.50 (hardback), £64.80 (PDF ebook).

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Marissia Fragkou's *Ecologies of Precarity in Twenty-First Century Theatre: Politics, Affect, Responsibility* represents a vital contribution to the burgeoning field of research on political theatre in contemporary British drama. In dialogue with recent publications, notably Katharina Pewny's *Das Drama des Prekären* and Mireia Aragay and Martin Middeke's edited collection *Of Precariousness: Vulnerabilities, Responsibilities, Communities in 21st-Century British Drama and Theatre*, Fragkou's study offers a fresh perspective on the issue by opting for a more concrete and contextualised understanding of precarity as "a social ecology," which cuts across a variety of discourses and practices and which, crucially, "foreground[s] the *material* conditions that facilitate and maintain the uneven distribution of vulnerability and management of precarious life" (6; emphasis added). At the heart of the book is an inspiring and passionate belief in theatre's capacity to foster resistance and hope by "reanimat[ing] our understanding of identity and the 'human' and our communal responsibility for the lives of Others against the backdrop of a spiralling uncertainty in the new millennium" (10). Identifying precarity as a powerful "political theatrical trope," Fragkou compellingly argues for "a paradigm shift in viewing the politics of identity in the context of neo-liberalism" (10). To substantiate this claim, she covers a wide range of examples, encompassing work performed both on mainstream stages and in the fringe theatre scene, including traditional text-based drama as well as more experimental forms of performance and theatrical activism, thereby reflecting the significance of precarity as both social phenomenon and progressive dramatic strategy.

While drawing on previous work on the intersections between theatre and precarity, Fragkou's approach decidedly stands out by virtue of its astute theoretical core, which underscores the significance of feminist approaches for an investigation of precarity. Deftly integrating a wide range of theoretical approaches into her argument, Fragkou notably aims to "decouple feminist critical frameworks from an exclusive focus on female practitioners" (186) and instead make them available for a critical analysis of broader concerns. Thus, with reference to Brian Massumi, Judith Butler, Athena Athanasiou, and Sara Ahmed, Fragkou

highlights the role of affect in the theatre of precarity for scrutinising “notions of responsibility, solidarity and care for Others” (184) by appealing to the spectators and their (affective) “response-ability” (Hans-Thies Lehmann) to the plays.

To trace the origins of this affective turn, chapter 1, “Promises of Happiness and Cruel Optimisms: Theatre in the 1990s,” revisits examples from late-twentieth-century drama, which, as Fragkou persuasively argues, can be understood as a “precursor to millennial work” (46). More specifically, the section proposes to read the in-yer-face sensibility and feminist theatre of the decade against the background of the Cool Britannia wave and its narrative of progress and optimism. Thus, Fragkou contends that, while plays like Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and Phyllis Nagy’s *Never Land* (1998) may no longer offer “an explicitly socialist agenda” (22), their political thrust emerges from their “focus on the experiential and the intimate” (22), suggesting that it is through this shift to affect that the theatre attempts to “[reveal] the cracks and failures of narratives of optimism and lures of security and stability brought about by a neo-liberal capitalist bonanza” (18). Fragkou shows that, for this purpose, the plays deliberately leave former aesthetic approaches commonly associated with left-wing drama behind to adopt more innovative forms as an expression of their radical agenda, as her conclusive discussion of Caryl Churchill’s *The Skriker* (1994) illustrates. Hence, rather than rejecting the political investment of these plays, Fragkou makes a convincing case for “an *intimate politics* or *politics of intimacy* which [. . .] recalibrates identity through a sharp focus on vulnerability and relationality” (23) – an argument which resonates throughout the book.

In many ways, chapter 2, “Children and Young People at Risk,” continues the debate initiated in chapter 1 by focusing more explicitly on the child as a powerful trope with complex connotations of both hope and anxiety in 21st-century British drama, examining how “the precarious child becomes a crucible of crisis and precarity in theatrical representation” (50). Significantly, Fragkou lays bare that it is above all in plays by male authors that the figure of the child represents a recurrent motif and also points to its potentially conservative implications when she identifies “a notable absence of contemporary theatre work that represents alternative modes of parenting that extend beyond heteronormative frameworks,” with a particularly conspicuous lack of engagement not only with “female children and teenagers” (76), but also with young people from ethnically diverse communities. Mike Bartlett’s *My Child* (2007) is illustrative of this conflation of the crisis of the child with a crisis of masculinity against the background of neoliberal narratives of bourgeois normality. Underscoring its function as an emblem of optimism, the figure of the child is often set against a dystopian background, from which it emerges as a metaphor of resilience and survival. At the same time, however, Fragkou argues with reference to Dennis Kelly’s *Debris* (2003) and Philip

Ridley's *Mercury Fur* (2005) that the youths' "capacity to survive is compromised by the desire to follow the general will of happiness" (76). What plays like Simon Stephens's *Sea Wall* (2008) and debbie tucker green's *random* (2008), which both stage grief through the use of the monologue form, attest to is the deep affective investment linked to children, which fuels the plays' call for responsibility in light of their unsettling representations of precarious young people.

Moving on to one of the central geopolitical manifestations of precarity in the new millennium, chapter 3, "A Glimpse into Some Other World': Imagining Slow Violence in the Anthropocene," explores how theatre engages with "environmental precarities" (80). Fragkou is particularly interested in the dramaturgical strategies employed to articulate "anxious hopes" (80) for the emergence of an ethics of care between the human and the nonhuman. Drawing on a variety of ecocritical frameworks, ranging from feminist to postcolonial approaches, Fragkou foregrounds Robert Nixon's notion of "slow violence," which describes the paradox that "catastrophic acts" caused by climate change "are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects" (79) and therefore often remain invisible, which raises urgent questions with regard to theatrical representation. Focusing on the resistant potential of the selected plays' spatial, temporal, and affective characteristics, Fragkou examines how they attempt to stage "small shifts, glitches or hiccups at the heart of normative practices of maintaining human lives," which "can turn into small political gestures that disturb conventional frames of recognizing precarious lives" (110). This is most obvious in Churchill's *Far Away* (2000) and Alistair McDowall's *X* (2016), which both employ strategies of theatrical dystopia in an attempt to foster hope through the very "lack of transcendence" (91). In contrast, performances such as Stan's Cafe's *Of All the People in All the World* (2003) and Complicite's *Encounter* (2015) choose more immersive frameworks which aim at providing an experience of interconnectedness through a kinaesthetic and affective exploration of space and sound, respectively, as a means of challenging normative perceptions and of reestablishing proximity and responsibility.

Bridging the gap between "here" and "there," the concrete and the abstract, chapter 4 turns to the issue of human rights and the politics of (dis)appearance. It problematises, with reference to Butler, "how certain regimes of power create norms which both 'give face' and 'efface' the human" (111). In her case studies, Fragkou examines how the theatre, through specific representational practices, can intervene in these processes by engaging spectators affectively as a prerequisite for "incit[ing] responsibility" (115) towards the Other. To challenge these mechanisms of marginalisation and effacement, the plays eschew, as Fragkou observes, "mimetic dramatizations of vulnerability," opting instead for "the uses of imagination and dissent" (148). Presenting often invisible and excluded figures or issues linked to human rights abuses, the selected pieces, among which Kelly's

Osama the Hero (2005) or tucker green's *hang* (2015), employ strategies of ambivalence and dissonance as a means of challenging common orthodoxies and affective investments on the part of the audience. In a careful reading, Fragkou also draws attention to the risk of reinforcing the very stereotypes and logic of consensus productions like Belarus Free Theatre's *Trash Cuisine* (2012) or DV8's *Can We Talk about This?* (2011) supposedly seek to expose. As a result, Fragkou emphasises that "theatre's concern with human rights might also be complicity with regimes of power which shape appearances of the human" (148).

Building on the arguments developed in the previous sections, chapter 5, "(Dis)possession, Debt and Economies of Value," closes the book with a more concrete and material focus on theatrical responses to processes of economic marginalisation as core mechanisms within the neoliberal system. Drawing on Butler and Athanasiou, Fragkou employs the concept of dispossession to describe how identity has increasingly been made dependent on factors of property, work, and social value as part of neoliberal regimes of austerity, through which abjection and precarisation (Isabell Lorey) have become constitutive processes underpinning social life. As a result, a new class has emerged, whose members are "positioned outside the aspirational narratives of the hard-working, flexible and high-achieving citizen" (152) and thus perceived as a potential threat to the dominant order, variously referred to as "precariat" by Guy Standing or as "underclass" by Imogen Tyler. Here, Fragkou draws an important parallel to the institution of the theatre and specifically the role of theatre-makers, who, as a result of funding cuts, have been forced into the position of the "self-governed, independent and resourceful subject" (154) and have thereby to some extent been made complicit with the very system they set out to challenge. In response to these developments, the chapter offers an important contribution to the field by foregrounding how British drama has recently reengaged with the implications of neoliberal class politics for subjectivity and identity formation. The examples discussed in this chapter deliberately focus on perhaps less well-known work, subtly acknowledging that the rapidity with which issues of class have lately been "absorbed by the mainstream [. . .] in the context of elite institutions might also risk turning poverty into a spectacle" (164). The selected productions are characterised by what Fragkou refers to as "a 'poor' aesthetic" (181), thereby reflecting how dispossession is fruitfully employed as a dramaturgical and formal strategy. The chapter particularly stands out because of its sensitivity to the nexus between gender and precarity. Thus, drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "wasted lives," Fragkou shows how Leo Butler's *Boy* (2016) challenges the defacement of the white working-class male. Aesthetically more experimental pieces by feminist theatre companies – Clean Break's *Joanne* (2015) and The Paper Birds' *Broke* (2014) – further illustrate how conventional bifurcations with regard to gender

identity and precarisation are undermined, thereby facilitating a fresh perspective which seeks to rehearse “human value and an ethics of care” (181) in the relationship between stage and auditorium.

The chapters cover a broad range of themes and dramaturgies and productively intersect with each other, which is why a certain (also stylistic) repetitiveness might be inevitable. This minor reservation aside, however, this book represents a substantial contribution to the lively discussions in the field. What makes it particularly valuable is the nuance and subtlety with which Fragkou approaches not only the phenomenon of theatre of precarity, always sensitive to the potential risks of staging the precarious within the institutional frame of the theatre, but also the theory which has emerged on the topic, as she emphatically foregrounds female voices in an implicit effort to counter gender precarity. As such, the study offers a timely plea for understanding contemporary political theatre in Britain “as a vibrant and alive form” which “might perform an act of hope in an age of uncertainty” (186).

Works Cited

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