Kathleen Gallagher and Jonothan Neelands, eds. *Drama and Theatre in Urban Contexts*. Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2013. (\$ 148.80 hb, \$ 58.95 pb). Pp 165. ISBN 978-0415835367.

Edited by two leading scholars of applied theatre, *Drama and Theatre in Urban Contexts* brings together a number of case studies that offer a framework for critical engagement with the central question of the volume: “How does theatre illuminate the urban and how is theatre illuminated by the urban?” Originally published in a special issue of *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* (vol. 16.2, May 2011), the foremost journal in the field, the contributions propose careful explorations of the aesthetics and politics of urban theatre, specifically understood in the context of this volume as “theatre made with or by those whose lives are marked by the urban landscape, its social limits and possibilities” (2). With chapters from a range of practitioners and/ or scholars from the US, UK, and Canada, the book illuminates current practices and debates in the diverse field of applied theatre, while contributing to the ongoing critical reflection on theatre and the politics of space/ place. The pieces are informed by the ideas at the core of contemporary critical urban studies, which construes the spatial not only as producing and reproducing the social, but also as invested with the liberating potential of reversing and re-envisioning social practices away from unjust configurations and hierarchies.

Generally developed in non-theatrical settings, i.e., “in marginal spaces, suburbs, boulevards and schools, rather than in the cultural sectors of the domesticated drama and the bourgeois zones of contentment” (4), and conceived of as spaces of social inclusiveness, applied theatre practices position themselves in a productive tension vis-à-vis the common perception of theatres as places of “cultural privilege and class division” (Nicholson 59). Opening up the space of theatre to a range of unconventional settings and communities outside the mainstream theatre-

going audiences, this field is primarily defined through its social intentionality and instrumentality, i.e., by an explicit commitment to promoting various social justice agendas geared towards such intended outcomes as the self-representation of otherwise marginalized communities, social and personal development, or community-building. In line with such visions, the individual chapters of the volume share an underlying belief in the transformative potential of theatre as “a site of inquiry and critique,” “a space of learning” (Perry and Rogers), “a tool for generating communities” (Nelson), or “a public platform for the dramatisation of [community] stories” (Malone and O’Sullivan), against the specific background of urban disenfranchisement and marginalization.

While the volume might have benefitted from a clearer organization of the material, a lengthier introduction and perhaps a conclusions section, the case studies do share multiple points of convergence, articulating a coherent body of research, whose common frames of reference are located, among others, in Helen Nicholson’s applied theatre scholarship or Kathleen Gallagher’s ethnographic studies of urban youth. Paulo Freire’s participatory pedagogies represent another important reference point for several chapters, and so do other more recent articulations of critical pedagogy, such as Henry Giroux’s theories or Elizabeth Ellsworth’s pedagogy of relationality. Combining theorization with practice-oriented research, each contribution documents and analyzes a specific theatre project facilitated in urban settings, delineating its larger contexts and stakes, as well as its multi-stage development (through workshops, research, improvisation, movement, character and scene development etc.) and performance. While articulating rigorous methodologies of evaluating the social change produced by applied theatre is beyond the scope of this collection, some of the pieces do offer insights into the respective projects’ impact on the participants and audiences, thus venturing into one of the difficult questions at the heart of the field. From a methodological perspective, most of the case studies are based on ethnographic research, including individual and focus groups interviews, “triangulations” of participants’ observations, field notes and reflective diaries, among others.

Importantly, the contributions approach applied theatre as a productive platform for staging participants' identities and building forms of community. In line with this two-fold vision, Bethany Nelson's chapter zooms in on a playmaking project developed with "at risk" students of mixed ages and racial/ ethnic backgrounds at an urban high school outside Boston; as she argues, devising and performing in a play inspired by their lived experiences contributed to an enhanced understanding of the unequal power dynamics of their urban scape and the importance of individual agency as well as collective action in challenging the status quo and furthering social change. It is worth noting that in most of the cases described in this volume, the thematic explorations resulted from the interests and lived experiences of the participants, many of whom had never been engaged in such theatrical and pedagogical practices, rather than the practitioners' or researchers' agendas. Taking their cue from this observation and building on Jonothan Neelands' seminal notion of ensemble-building as a democratic model of "living together," Patricia Enciso, Camille Cushman, Brian Edmiston, Robin Post and Danielle Berring's chapter discusses the potential of this practice in the particularly fraught space of "urbanicity," defined by "the paradoxical conditions of rigidity and creativity, stability and mobility, and anonymity and visibility" (65). Documenting a project with a group of African American students at an urban secondary school and a further collaboration with an ethnically and racially diverse group of university students enrolled in a theatre program at Ohio State University, the authors assess the ways in which such ensemble-building projects shape the participants' understanding of their own experiences of urban life, particularly the dynamics of oppression and freedom from oppression, and their role in knowledge and community production.

Mia Perry and Theresa Rogers' contribution explores a school-based performance project with a group of white, middle-class teenage girls from a Vancouver suburb, which aimed to reread and generate new representations of the Downtown East Side (DTES), whose discursive construction had been otherwise dominated by taboo narratives of violence and exploitation, especially regarding women's experiences. Seeking to remap and reimagine an urban space positioned outside their

socio-cultural realities, through the lenses of their own (lived, imagined, performed) subjectivities, the young participants engaged in a negotiation of cultural representations of the urban feminine body, with a focus on its medicalization and surveillance. Despite the progressive aspirations of applied drama, this particular case study demonstrated the complexity and unpredictability of such negotiations, as the performance vacillated between resisting and perpetuating stereotypes, i.e., between transgressive and normative discourses. Niamh Malone and Carmel O'Sullivan's piece centers on a theatre project operating in a similar mode of recoding urban spaces and communities while subverting reductive and unflattering discursive constructions. Commissioned as part of the wider regeneration scheme of Dublin's stigmatized ghetto, Dermot Bolger's *The Ballymun Trilogy* (2004-2008) is shown to integrate features of community and popular theatre in its dramatization of place-bound identities and local narratives focusing on the emergence, decline and regeneration of an urban community.

Most of the contributions address, albeit rather briefly, the tensions resulting from the pedagogical and artistic stakes of the individual projects, be they challenges pertaining to the participatory nature of such performance practices (and the potentially unsettling ways in which they depart from the participants' previous experience with, and representation of, drama), to ensuring diverse audiences, or to evaluating the respective projects' (larger) impact. One of the strengths of the book is represented by the two pieces devoted to a thorough examination of the challenges and dilemmas that might complicate applied theatre's "good intentions," in line with recent calls for an enhanced self-reflexive engagement with the ways in which its agendas are nonetheless embedded in specific systems of power, such as institutional structures, funding relations, partnerships, etc. (Snyder-Young 135). Sheila Preston's chapter focuses specifically on the limitations of a project with young women in a secondary school in inner-city London, in the larger context of interventions targeting the integration and inclusion of disenfranchised urban populations. Reflecting on problems arising from group dynamics and power imbalances, as well as the participants' difficulties in negotiating the disparity between the project's micro agenda of identity affirmation and the macro social

realities of “mis-recognition” to which they returned, the contribution calls for a necessary reframing of such interventions by shifting the focus from questions of individual responsibility and moral deservingness to a redistributive agenda predicated on notions of recognition. A similarly sober inquiry into the limitations of this type of theatre is provided by Alice Bartlett’s account of the artistic and ethico-political conundrums surrounding the development, performance, and reception of a verbatim play commissioned in response to recent terrorist threats and radicalized behavior in the UK, as part of the British government’s counter-terrorism strategy.

While a significant portion of the book is devoted to socially engaged projects, two studies work in a somewhat different, less activist vein, aiming to remap and reinscribe urban spaces through site-specific performance-based strategies. Drawing on insights from the Situationists’ psychogeography and proposing the notion of “relational tourism,” Nicolas Whybrow’s chapter describes a “performative mapping” of Venice undertaken by a group of undergraduate students from the University of Warwick, UK. Their performative “ex-planation” relied on devising playful “situations” and encounters with the residents and visitors of Venice, with a view to disrupting the urban every day and, ideally, to generating new insights about the city away from its “mediated inevitability” as a tourist spectacle (136). Sharing a similar concern with the ways in which “the multiple meanings of certain sites, particularly those designated as ‘heritage’ or ‘touristic,’ [are] ‘closed down’” (116), Phil Smith offers in his study an account of a performative “mis-guided tour” of Queen Street in Exeter, UK. Informed by mythogeographical approaches and notions of “post-tourism,” Smith’s tour was specifically geared towards restoring the alternative, invisible meanings and rhythms of the non-touristic/ non-heritage spaces of the street, in a part-scripted, part-spontaneous performance based on the interaction of the “mis-guide” and their audience, which included such tactics as physically altering the places they visited.

As applied theatre studies continues to expand and diversify, this collection provides valuable practical and theoretical insights into the field’s wider concerns and debates arising from its constellation of

localized case studies facilitated in community and educational settings. Overall, the chapters forming the substance of this volume delve into the intricate ways in which the spatial and social imaginaries of the “global city,” understood here as the epitome of displacement and inequity, might be remapped in a more hospitable manner through the artistic strategies and social justice demands of an often-overlooked theatre practice. While the intersections of applied theatre and urban studies are still a relatively new and under-studied area, the scope and depth of this body of research would certainly benefit from an engagement with similar projects facilitated in contexts beyond the Anglophone world.

The primary readership of this collection is that of practitioners and scholars of applied theatre, but its interdisciplinary scope is sure to attract broader audiences in theatre and performance studies, urban studies, urban education, critical pedagogy, as well as cultural and literary studies, given its treatment of the city as a “text” to be endlessly reread, reinscribed and reinterpreted.

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Works Cited

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