

Book Reviews

Double Take

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Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre. By Jill Dolan. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. Pp. 233. \$27.95 Pb.

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Read Elinor Fuch's [original review](#) which we published in *Theatre Research International*, 32, 2 (2007), pp. 198–9.

There are few scholarly projects that have been taken up as readily as Jill Dolan's 2005 book *Utopia in Performance (UiP)*, which extended work published in her 2001 journal article speculating on the capacity of theatre to form relations between strangers in the moment of spectating.¹ The *UiP* methodology was forged alongside the critical practices of feminist spectatorship that Dolan pioneered, and its impacts beyond theatre studies are notable.

Though 'utopia' has been a valued concept in literary studies, in its speculation of the 'non-place' or the 'not here', its force comes into view in a wide range of fields, as scholar-activist Mike Davis demonstrates, saying, 'Utopia in the most profound sense is not the dream of a paradise but the defense of the necessary against the realistic. It's the refusal to accept the triage of humanity implied by the vicious circle of inequality and environmental degradation.'²

Lyman Tower Sargent claims that 'utopianism, unlike much social theory, focuses on everyday life as well as matters concerned with economic, political, and social questions'.³ Utopian studies is a more expanded field beyond literary studies' focus on setting and plot thanks to the interventions of Dolan, who brings utopianism into phenomenological realms – spectatorship, performance making and material contexts.⁴ Explaining the tendencies in utopian studies, Ruth Levitas speaks to three possibilities of utopia, expressed through content, form or function, wherein it has 'the common factor of the expression of desire'.⁵ This definition, particularly the potential for utopia to be produced in 'form' and 'function', clearly ties Dolan's work in *UiP* with her long-standing project on feminist spectatorship which aims to deepen the understanding of how performance making and spectating produce ephemeral communities of desire, whereby conditions of imagining and collective prefiguration produce what is desired. While, in earlier essays, Dolan's concentration may have been explicitly on lesbian sexuality and desire, the political force of how *UiP* conceives of desire is its application to a 'better world' more broadly.⁶ This occurs in what Dolan terms 'utopian performatives'.

In some of the most often cited lines of the work, Dolan outlines the value of utopian performatives – moments we experience in the act of spectating that can produce the desire for *something else*:

The politics lie in the desire to feel the potential of elsewhere. The politics lie in our willingness to attend or to create performance at all, to come together in real places – whether theaters or dance clubs – to explore in imaginary spaces the potential of the ‘not yet’ and the ‘not here’. (p. 20)

This both is the significance of the work and demands a caveat. As pointed out in her early review of the book, Elinor Fuchs warned that due to its ‘admirably long reach’, Dolan’s project can seem impossible, naive or even silly because the limit of language ‘exceeds her grasp’.⁷ This can lead to empty signifiers such as claims for ‘change’, audiences being ‘moved’ or ‘transported’. Dolan points out that the ‘hope’ she seeks to find in the theatre is also judged against David Roman’s warning about the scholarly field’s ‘efforts to credentialize itself against the charge of inconsequentiality’.⁸ In that sense, the project of *UiP* is hopeful and iconoclastic in its tendencies to place feeling, desiring and co-producing the ‘not-yet’ in the present.

Despite the potential for such criticism, *UiP* has had a profound influence on the discipline, much cited across the spectrum of theatre and dance criticism, taken up by queer and feminist scholars, applied theatre and theatre education.⁹ It also informs recent scholarship by Siân Adiseshiah.¹⁰ With the uptick of affect studies since the early 2010s, there’s been a resultant embrace of grammars of emotion and registers of ephemeral meanings within performance scholarship. Perhaps that pernicious fear of hope, or indeed characterization of utopianism as frivolous, has been tempered by the insistence on the centrality of affect in our disciplines. To that end it seems spiteful to critique the ‘momentary’ (p. 31) nature of utopian performatives, given that theatre-goers want to believe that theatre, spectatorship and what Dwight Conquergood calls ‘co-presence’ are meaningful. Such hope resists cynicism even if spectators, makers and critics cannot definitively lock down future change or predict civic behaviours.¹¹

Having forged her argument for materialist and affective analysis of ‘moments’ of desire, Dolan applies these readings across a promiscuous range of forms and aesthetics, from mainstream, solo performance, community-based to independent works. The value of utopian performatives can be criticized for the transience of momentary lifting beyond the ‘here’ and ‘now’. That said, there is a playful capaciousness in her theorizing about audiences, the public sphere and relationality that draws on notions of *communitas* (Victor Turner), explored as groupness or the experience of the intersubjective ‘us’ of being (or becoming) an audience. This is experienced as ‘always in process’ (Angelika Bammer), or as ‘horizons of possibility’ (from Frederic Jameson) (pp. 35–54).

Some examples that stand out in the book are from Chapter 3, in which Dolan explores the peculiar potential of multiple-character solo performance for the consideration of how a lone performer and their dextrous embodiment produce the vision of ‘otherwise’ in the present. Some of the artists mentioned include Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, Anna Deavere Smith and Lily Tomlin. What Dolan is drawing on in discussions of these examples is the significance of dialogue across positionalities. She posits that it is ‘the simple complexity of the solo performer’s presence and transformation across multiple identities [that] asks us to suspend our disbelief in particular ways that let us see and hear people with more empathy and understanding’ (p. 68). This is perhaps most obvious in Dolan’s discussion of *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) or *Twilight Los Angeles* (1994) by Anna Deavere Smith, and which could be considered in the more recent work *Notes from the Field* (2017–18). This work is not fictional, but rooted in what Dolan calls ‘important political work, interrogating unresolved, festering conflicts’ (p. 84). Smith’s approach stages the competing understandings of real-world events that attend to racial and ethnic tensions. By embodying the crossing between positions as the solo performer who re-performs

the testimony of her subjects, Dolan says that Smith is ‘the invisible interlocutor whose eyes, ears, and mimesis give the audience access to these racially divided communities’ (p. 85). The experience of theatre-goers is that of witnessing the potential to traverse entrenched positions through encountering dialogue, and thereby experience alternative positions as collective witnesses.

By contrast, and entirely in the fictional realm, in Tomlin’s performances (1985, 2000) of Jane Wagner’s *Search for Signs*, the performer is an actor who is a ‘cock-eyed optimist’ (p. 69) sharing her worries about the world. She presents fears and anxieties and produces alternatives through the array of characters. The premise of the work is an encounter with aliens seeking to make sense of life on earth. By framing that encounter as a play within a play, the presence of the audience produces the very signs of humanity in the theatrical frame, which is what Dolan points towards as a utopian performative. As Tomlin evinces virtuosity in her performance, Dolan notes audience responses that included delight, gasps of recognition and reflexivity that produce the effect of a collective experience of pleasure that produce the effect of an assembly of people contemplating the future in which ‘they build alliances through their common humanity, facilitated, rather than hampered, by their differences’ (p. 74). The degree of hopefulness in the notion of the collective is probably unrecognizable at this stage, many years after the book was initially published. Nonetheless, Dolan offers valuable close attention to the experience of theatre-going as a hopeful activity.

The complex temporalities of culture and how we experience the world as it is, alongside claims of producing worlds we want to see in and through cultural experiences, are invoked by queer theorist Jose Muñoz, who invites a queering of some of the ideas put forward by Dolan by ‘suggesting that utopia is a stage, not merely a temporal stage, like a phase, but a spatial one’.¹² His work insists on the production of hope that is thus more expansive than momentary ‘lifting’, arguing that ‘[u]topian performativity suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished’.¹³

The value afforded to Dolan’s articulation of utopia is in how it has been adopted beyond her initial application, and thus she may be understood to have contributed to what Seyla Benhabib has described as a ‘critical social theory’, which ‘views the present from the perspective of the radical transformation of its basic structure, and interprets actual lived crises and protests in the light of an anticipated future’.¹⁴ As such, it has continued relevance for considerations of social change. Its core premise, that theatre itself, as well as theatre studies, are relevant sites of producing viable communities to come is perhaps a necessary reminder in light of climate change, austerity and a political sphere intent on shutting down freedoms worldwide. While scholarship centred on ‘hope’ may be difficult to swallow for the cynics, it is, after all, as abolitionist Mariame Kaba says, ‘a discipline’.¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 Jill Dolan, ‘Performance, Utopia, and the “Utopian Performative”’, *Theatre Journal*, 53, 3 (2001), pp. 455–79.
- 2 Mike Davis, interview by Joe Day, in Piotr Dutkiewicz and Richard Sakwa, eds., *22 Ideas to Fix the World: Conversations with the World’s Foremost Thinkers* (New York: Social Science Research Council and New York University, Press, 2013), p. 125.
- 3 Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 5.
- 4 Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990); Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Sargent, *Utopianism*; Lyman Tower Sargent, ‘Utopia Matters! The Importance of Utopianism and Utopian Scholarship’, *Utopian Studies*, 32, 3 (2021), pp. 453–77.
- 5 Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 8.
- 6 Jill Dolan, ‘“Lesbian” Subjectivity in Realism: Dragging at the Margins of Structure and Ideology’, in S. E. Case, ed., *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 40–53; Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

- 7 Fuchs (2007), p. 198.
- 8 David Roman, 'Comment – Theatre Journals', *Theatre Journal*, 54, 3 (2002), cited in *UiP*, p. 65.
- 9 Including José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Monica Prendergast, 'Utopian Performatives and the Social Imaginary: Toward a New Philosophy of Drama/Theater Education', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 45, 1 (2011), pp. 58–73; Ramon Rivera-Servera, 'Choreographies of Resistance: Latina/o Queer Dance and the Utopian Performative', *Modern Drama*, 47, 2 (2004), pp. 269–89.
- 10 Siân Adiseshiah, *Utopian Drama: In Search of a Genre* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
- 11 Dwight Conquergood, 'Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance', in Petra Kuppers and Gwen Robertson, eds., *The Community Performance Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 57–70.
- 12 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 99.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 14 Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 154–5.
- 15 Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), p. 26.

New Books

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Real Theatre: Essays in Experience. By Paul Rae. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xiv + 236. £78.99/\$105 Hb; £26.99/\$34.99 Pb.
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Real Theatre by Paul Rae is aimed at undoing the theatre studies habit of thinking its two titular terms as oppositional. As the introduction puts it, 'The persistent appeal of thinking about theatre in relation to reality remains something of an impediment to recognizing the theatre as real in itself' (pp. 2–3). This is a worthy goal, as almost any idea that has hardened into orthodoxy probably needs shaking up. For a book taking on such a ubiquitous disciplinary habit, the arguments that unfold turn out to be deceptively minute, which is not, as I will explain, a criticism.

To a great extent, *Real Theatre's* thesis is commonsensical: at some level everyone knows that theatre is 'real'. We *know* that theatre performance is made of technologies, of talk, of material bodies and physical things. Making stage magic is some people's ordinary day job. Most theatre is mediocre. And yet defining theatre as precisely that which is not real has a persistent rhetorical use and appeal that has made it an overdetermined reflex of theatre theorists, makers and lovers. This might include me, who has spilled a lot of words on theatricality and how 'real life' is thoroughly saturated with what we might call the fake, the theatrical, or theatre. We, the 'theatre people', like to feel special. So it can feel rather non-interventional to argue for 236 pages that theatre is 'real' in these ways, and maybe even churlish (a word Rae applies to himself before I did here) to take aim at the one sparkle of specialness that theatre maintains. Nevertheless, if I did sometimes yearn for a bigger splash, following the book into those most boring and unexpected corners and musing on them longer for this review pushed me to appreciate the possible applications of this recalibration of 'the real' and/or 'theatre' more.

Over seven chapters in two parts, plus a substantial introduction and short conclusion, 'real theatre' is understood as 'theatre in general, theatre as is, theatre on aggregate, and so on' (p. 211),