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**Review of: The Active Text: Unlocking Plays Through Physical Theatre**

**by Dymphna Callery, London, Nick Hern Books, 2015, 224 pp., ISBN 978-1-84842-127-**

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***The Active Text: Unlocking Plays Through Physical Theatre* by Dymphna Callery, London, Nick Hern Books, 2015, 224 pp., ISBN 978-1-84842-127-1**

### **Will Wollen**

How can we harness processes commonly associated with devised theatre, putting them to work in tackling a scripted play? What can an authored playtext gain through physical exploration at all stages of the rehearsal process? Dymphna Callery's latest book, *The Active Text*, answers questions such as these in a well-structured and welcome attempt to show how physical approaches can, and should, be channelled into the service of text-based work. While books on theatre technique tend to be aimed at the individual - the actor, the director - Callery's is unusual in its focus on group effort and there is an assumption of a shared responsibility among the 'players' for all aspects of the work.

*The Active Text* challenges theatre-makers to prevent a play becoming trapped by some of the expected features of a standard rehearsal process and by any assumptions that might be made in advance about a play's particular style or genre. A play, says Callery, is an inherently active thing, and to be grasped truly it needs to be explored through embodiment. All aspects, from the props and the words to the stage directions and the structure itself, should be interrogated and analysed through physical means. By working in this way, the book argues, the players can unearth a more interesting and visual theatrical expression of the play, moving beyond the confines of a merely naturalistic methodology.

Callery is a theatre practitioner herself, with twenty-five years' experience of teaching acting, directing and writing in higher education and throughout the book it is clear that one is in the hands of a very experienced and skilled teacher. The exercises and games she proposes are well explained and they are accompanied by the occasional detailed tip, caveat or suggestion for variation that can only spring from a wealth of ease and familiarity with her material. She is careful not to prescribe the outcome of the activities she suggests; they are there to aid the revelation of whichever play might be in focus.

The book, however, is not quite, nor does it pretend to be, a theatre toolkit. Many theatre manuals offer a smorgasbord of games and activities to be dipped into, but this is a book that makes an argument alongside the creative ideas that it offers and as such it demands to be read in its entirety. The exercises that Callery suggests are drawn from a variety of different practitioners, some distilled and developed through her own practice and some largely unaltered, and she makes no apologies for what might seem an eclectic selection. What makes the book her own, however, is a structure that proposes a careful and well-considered plan of action in approaching a play. By warning her readers away from rushing into overworn features of a 'typical' rehearsal process (the read-through, the learning of lines, the blocking) and offering instead an alternative model, she allows them the possibility of discovering a play for themselves in a way that may produce more surprising results.

The sections of the book are introduced in the order in which Callery suggests they should be approached in the rehearsal room. The narrative structure of the play as a whole precedes the character journeys and the individual scenes; the words, the actions, the sounds release their meaning next and the book ends with a section on finding the flow and shape of the piece as whole.

Rather than concentrating on a single play, or using a confusing array of them, Callery has judiciously picked a few contrasting titles and playwrights to use as examples and to illustrate the exercises. Thus each section of the book considers how various techniques might be applied to the work of, say, Kane as well as to Sophocles, Büchner as well as to Bond, Beckett as well as to Miller. At the same time she draws on the work, reflections and insights of important practitioners, past and contemporary, to show how similar approaches have led to exciting and, in some cases, ground-breaking productions. Much use is made of Jacques Lecoq, Simon McBurney, Steven Berkoff and Frantic Assembly, and Callery draws too on her experience of the work of Kaos Theatre, with whom she has served as a board member.

Peppered throughout are short quotations, inset into the text, from a vast array of influential writers, directors and actors which Callery uses to support her arguments. Some of the quotations should probably come with more of a health warning, as they are from practitioners who do not necessarily espouse the methods proposed (which could give a misleading impression to some student readers) but the quotes serve as tremendous titbits of inspiration and help at least to compare attitudes of specialists from different places on the text-to-physical spectrum.

*The Active Text* usefully fills a gap, drawing together the ideas of many exponents of non-naturalistic methods, but seasoned practitioners are unlikely to find anything strikingly new in the way of exercises – some are common practice - but the book does offer a well-written opportunity to re-examine rehearsal habits. Drama teachers and youth theatre leaders may find it valuable, as some of the exercises will be particularly useful as teaching and training aids, and indeed some will be more effective for those studying a particular play rather than for those who might be producing it. The main beneficiaries of the book, however, though Callery is careful not to limit its scope, will be university drama students working at undergraduate level; the exercises, games and explanations are pitched perfectly for the type of ensemble work expected on many practical drama modules – challenging work that implies the kind of shared accountability that university group assessments require – and the book will double as an informative introduction to some seminal texts. In *The Active Text*, Callery has created a well-constructed educational aid, to sit alongside her much-admired guide to physical theatre, *Through The Body*, and it deserves to find its place on many a reading list for practical undergraduate drama modules.

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