

Book Reviews

Jon Foley Sherman. *A Strange Proximity: Stage Presence, Failure, and the Ethics of Attention*. London: Routledge, 2016, xiii + 186 pp., £85.00 (hardback), £29.99 (paperback), £20.99 (PDF ebook).

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Jon Foley Sherman's *A Strange Proximity: Stage Presence, Failure, and the Ethics of Attention* is a rigorously researched phenomenological study of the qualities of attendance and presence that constitute the theatre event. Foley Sherman situates his project in the lineage of performance philosophy and it will be a valuable addition to that interdisciplinary field and to those readers, in particular, who wish to deepen their understanding of how the primary relationalities inherent to the theatre event, such as actor/attendant (Foley Sherman's term to replace spectator) and actor/character, can offer insight to the broader philosophical studies of the encounters between self and other. Although Foley Sherman does not draw explicitly on the growing discourse on affect, this book is clearly aligned to many of the same pre-occupations, given the shared phenomenological basis, and so will also be of particular interest to scholars engaged in that current strand of discursive practice.

There are many key features of Foley Sherman's theoretical framework that I find productive and applicable more widely. Beginning with an analysis of stage presence, the study investigates what Foley Sherman terms 'economies of attention,' or more precisely, "how attention is distributed" (13) in the theatre event, with a focus on the potential ethical implications of proximity and distance (both conceptual and physical). The importance of "failure" to the project I find less central than the title or introduction might suggest. Although it is explicitly featured in one chapter, and Foley Sherman does articulate in each case study how failure can be identified as a common factor throughout, I am not sure whether, as a concept, it adds significantly to his argument, or that his argument adds significantly to the existing discourse on failure. He does, however, re-affirm the often-acknowledged capacity of failure to offer unexpected openings and possibilities.

In this way, Foley Sherman's study further supplements the familiar and influential philosophical discourse that valorises failure over virtuosity and advocates the disruption of the known, the fixed, the completed, in favour of distance, difference and the dislocation of the self through relations with otherness that

might open up possibilities of expansion and the capacity for astonishment on both sides. In the opening chapter, he introduces his framework as one that might propose an ethics of attention, asking how we attend and to who. The first of these questions dominates most of the study, and results in the proposition that a more ethical mode of attending might be secured by maintaining distance and difference, and committing to an openness to being moved, and the potential of being changed, by the encounter with otherness. As might be expected, the philosophical premises of the study are largely determined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as Foley Sherman seeks to build on his work and that of theatre scholar Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca to develop a “phenomenological ethics derived from performance” (21).

The study is rigorously researched and demonstrates a confident navigation of philosophical theory and an awareness and acknowledgement of its own philosophical lineage and other key texts in the field of theatre and phenomenology to which Foley Sherman explicitly speaks. While the book can thus rightly stand as a welcome contribution to the emerging interdisciplinary field of performance philosophy, it speaks less usefully than perhaps it might to those of a less philosophical disposition. This is not because there are not distinctive areas of analysis that could benefit the theatre discipline more widely, as this review will seek to draw attention to, but because of the extent and depth of the philosophical discourse which at times travels some distance from the theatrical objects of Foley Sherman’s study. Given that Foley Sherman set out to work *from* theatre and performance *to* new philosophical insights, as advocated by the performance philosophy field, I would question the need to draw quite so heavily on existing philosophical analysis in order to arrive at the conclusions he does, which seem to me to be most effectively articulated by Foley Sherman on theatre’s own terms. That said, the remainder of this review will seek to draw out those aspects that might be of most interest to theatre scholars more widely, as those readers who are already invested in performance philosophy, and phenomenology in particular, are likely to need no further encouragement to train their own expertise on the philosophical detail of Foley Sherman’s study.

After the opening chapter sets up the theoretical parameters of the study, chapter two examines the relationship between self and other, verisimilitude and difference through a detailed comparative analysis of the pre-expressive state of Eugenio Barba and the neutral mask of Jacques Lecoq. Both actor training techniques, Foley Sherman argues, address the potentiality of stage presence that emerges from the “cracks” (34) that training produces in everyday habitual behaviour. Where Barba’s pre-expressive techniques are vulnerable to the charge of erasing difference of the cultural other to construct an allegedly universal model of stage presence, Lecoq’s neutral mask seeks to enable the emergence of a uniquely personal stage presence through providing the student with a “state of

discovery, of openness, an availability to receive” (Lecoq 38). Foley Sherman suggests that the quality of attention of the neutral mask towards the mimed object can thus be characterised as more ethical as it permits a fluid, open and shifting relationship between self and object which changes the self as it changes the object. Neither are able to exist independently of the relationship that is formed between them:

Students under the mask do not know or dominate what is mimed but instead open up *mimetic possibilities* in which they are altered by something different from themselves without claiming it. Mimesis with the neutral mask does not repeat or represent or replace another but allows the students to find themselves displaced. (46)

In conclusion to this chapter, Foley Sherman sets up an important principle that will continue to steer his argument throughout, that the answer to the ethical problem of encountering another “will involve transformative contact through movement” (47).

In chapter three, Foley Sherman examines how attention from attendant to performer is transfigured through physical space, paying particular attention to the discursive valorisation of proximity in the context of immersive modes of performance. He argues that this contemporary valorisation is the precise reversal of Benjamin’s location of the aura of the art object in its unbridgeable distance from the perceiver: “This time, however, in the environment of a digitized neo-liberalism, moving closer to a work of art is meant to have the opposite effect it had for Benjamin: instead of destroying authenticity, the approach is meant to secure it” (72).

Foley Sherman critiques existing arguments that valorise proximity to the actor in this way, and argues that

[i]n contrast, the community supposedly welded together by immersion in a performance or work of art leaves no room for critique, dissensus, or knowledge. While distance for Rancière establishes the authority of emancipated spectators by keeping them unapproachable, distance for Benjamin establishes the authority of the artwork by keeping *it* unapproachable. For both, distance remains crucial even as it channels power in opposite directions. And in both cases something happens to those who attempt to cross these distances: they lose agency as political and ethical subjects. (87)

Through protracted philosophical engagement, Foley Sherman then proceeds to differentiate between the distance of desire as articulated by Renaud Barbaras and Merleau-Ponty’s distance of astonishment; the latter of which Foley Sherman advocates as it does not result in antagonism or overly-empower the perceiver but expresses “a relationship with the perceived that arises from both of them *and* from the space between them” (92).

The capacity for astonishment that arises through the preservation of distance in a quality of attention that is sufficiently open to destabilise both perceiver and perceived in unexpected ways is central to the concerns of the following chapter. These emerge from the instance of the technical failure of music in a dance performance Foley Sherman was attending, and the transforming effect of such failure on the quality of his attention. Here we are introduced to Merleau-Ponty's notions of centripetal and centrifugal space which align with the related dichotomies Foley Sherman has already established. In the centripetal space, the attention is trained on an object of desire, and the quality of presence is consequently located solely in the perceived with the perceiver remaining unaltered, such as in the conventional understanding of stage presence. Conversely, the centrifugal space is described as enabling "an ethical rapport of disorientation [...] when I lose myself as the source of possibility, I am thrust into an experience of intersubjective embodiment held at bay by habits of identity" (99).

Foley Sherman draws here on the existing research of Nicholas Ridout's *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (2006) and expands on the philosophical potential that opens up when things go genuinely wrong. He contrasts such failures with the aesthetically constructed failures examined in Sara Jane Bailes' *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (2011), but in a sense his conclusions on the potential of perceived failure are not far removed from hers, at least for the attendants in both cases:

This kind of disorientation strips performers – and attentive attendants – of their accustomed sense of possibility. It demands the awareness and acceptance of something else, of possibilities outside of one's own, of an order of experience derived from elsewhere. This kind of disorientation offers something strange. (103)

The ethical choice that Foley Sherman arrives at in conclusion to this chapter is the choice that arises from such disorientation: "to orient myself into a strange world centered between others and myself or in myself" (117). And this is the crux of the ethics of attention the study is proposing. Although Foley Sherman himself is clear that no ethical answer to the choice can be secured, his study aims to highlight economies of attention in relation to the ethical choices that different modes of attention can induce. However, it is evident, for Foley Sherman, that the commitment to astonishment, to be disorientated and open to changes induced by unexpected relationships with others, offers greater potential for ethical engagement with the other, than an attention that seeks to close the other's possibilities down through the desire to control, or understand the other in terms of the self that remains fixed and knowable.

In chapter five, Foley Sherman revisits the controversy of Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B* (2010-) to add some important and insightful cautions to his thesis in

conclusion. Here he returns to the question, not of *how* but of *who* is attending, and who they are attending to. The absence of the audience in the publicity images of *Exhibit B*, he persuasively argues, removes any sense of the ethical potential of the exhibition which lies entirely in the relational and reciprocal attention of attendant to actor and actor to attendant. Without this attention featuring in the publicity, the exhibition is seen to merely replicate the exoticisation and subjugation of the other that it is designed to critique.

In conclusion to his study, Foley Sherman makes the important observation that “attention is egalitarian in principle – anyone *could* be paid attention to and anyone *could* pay attention. Attention is anti-egalitarian in practice. It is inescapably and unjustly and lovingly and dangerously unequal” (147). Any ethics of attention is necessarily hampered by this limitation, the fact that there will always be those and that which is not attended to. The ethical charge is for us to be cognisant of this inevitable failure to attend ethically or equally to everything, and to remain cognisant of *how* we are attending to that on which our attention falls. Foley Sherman’s study offers a detailed philosophical analysis of how by paying attention to the economies of attention within the theatre event we might better understand the ethics at stake in encounters between self and other, and *A Strange Proximity* is a valuable addition to the disciplines of both theatre and philosophy on that count.

Works Cited

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