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Book review: *Practice as research in the arts: principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances*, by Robin Nelson

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Practice as research in the arts: principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances by Robin Nelson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; ISBN 9781137282903 (£18.99)

The methodological openness of practice as research (PaR) is arguably one of its most stimulating features. Simultaneously, it can be a significant source of frustration: a labyrinth of possibilities, and myriad ‘-ologies’, can be encountered in any research process. This was certainly my experience as I conducted my own PaR PhD on and through rehearsal and performance practices in theatre. While concepts such as the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of methodology are inappropriate in discussions about practice as research on the conceptual level, I found uncertainty about methodology to be a pervasive force. It is this area, the concrete methodology of PaR, that Robin Nelson addresses in his book *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*.

The book is organized in two parts. Part One consists of five chapters by Nelson articulating in full his conception of the PaR process. Whilst Part One emerges from Nelson’s perspective, and is grounded in his own experience working in theatre in the UK, Part Two features chapters written by six different authors, each examining PaR from the

perspective of various countries and cultures including New Zealand, Australia, Continental Europe, the Nordic countries, South Africa and the United States.

Nelson's book is pragmatic in a number of ways. Much of Part One is presented as a 'how-to' approach to PaR (particularly in Chapters 2, 4 and 5). Through this focus, Nelson provides thoughtful guidance on many aspects of PaR projects: from planning to supervision, from documentation to exegesis. At the core is Nelson's presentation of 'a model in which a diverse range of enquiries conducted by means of arts performance practices might be framed' (p.6).

This model demonstrates a second level of pragmatism: it is underpinned with the aim 'to extend the acceptance of PaR within "the academy"' (p.6) and, for this reason, it attempts to find resonance with more traditional and established research paradigms (qualitative and even quantitative). In this model, 'know how' (which might include tacit or embodied knowledge) is balanced with 'know what' (knowledge gained through critical reflection) and 'know that' ('the equivalent of "academic knowledge"', p.45). While recognizing the special importance of 'know how' in PaR, Nelson advocates a methodology that addresses all three types of knowledge, and in doing so brings PaR closer to more traditional academic disciplines. This is not, however, merely a strategy to gain acceptance within the academy, but rather a fundamental way of thinking about PaR that recognizes the value in learning from other established research methodologies in support of rigorous investigation.

Where the approach to PaR presented is unique and compelling, perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the book is manner in which PaR is discussed. Like other texts on the subject (such as Elizabeth Barret and Barbara Bolt's

Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry (2010)), philosophical discourse is embraced. Here, Nelson opts to extend the discussion further by using this discourse as a springboard to articulating and supporting the mechanics of PaR as he sees them. By design, and unlike Josh Freeman's *Blood, Sweat & Theory: Research through Practice in Performance* (2009), case studies are not a focus—a decision that prevents the text from making generalizations about PaR or undertaking analysis of specific PaR projects. Instead, readers are able to engage with Nelson's ideas as they might apply to their own work. In essence, Nelson invites the reader to meet and interact with his ideas, making the book extraordinarily thought-provoking.

Nelson is the first to admit that his proposed approach may not work for every PaR project. He rightly draws attention to the limitations of his experience and acknowledges that there are some PaR projects where the contribution to knowledge may be contained and explicated fully by the practice outcomes. Nelson's pragmatism, therefore, does not extend to being prescriptive. He does not insist that his is the only viable way to approach PaR, but instead adds to the conversation about what it is and how it might be undertaken. For this reason, Part Two is a worthy companion to Part One as it draws together different voices from around the world who present their own views of PaR. In this way, Nelson not only contributes to a very necessary conversation, but facilitates it.

My one criticism of the book is quite minor: Nelson's use of endnotes makes the reading experience somewhat cumbersome. Replacing these with footnotes within each chapter would have improved the reading experience.

In spite of this quibble, Nelson's book should be considered a major contribution to the field of practice as research. He

has geared the text particularly to those studying at the doctoral level. This is most evident in Chapter 5, which specifically addresses PhD students. Even so, the material presented will be of use to anyone engaged in or considering PaR. Nelson's model is clear, effective and persuasively argued. While one may disagree with his proposed approach, the conceptual dialogue undertaken as a result of the disagreement will be highly beneficial.

References

Barrett, E. and Bolt, B. eds., 2010. *Practice as research: approaches to creative arts enquiry*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Freeman, J. ed., 2009. *Blood, sweat & theory: research through practice in performance*. Faringdon: Libri Publishing.

About the review author

MARC SILBERSCHATZ is a PhD candidate at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the University of St Andrews engaged in practice as research. The focus of his research is on developing contributions to rehearsal and performance practice that eliminate pre-agreed-upon performance structures and minimize divided consciousness in actors. He is also a professional theatre director who has staged over twenty productions in both the United States and the United Kingdom.