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Theatre and performance in small nations, edited by Steve Blandford. Bristol: Intellect, 2013; ISBN 9781841506463 (£25.00)

This edited collection is timely and shares an interesting and diverse range of voices. Issues around independence, nationality and nation-building are discussed through the lenses of current theatre and performance practices. Editor Steve Blandford has assembled chapters written by authors in a variety of registers, including personal testimony and social, cultural and historical perspectives representing an international set of activities and projects. The style and delivery of each chapter is different and a range of views contribute to this emerging area of international theatre scholarship. Some contributions opt for a single case study; others are more discursive and polemical to interrogate the making and re-making of small nations across the globe.

The starting point for this volume, according to Blandford, rests 'at least partly, on the idea that it is within small nations and first nations that some of the most interesting work is taking place inside of the broad arena of using theatre and performance as a sophisticated means of scrutinising questions of nationhood, nationalism and national identity in the age of globalisation' (p.8). By offering wider definitions of what a national theatre in Scotland, Wales and New Zealand might be, this volume takes us

beyond nation and national theatres, entering a complex series of political and geographical contexts. For example, differences of scale are apparent when the landmass of Australia and its small population is contrasted with the large population but small landmass of Malaysia. A broad survey, both generous and expansive, is achieved here in a book whose origin is the Centre for the Study of Media and Culture in Small Nations based at the University of South Wales.

By using the phrase 'small nations' in the title, it is clear that this collection is about nationhood and what that might mean in different contexts. Blandford states early on that his aim is to interrogate and challenge this contested term. It is suggested that the scale of 'small nations' may be a reason why these nations offer a site for contesting national identities in a way that monolithic, large-scale nations do not. The process of national identity seems to get more fixed and rigid as the nation increases in size. This suggests that although 'small nations' may feel under-confident due to their size, this characteristic can offer new potentials and futures. Helen Gilbert helps to frame the project and explain the role of theatre and performance in this process:

Always a site of circulating representational forms, theatre becomes, at formative moments in the on-going narrative of nationhood, a means by which communities register, reiterate and / or contest modes and models of national belonging (quoted on p.3).

The collection begins by discussing Irish theatre between the early 1990s and 2008, a period of intense development where Cathy Leeney suggests that an alienation from the national and state-promoted values is apparent. This may produce 'a growing sense of disjuncture' (p.22) to such an extent that the author suggests the survival of this particular 'small nation' is under threat.

To some extent, Blandford positions this collection around his description of the early development of National Theatre Wales (NTW), founded in 2010, as an example of national identity read through theatre and performance: 'and where dialogue feels at least possible, that a strong theatre and performance culture, a potential source of democratic engagement and questioning, can survive.' (p.69). The National Theatre of Scotland, founded in 2006 as a response to the London-centric National Theatre, was of course a model for NTW, and in both cases these new 'National' theatres demonstrate the variety of ways that nationhood can be developed, communicated and shared and might 'reflect the kind of democratic engagement that is in the spirit of their newly devolved nations' (p.12). Ian Brown surveys the process of Scottish devolution through Scottish theatre itself and importantly emphasises in his detailed chapter that 'the devolutionary settlement is part of a process, not the product of an event' (p.41). In recognising that devolution can be considered as the 'Reconfiguration of the Possible', Brown is optimistic about the trajectory of Scottish theatre as a barometer of cultural change. As he says: 'Scotland conceives of itself as 'Scotlands', multilingual, varied and intercultural both historically and contemporaneously' (p.43).

At its core, the volume celebrates the lack of fixity surrounding definitions of identity and nation. The construction of national identity is considered here as a process, a main platform of Blandford's argument. Live performance is particularly appropriate in helping the discussion of national identity, as the act of live performance itself draws attention to the idea that identities are performed 'and that different versions of identity can compete for our attention or allegiance' (p.3). Another key thread is how the external projection of national identity fits or in some cases does not fit with the internal understandings of a particular 'small nation'.

Helena Buffery suggests that for the Catalan theatre community, marketability and reaching out into a globalised world is a challenge because of the political requirement to communicate in the Catalan language. Goran Stefanovski charts a personal story of migration set in train in 1991 by the Yugoslav Civil War in which he attempts to recover some understanding of this disrupted history. Sharon Mazer discusses how in New Zealand, this post-colonial small nation tries to recover and find a way to produce and communicate diverse histories in dialogue with the Maori people and develop a form of national theatre.

Rea Dennis shows the difficulty of finding a 'unifying national identity narrative' in Australia post-9/11 due to competing debates around both human rights and national security. Teresa Marrero discusses the Hispanic and Latin debates of the different language communities who are becoming more evident in North Texas, USA. Issues of race in the English-speaking theatre of Malaysia and the struggle between racial and national identities are made explicit in Susan Philip's chapter. Finally, in her chapter on Indian dance, Aparna Sharma profiles the struggle between traditional country-dance and urban values and calendars in the context of an expanding Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) economy.

This collection helpfully expands the debate on theatre and performance in small nations by providing a selection of points of view and experiences inviting further study in this important area.

About the review author

Dr Anna Birch is Artistic Director and founder member of Fragments & Monuments performance and film company and currently Lecturer, Research at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow where she supervises a number of PhD students. As a practice-led researcher, publications include co-editing 'Site-specificity and mobility', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 22, Issue 2 (Routledge) and a collection entitled *Performing Site-specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice* which includes her latest essay 'Repetition and performativity: site-specific performance and film as living monument' (Palgrave, 2012) both with Professor Joanne Tompkins (University of Queensland, Australia).