

BOOK REVIEWS

***Shattering Hamlet's Mirror: Theatre and Reality.* By Marvin Carlson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. 145 pp.**

Reviewed by Kelsey Laine Jacobson

Marvin Carlson's most recent book, *Shattering Hamlet's Mirror*, productively extends the ongoing discussion of mimesis as central to performance by considering the specific interplay between theatre and reality. Taking his cue from the book's title, Carlson breaks down the delineation between the real and the representational by tracing a trend throughout Western theatre history that places the real onstage alongside, among, or within the mimetic. The central question "Imitation of What?" frames Carlson's extended contemplation of what exactly Hamlet's mirror might be reflecting, which ultimately suggests that there is not quite so much separation between the real and the reflected as might be traditionally thought. Though the genre of theatre of the real (theatre that incorporates some aspect of perceived realness in content, frame, or effect, such as site-specific, verbatim, documentary, or immersive theatre) is often perceived of as postmodern, Carlson finds it has deep roots in theatrical and artistic history, treating, in turn, words, performers, settings, props, and the audience in each of the book's five chapters.

Carlson's first chapter on verbatim theatre provides a thorough grounding of the genre's history to consider the ways in which real words from the real world might operate on stage. His examples range from documentary theatre to courtroom dramas, to Anna Deveare Smith, considering the performative function and power (or lack thereof) of both the spoken and the written or documented word. This chapter also contemplates the desire for a theatre of the real by pointing specifically to the operation of words in both real and theatrical worlds: "Documentary theatre," he supposes, "was a clearer picture of reality than the documents it utilized, since it revealed more clearly the truth hidden within" (29). This is an oft-repeated refrain of particular relevance for the late twentieth-century examples Carlson cites, such as *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, *Fires in the Mirror* and *The Laramie Project*. These plays examine at a personal level events that had been covered only in courtroom transcripts, major media outlets, and official documentation. The emergent phenomenon in the twenty-first century of instantaneous, unofficial, and crowd-sourced news via social media, however, arguably provides a similar, perceptually more authentic or personal means of getting at the "truth" of reality, thus prompting a questioning of what function or desire documentary theatre might be fulfilling today.

Chapter Two, "Who's There?," considers real bodies and real people onstage, moving from efforts to conceal actor bodies through masks and costumes in Ancient Greek dramas, to a consideration of celebrity performers, before finally turning to the body as unruly through its on-stage acts of impropriety, such as urination, defecation, and sexuality. Again, Carlson's elegant ability to connect various and varied theatrical and performance events allows for a consideration of these multiple aspects of the performing body, and he makes use of such far-ranging sources as Judith Butler, Buffalo Bill, and Rimini Protokoll to consider the aesthetic, social, and cultural challenge to imitation a real body might pose.

The third chapter, "There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake," moves to a consideration of site-as-real. Carlson makes the interesting assertion that unlike actors' bodies and words, theatrical sites are rarely at risk of their reality bleeding through. There are, obviously, several exceptions to this statement, such as outdoor performances and site-specific venues, but for the most part, theatre

spaces rarely perform as theatre spaces. They are instead tools for transcribing the real into the fictional; putting a body in a theatre space tells us to consider the body as something other than its “real” self. His vast sampling considers sites that are both “celebrity,” such as a performance of *Hamlet* at Elsinore Castle, and “ordinary,” such as R. Murray Schafer’s directing of audience attention toward everyday moments like sunsets.

In “Simon’s Chair and Launce’s Dog,” Carlson moves on to a consideration of properties on stage. Whereas the behaviour of words, bodies, and sites may betray their “real” status, Carlson suggests objects are less likely to disrupt the fictive frame: “Being inanimate [the property] has been far less likely than the actor to betray that other existence to the audience” (82). After all, he suggests, props are largely taken from the real world and once onstage they often possess iconicity: a chair is a chair, the same chair, in both the fictive and real worlds. Of course, as Jenn Stephenson points out in her Twitter review of Carlson’s book (2016), and as Carlson himself illustrates using an extended examination of real skulls onstage, there are objects that misbehave, such as the epitomic gun that fails to fire properly. In addition, he considers “recalcitrant props” like animals and the ways in which they provoke a continual tension between the real and fictive worlds by possessing some degree of autonomy. Carlson’s comments on props provoke thinking about new materialism’s turn away from anthropocentrism and expansion of what constitutes “life”; the real skull Carlson refers to, for instance, has effect and might in fact be considered a live performer, despite the utterly opposite status of its originating human body.

Carlson’s fifth and final chapter, “All the World’s a Stage,” considers the work of the audience in determining whether something is perceived as real or not. Highlighting in particular the drive for immersive experience and the “fiction” of “real” emancipation for spectators, he asserts that even as “a significant part of experimental theatre has challenged the traditional dividing line between the ‘real’ world of the auditorium and the mimetic world of the stage,” perceptual power remains in the hands of the spectator, who “must make the final decision as to which of these worlds, or what blend of them, will determine the status of any theatrical element” (106).

Carlson’s book is not a performance analysis per se, nor does it delve into a heavily theoretical consideration of theatre of the real. Instead, it acts as an invaluable resource for scholars studying the genre by providing myriad case studies, illustrations, and exemplars. The strength of Carlson’s book lies in his vast knowledge of theatre history, and his elegant ability to connect moments across time and place under this umbrella of “theatre of the real.” His impressive range of sources covers, in fact, everything from a nineteenth-century English journal to Ian McKellan’s personal website. This book thus acts as a highly useful resource for scholars looking to do more specific and/or expansive work on theatre of the real. For instance, there is space left for the consideration of non-Western theatre of the real, which Carlson touches on only briefly here (though somewhat more extensively in his several other publications). *Shattering Hamlet’s Mirror* provides a much-needed resource for scholars, and its well-organized, thematic structure and lucid writing is inviting and accessible.

References

- Stephenson, Jenn. 2016. “‘Shattering Hamlet’s Mirror’ by Marvin Carlson: A Twitter Book Review/Read-along.” Accessed June 30, 2016. <https://storify.com/queensjenn/shattering-hamlet-s-mirror-by-marvin-carlson-a-twi>.