

Book Reviews

Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories

Peggy Phelan

New York and London: Routledge
1997

187 pp. ISBN 0 415 1475 9X

Mourning Sex is Phelan's second book after the highly acclaimed *Unmarked* (Phelan 1993). In *Unmarked* Phelan experimented with the kind of performative writing that *Mourning Sex* is entirely composed in. Phelan says of this shift towards performativity: 'I want this writing to enact the affective force of the performance event again' (12). And I would say that this is the effect of *Mourning Sex*; a troubling, inspiring, mourning read. Phelan is critically and poetically interested in time, in the temporality that organizes bodies and psyches, and that fails them. She is a theorist of the edges of understanding and combines a rigorous critical voice with an understated ordinariness. In each of the book's eight sections, Phelan focuses on a different part of the body – a wounded torso, a paralysed leg, a grave-like rectum, a bleeding nose, a shattered skull, a failed liver, an infected eye. As we negotiate this wounded and incomplete body, Phelan casts her writing in shifting tenors; elliptical fictions; poetries caught falling.

Since this is a book about struggling with endings, I begin at the end of Phelan's book: 'Infected eyes: dying man with a movie camera, Silverlake Life: the view from here'. This is an essay which is 'speculation in the key of grief' (153), an

analysis of an extraordinary film made by Tom Joslin and Mark Massi. In this chapter Phelan suggests a cinema for the dead – a film-making that has a particular relation to the psychic need to rehearse for death. The dying recorded in the film *Silverlake Life* offers for Phelan 'a new manifesto for a politically motivated talking cure' (155) as she writes and mourns the deaths recorded here in celluloid and failing flesh.

Dying haunts this book. In another section, 'Failed Live(r)s', Phelan writes a chapter to the academic Rena Grant who died of alcoholism at 32. Mimicking Freud, Phelan names several of her sections 'A fragment of an analysis of a case of repetitive hysteria', the case of a woman who has trouble with mimicry. This woman, called Echo by Phelan, is a professional critic and a fictional colleague of Rena Grant. In this *mise-en-abyme* of critic mimicking critic, etc., Phelan performs Grant's theoretical and personal impact on contemporary theory. In counter-mimicry Phelan explicates her grief, but resists any neat autobiographical analogy.

Mourning is not always a solemn process in this collection. In 'Uncovered rectums: disinterring the Rose Theatre', Phelan writes one of the funniest lines in a critical work I've read in a long while; she calmly says: 'Let's compare an anatomical diagram of the male rectum and an aerial photograph of the Rose remains' (84). None the less her argument here is gripping as she weaves the political *furor* in Britain

over the Rose remains, with a psychoanalytic reading of how the grave of the theatre (actually Marlowe's more than Shakespeare's) functioned to bring into relief a cultural construction of 'the missing'. Other sections of the book bring together Holbein's skull in *The Ambassadors* with Rodney King's battered head and Caravaggio with Mapplethorpe. In 'Immobile legs', Phelan composes her chapter on dance, hysteria and the dying of bodies as a narration by a dancer who gets injured and takes up critical research. Throughout Phelan focuses on the 'catastrophe and exhilaration of embodiment' and on trauma as a term for the unrepresentable.

These essays are unsettling and surprising in their narrative and critical turns. The content of Phelan's writing is regularly startling but it is the haunting audacity she has to perform her critical focus in such different ways that makes her an artist as well as a theorist. This work is original, exciting and moving. Phelan's prose and poetry are crisp and direct. She is as elegant as the professional critic, negotiating Derrida, Celan and Heidegger, as she is telling stories about tearing figures from childhood anatomy books. Phelan herself, along with Isabela Basombrio, has made the photographs that cover the front and back of this book. These are photographs of a flamingo flower (*Arthurium Scherzerianum*). On the front of the book, the flower is whole if troubling. Rich reds and mauves – the phallic stamen and labia-like petal. There are echoes of the public rituals of mourning. But on

the back of the book the flower is dying, its stamen broken off and its petal-flesh dried. If you open the book from the back, you will find four blank pages – eight empty sides: mourning pages beneath the image of the dying flower. Under the index and the bibliography is Massi shooting the images of Joslin's dead body and sobbing.

Jools Gilson-Ellis

References

Phelan, Peggy (1993) *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, New York & London: Routledge.

The Explicit Body in Performance

Rebecca Schneider.
New York and London: Routledge 1997
237 pp. ISBN 0 415 0909 261

A theorizing of the explicit female body in the work of a range of performers/performances sounds like a rich addition to contemporary performance studies and feminist theory. Schneider promises much in her title and in the smug smile Ann Magnuson wears on the cover of her book. Magnuson kneels confidently astride what looks like a male corpse. The title of the book is written in rainbow colours between her breasts and across her belly. On the tag tied to a toe on one of the male feet (whose soles face us) is written 'hype'. It's a clever, witty image. Magnuson looks triumphant as she faces us with her executive glasses and her long wig. If this man is dead, how can he penetrate her? Is this necrophilia or another kind of mounting glee? Schneider's book fails, however, to live up to its own visual hype.

Schneider is concerned with what she refers to as the 'explosive literality' of explicit feminist performance art. She uses perspectival theory which situates the female body as prime

signifier of the vanishing point in relation to the ways desire is structured according to commodity capitalism. This makes for an interesting theoretical position – a materialist feminism for the 1990s. Schneider is delicious on 'bad boy art' – it had me giggling with recognition of the bad boy artists I have wearily known. But I wonder if what Schneider proposes in this critical work sufficiently theorizes an alternative position. She makes one point very well – that women by virtue of their engenderment are already transgressive, so that their mimicry of myth/stereotype double-winks at representation. Her point about literal and explicit feminist performance artists 'performing' satiety is also a tantalizing one – but not one that is developed and negotiated fully across the work of the women analysed here.

One of the book's biggest problems is its lack of theoretical pinning-down of the term 'explicit'. Explicit about what? In what sense 'bodily' explicit? We're used to the word in relation to porn flicks – it comes already drenched with sexual connotations. This is why it is so disconcerting when Schneider seems to be moving away from women who are linked to the term used in this way (albeit transgressively) and towards performers of colour about whom she uses the term to mean explicit about racial appropriation, but not bodily explicit. If Schneider simply means processes of bodily unfolding as the root of the word 'explicit' (*explicare*) suggests, then her term needs more rigorous and precise location.

Schneider is best on Schneeman who has been critically neglected for several decades and the book does include new material. The work on Sprinkle and Finley is less innovative simply because it covers old ground with a slightly different flavour. Towards the end of the book Schneider moves on to analyse

Spiderwoman Theatre, a chapter which is certainly an important contribution to writing on the company's work, but I simply lost the reason for their inclusion in a book on the explicit body. I presume the connection is in the performance of bodies which are not closed, classical, or white. This is structurally and theoretically an odd end to the book. The chapter before this focuses on modernism and its obsession with the female savage particularly in visual art. Again a perfectly valid piece of scholarship, but the connection to the explicit body seems to me somewhat tenuous.

Schneider returns to the art/porn divide in relation to several women performance artists. She begins with Veronica Vera and her use of a 1982 Mapplethorpe photograph of herself and 'Marty'. Schneider's argument here neatly brings together biblical story and postmodern reworking, and suggests that Marty is speaking into Veronica's vagina. But what does he say? And what kind of elision is it between speaking into female genitals and impregnating into an ear?

Schneider's negotiation of personal and critical voices is a little patchy. Her description of being winded by a hurricane and then witnessing the eye – 'a hollow sunny place in the middle of devastation' (57) – certainly lends something to her critical concern in this chapter, Annie Sprinkle's good-humoured showing of her cervix (Chapter 2, 'Logie of the twister, eye of the storm'). But there are other times when autobiographical strands leave out important critical analysis. In Chapter 6, 'Seeing the big show', Schneider discusses a performance of Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*. What's interesting to me is why Schneider and the rest of the ('mostly white') audience joined in with the chant 'Bid 'em in' when Robbie McCauley is naked and on an auction

block. What extraordinarily compelling performative context brought this theatre to pass?

The discussion of Finley's work relates to her performance of *The Constant State of Desire*, now ten years old and with a critical history of its own. Schneider's descriptive analysis adds little to the theoretical discourse on Finley whose work has shifted significantly in the intervening period. Certainly Finley's assault on commodity culture is key to her work but this is simply going over old ground. Finley's 'scandalising metaphoricality' (see Pramaggiore 1992) has been written about before in a similar way. I think this is a particular shame because Finley's performance of excess is critically rich indeed.

There are certainly some interesting sections to this book, and it opens up some important debates in the staging of transgressive female bodies. Overall, however, I think it suffers from losing its focus, and not pushing its theoretical questions far enough.

Jools Gilson-Ellis

Reference

- Pramaggiore, Maria (1992)
'Resisting/performing/femininity: words, flesh, and feminism in Karen Finley's *Constant State of Desire*', *Theatre Journal* 44: 269-90.

Feminist Stages: Interviews with Women in Contemporary British Theatre

Lizbeth Goodman.

Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers 1996

Research Assistant Jane de Gay

This is a wonderful book. Reading it cover-to-cover gives an extraordinary sense of the range and perspectives of women involved in British theatre over the last thirty years. It will probably be most valuable as a reference book for

students, academics, critics and practitioners, but it does also make a readable read. It is ten years since Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig published their *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. In the inevitable tussle for the North American college market, many books on contemporary theatres focus heavily or exclusively on North American writers, companies and performers. The Betsko and Koenig was really a collection of interviews with women playwrights from the USA. Out of thirty interviews there was one each from France, China and Argentina and four from Britain. Goodman and de Gay's collection offers a clear focus on the British context, and includes interviews with women involved in all aspects of theatre-making, including writers, critics, actors, designers and directors. This is not on the whole a theoretical book; interviewees are asked what they understand by feminism and whether they consequently consider themselves or their work to function under this definition. This makes interesting comparative reading, but does not (nor does Goodman intend it to) take the place of other forms of critical analysis.

Goodman and de Gay have a structure for their interviews, but also allow them to take their own course as interviewees/interviewers wish. Much of the juice of these interviews is found in the quirks of these discussions – in the wit of anecdote, the verve of a political project. What comes across after reading this collection is an extraordinary sense of the passion, weariness and humour of these women. Many have struggled on little or no financial support for many years. Others had a flush period in the 1970s when many small companies were funded by the British Arts Council only to have their grants cut abruptly during the

1980s. Others worked/still work with project-to-project funding which breeds insecurity and fails to facilitate continuity. Significantly very few companies have survived the entire period covered by this book. The Sphinx (formerly the Women's Theatre Group) is one of these very few. Other women have made a life out of working in mainstream theatre. Fiona Shaw and Juliet Stevenson have almost become Britain's diva feminist actresses. Both have flirted with Hollywood but still do a significant amount of their acting work in theatre. Shaw discusses the kind of women's roles she has played in theatre of recent years including Hedda Gabler, Elektra and Rosalind. She also speaks frankly about Britain's National Theatre and its failure to produce women playwrights regularly. Juliet Stevenson discusses her experience of acting either in theatre or film in which writers, directors and fellow actors are usually men. She describes a passion for 'scrubbing down' Shakespeare heroines and starting again.

Bryony Lavery the playwright is a hoot – as full of gorgeous spirit as her plays are. She adds ironic verve to this collection in her playfulness and discussion of her work in British lesbian theatre. To Goodman's question 'Are these feminist plays, and are they political?', Lavery replies, 'Do bears shit in the woods?' Other interviews give a focused insight into the work of particular companies – The Hairy Marys, Tamasha and Charabanc, for example. The Hairy Marys were originally formed by a group of women with Irish roots/connections. The company now develops work which plays with gender roles through comedy and physical theatre. Kristine Landon-Smith of Tamasha discusses the company she formed in 1989 with Sudha Bhuchar. Tamasha is an Asian

theatre company which produces Asian-influenced drama for the British stage. Landon-Smith discusses the lack of Asian theatre in Britain, and the company's work on women construction workers in Delhi, in their production *Women of the Dust*. Charabanc Theatre Company is based in Belfast, Northern Ireland and has been working since 1983. The artistic directors Carol Moore and Eleanor Methven talk about the artistic and political implications of making feminist theatre in a paramilitary state.

This is a rich collection of voices – pleasurable, surprising and sometimes mournful to read. They constitute an invaluable document in the field of contemporary women's theatre. Much of the work discussed here would easily be lost without these voices in print, and Goodman's gesture of collection is a beckoning finger tempting more work in this area – critical, artistic and audacious.

Jools Gilson-Ellis

A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance on and beyond the Stage

edited by Carol Martin
London and New York: Routledge
1996

311 pp. ISBN 0 415 106 451

This collection of essays, interviews and performance texts doesn't own up to its exclusive focus on work from the USA. It is really 'A sourcebook of feminist theatre and performance in the United States'. For a collection which includes a range of critical and artistic texts from some of the most exciting of contemporary American critics and performers this elision is more than a little startling. All except two of the essays/texts/interviews in this collection were first published in the *Drama Review* between 1975 and 1993. Occasionally I think this is a problem, when criteria for inclusion

seem to be closer to what was available (as well as important) from the *Drama Review* archives than what would best provide a student source-book of feminist theatre and performance. I would be less bothered by this if the book were more forthright about its aims. Having said all this, the collection does provide an invaluable resource in one volume. I have often used material included here for teaching, but have rarely found it in book form. Students are likely to find this an excellent collection in this area, although it will be more difficult for students outside an American context to locate this work.

The best feature of the collection is its combination of critical/theoretical writing, interview material and primary texts on single or related practitioners. The book offers, for example, such a pedagogical trilogy on Karen Finley: Lynda Hart's 'Motherhood according to Finley', written in 1992; Schechner's 1988 interview with Finley, 'A constant state of becoming'; and the text of *A Constant State of Desire*, also written in 1988. These three texts offer students a rich starting-point for looking at Finley's work. Hart's article analyses the dangers of appropriation for Finley, goes on to focus on *The Theory of Total Blame* (1988) and then locates this work within psychoanalytic theory. Schechner's quirky interview technique gives Finley's perspective on *A Constant State of Desire*, and offers a sense of her concerns before she was involved in the NEA controversy two years later. The text of *A Constant State of Desire* is now a classic of feminist performance art, and its brutal, tender, terrible voice makes for troubling reading still.

Holly Hughes is included in a similar trilogy: Kate Davy's 'Reading past the heterosexual imperative' about *Dress Suits to Hire*; Schneider's 1989 interview 'Holly Hughes: poly-

morphous perversity and the lesbian scientist'; and the text of *Dress Suits to Hire* (1989). All three texts give a clear sense of the flavour of Hughes's work and its marked contrast to the combative Finley. In one of the two non-TDR inclusions Carol Martin writes about the problems of mainstream success for Anna Deavere Smith in 'Bearing witness'; this is complemented by an interview with Deavere Smith also by Martin, which includes an extract from *Fires in the Mirror* (1992). These make interesting reading in tandem and give a sense of the theoretical excitement around Deavere Smith's work as well as the artist's own sense of its aim and construction.

This collection also includes theoretical articles focused on the theory of feminist performance practice rather than on the work of particular practitioners. Important amongst these are Dolan's 'In defense of the discourse' (1989) which locates the shifts in the USA towards and away from poststructuralism, both in 1980s publications and performances given at the Women and Theatre Program's preferences. Diamond's 'Brechtian theory/feminist theory' (1988) proposes a feminist alienation effect. Essays located closer to the theatre business include Berson's 'Women at the helm' (1994), which surveys female artistic directors in the USA.

As a student source-book this collection offers no contextualizing introductory paragraphs/follow-up bibliographies or the dating of articles within the body of the book. I think this is a pedagogical shame, and particularly so for readers outside of a US context. Despite this, much in the collection charts important territory in the field of feminism and performance and will provide an invaluable resource in the area.

Jools Gilson-Ellis