Book Review: Plays for Physical Theatre II. Angie Farrow, Dunmore Publishing, Wellington NZ

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The paradox of publishing the scripted versions of plays that are designed to be performed making full use of physical theatre is plain to see. It could be assumed that such scripts would be overburdened with complex notation of movement and gesture or lengthy stage directions which attempt to convey how the play was originally performed. Fortunately, Angie Farrow’s collection of three very short pieces designed to play in around ten minutes, and three one-act plays employs a number of features that successfully tackle this conundrum.

Farrow's writing is characterised by the creation of an aesthetic language whose poetic rhythms and cadences simply seem to demand choreography. I have a clear memory of seeing one of Angie’s short plays some years ago. I had never seen anything quite like it and when I decided to address the drama of movement and sound in ‘The GCSE Drama Coursebook’ I knew I had to include an extract of it. This collection demonstrates her continued ability to identify a strong clear pretext that throws a new light on life then explore it in a keenly imaginative, often humourous and always humanistic way.

In ‘Lifetime’, for example, a couple meet, marry and face panoply of domestic and political problems before going their separate ways ten minutes of theatre time later. The compression of time is absurd and demands precision timing and an intensity of performance. Life as shown here may be comically random, but that doesn’t negate the pain and joy involved in living it. ‘The Last Day' presents us with four characters so wrapped up in their own preoccupations they at first fail to accommodate the import of their situation yet each experiences some small, transformative revelation. In Farrow’s own words, ‘It’s not a subtle play. Don’t be afraid of the funny,’ yet played out in words and actions these tiny realisations make the characters grow immeasurably as fellow humans. In contrast, ‘Falling' demands a deep engagement
with the psychological, emotional and the physical in order to demand an empathetic response from an audience to an extraordinary human condition. Based on the case study of a woman whose unusual neurological disorder gave her the sensation of perpetually falling, the play illustrates how the playwright’s language cannot reach its full poetic potential without accompanying realisation in three dimensional space and the employment of visual and aural choric devices.

The two great strengths of Farrow’s use of language lie in her ensemble choral pieces and snappy stichomythic interchanges. At times she does manage to capture young voices well but more generally her immersion in the ephemeral demands that meaning is conveyed through the qualities of sound and movement more than through mimesis. This is certainly so in ‘Follow, Follow, Follow’, the narrative line of which follows a group of six young adults who have been in some kind of shelter for as long as they remember. As is often the case with Farrow’s plays the pretext appears to suggest science fiction yet the dramatic exploration is more akin to the metaphoric worlds Beckett created in pieces such as ‘Act Without Words’ or ‘Krapp’s Last Tape’. If ‘Follow, Follow, Follow’ is about the transition from childhood to adulthood then ‘Amnesia’ takes its inspiration from the other end of life where the struggle is to remember moments of personal growth in a world in which, increasingly, there is less and less need to rely on our own brains to remember anything. Sitting chronologically neatly between these two plays ‘Legend’ tells the story of three women friends who search for, and in unexpected ways find, a manifestation of heroism which underpins and gives meaning to their existence as adults.

Students who have come across the work of Frantic Assembly, DV8 and Complicité will have no trouble seeing the potential of these plays. For those just beginning to see physical theatre as an area for serious and enjoyable study the introductory section to each play will prove invaluable. In these sections the author provides a structured and accessible essay on each play’s genesis and how actors and directors realised the words. Small boxes are inserted to explain, briefly, terms that may be unfamiliar to students and a short but helpful list of ‘key points’ sums up the core of the play and issues of form and content addressed in the introductory
essay. In all, this is an attractively designed and exciting resource which would offer older teenagers new alternatives with which to develop their knowledge of and skill in physical theatre.

Biographical note

Andy Kempe is Head of Initial Teacher Training and Senior Lecturer in Drama Education at the University of Reading. He has extensive experience of working with both trainee and serving teachers in the UK and abroad and his work with students of all ages and abilities has informed numerous articles and chapters covering a wide spectrum of issues in drama, English and arts education. His *GCSE Drama Coursebook* has been a standard text in many schools since the first edition was published 20 year ago. Recent publications include ‘Speaking, Listening and Drama’, ‘Progression in Secondary Drama’ and ‘Learning to Teach Drama 11 – 18’.

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