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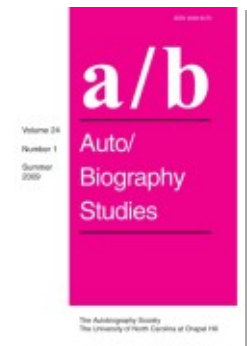
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*Autobiography and Performance* (review)

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*Autobiography and Performance*. By Deidre Heddon. Hampshire: Palgrave, 2008. xi, 218 pp.

Reviewed by Gillian Arrighi

AUTOBIOGRAPHY has always been implicated in the practices that contribute to theatrical production. Within theatre praxis it is commonly understood, for example, that in order to do their jobs well, actors need to draw on their personal store of life experience. The individual voice and physicality of actors can only ever be theirs and theirs alone, whilst the roles they create will inevitably reflect aspects of themselves, layered perhaps with re-presented characteristics (whether physical, vocal, or behavioral) of other people they have known, met, observed, rubbed shoulders with, or been influenced by at some previous time in their lives. Theatre directors and writers likewise draw on their stores of personal experience because, as Deidre Heddon observes in the opening pages of *Autobiography and Performance*, all creative production is inevitably “infused with the personal” (7).

Over the past two decades in England and North America there has been a phenomenal increase in new performance works created by performance artists who have mobilized autobiographical material as the primary source for their devising ventures. *Autobiography and Performance* provides a critical study of a key selection of these works, chosen from a vast body of live performances Heddon has witnessed in England and the United States since the late 1980s. In contrast to the celebrity actors, actresses and producers of stage and screen who have traditionally been the subjects and authors of autobiographical books pertaining to the entertainment industry, the majority of the artists whose work is examined in *Autobiography and Performance* are subjects whom Heddon characterizes as socially marginalized, either as a result of their ethnicity, their gender, or their sexual preference. A self-confessed advocate of autobiographical performance, Heddon regards the productions of these artists as “performances of possibility” because they invest the marginalized subject with agency and with narrative authority (2), “reveal otherwise invisible lives” (3), and enable subjects who are marginalized by the hegemonic structures of Western society “to talk out, talk back, talk otherwise” (3).

Heddon argues that the live performance environment, where performer and audience are necessarily co-present and therefore share the same time and space, is an ideal location for the autobiographical medium (although she is also aware of the limiting contingencies posed

by the theatrical environment to the truth status of autobiographical works). Whilst many of the performances discussed in this book appear on face value to be monologic in structure, Heddon maintains that the direct address mode frequently adopted by performers of autobiographical material enables an immediate engagement with their audience. As a consequence, audiences become witnesses to the personal narratives of the performers and are also unavoidably confronted by matters of relevance to the broader society, such as human rights, citizenship, justice, and equality. In choosing which performances to discuss and critique from a vast archive of recent autobiographical performance, Heddon has gravitated towards productions that “use the details of [a] life to illuminate or explore something more universal” (5). Maintaining the belief that “the personal is political,” Heddon’s sustained argument throughout is that “[t]he work of autobiographical performance [is to explore . . . the relationship between the personal and the political, engaging with and theorising the discursive construction of selves and experience” (162).

University and higher education teachers and students of drama, theatre, performance, literature, self writing, cultural geography, and communications studies will find this book useful. Proposing neither a teleological history of the field nor an anthology of significant autobiographical performance works produced in the UK and the US since the late-1980s, Heddon instead introduces and engages critically with the social, political, and aesthetic contexts of this relatively recent “genre” of creative production. Such an undertaking is a challenging one since the number of live performance works that mobilize personal material as their primary source is huge and defies generic classification. Live performances created by people who are at once the subject and author of the production span a diverse range of contemporary theatrical styles that include but are not limited to solo performance, site-specific and time-based performance works, verbatim drama, documentary theatre, testimonial performance, oral history, oral narrative, and performances implied by the broadly useful term performance art. Heddon’s analysis of the dominant cultural practices and values in Western society that autobiographical performance “worries” or “unsettles” in one way or another and her wide-ranging discussion of the political, cultural, personal and ethical complexities which autobiographical material intersects is valuable for its scholarliness and its inclusiveness.

Organized economically into four chapters, the case studies and related critical discussions that constitute the material of the book are thematically gathered under the headings “Politics,” “History,” “Place,” and “Ethics.” Observing that “the act of turning the personal

into the publicly political is one that has endured across time” (30), Heddon begins her first chapter, “Politics (of Self): The Subject of Autobiography,” by locating the historical impetus for autobiographical performance in the second-wave feminist movement of the early 1970s when “the political potential of autobiographical performance was harnessed for the first time” (21). Arguing that “representation is itself a discursive technology” (31), Heddon brings forward the problems inherent in making claims for an “essentialized” or “real” self within the context of public performance, where the identities of performers are necessarily mediated by the conditions and expectations of theatrical presentation (“performance is *not* the real world” [28]). Heddon teases out the tensions that she perceives between lived experience and its re-presentation on stage. The autobiographical performances chosen for examination in this chapter consequently encapsulate a between-ness, emerging as they do from *between* fact and fiction (Tim Miller’s *Glory Box*, 1999), from *between* self and persona (Bobby Baker’s ‘Daily Life Series’ of shows, produced from 1988 to 2001), and from the processes implied through *becoming* something *other* (in this case, on becoming lesbian, in the Glasgow-based theatre company mct’s 1998 show called *Fingerlicks*).

At the center of Chapter Two, “History: Testimonial Times,” sits the notion of witnessing rather than confessing via live performance. Here, Heddon’s focus is on performances by people who are secondary witnesses to the traumatic events that have shaped the lives of their ancestors. Case studies include Kim Ima’s *The Interlude* (2004), which draws on the forgotten history of World War II Japanese internment camps in the US and the familial legacy of Ima’s father who was a camp intern; Lisa Kron’s *2.5 Minute Ride* (1996), again concerning the experiences of the performer’s father, a Jewish holocaust survivor; and Robbie McCauley’s *Sally’s Rape* (1989), which emerges from the event that shaped McCauley’s family lineage, namely the rape of McCauley’s great-great-grandmother who was a black slave. In each case the performers acknowledge that the trauma of the past resonates across generations, impacting on their own identity. Heddon’s particular choice of performances in this section of her study enables recognition of the testimonial culture of our contemporary society and leads to an engagement with critical concerns surrounding issues such as trauma, memory, representation and historical “truth.”

The politics of identity and the politics of place constitute the focus of Chapter Three, “Place: The Place of Self,” and here Heddon examines the social relations that create “place” and the complex interdependency that exists between “place” and “identity.” Out-of-doors, public space “walking performances” by Mike Pearson (*Bubbling Tom*, 2000) and Phil Smith (*The Crab Walks*, 2004) are

considered alongside domestic, home-sited performances by Bobby Baker (*Kitchen Show*, 1991, performed in Baker's London kitchen) and *On the Scent* (2003) by the performance group Curious, who appropriate other people's homes for their shows.

The final chapter of Heddon's study, "Ethics: The Story of the Other," takes as its starting point the commonsense assertion that the personal narrative of any given individual necessarily intersects with the lives and experiences of others. Addressing the various ethical concerns to which autobiographical performance gives rise to, together with the matter of responsibility that autobiographical performers owe to familial or proximate others, Heddon focuses equally upon the application of good ethical practice during the process of devising a performance that draws on autobiographical material and on the ethical standards embedded within a finished product. It is this part of Heddon's study that is most specifically aimed at performers-in-training and their mentors.

As a higher education teacher of devised performance praxis myself, I can vouch for the usefulness of Heddon's text as a reference work and a critical guide. Many of the performance works scrutinized here have been written about in other literature, either within self-reflective commentaries written by the artists themselves (for example Mike Pearson, Tim Miller, Spalding Gray) or as the subject of other critical analyses (for example Bobbie Baker, Robbie McCauley, Graeme Miller, Lisa Kron, Mike Pearson, Spalding Gray, and the plays *The Laramie Project* and *Black Watch*); thus *Autobiography and Performance* functions as a connective overview of the field. But beyond the specific works Heddon refers to, it is her theoretical discussion that provides a lens through which to usefully view, assess, and critique performances beyond the scope of the book. Heddon provides a nuanced exposition of contemporary critical concerns that are central to many university courses and her ability to match those concerns to the study and practice of autobiographical performance will make this book a challenging resource for students and teachers working in a number of areas in the higher education sector.

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