TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work

Dominic Johnson

a Queen Mary, University of London
Published online: 04 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Dominic Johnson (2014) TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work, Contemporary Theatre Review, 24:2, 275-276, DOI: 10.1080/10486801.2014.890311

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2014.890311
democratisation and extension in methods of communication and access can be seen as a theme across the collection.

Despite a focus on new work, certain mainstays of digital performance discourse also reappear in this collection. Second Life makes an appearance in three chapters. This repetition suggests a need to re-evaluate the predominance of Second Life in discussions of virtual space. As a tool or method for artists it cannot be ignored, but something new needs to be brought to the table to validate its repeated presence as the default buzzword when discussing virtual realities. This is a small grievance though in a book that does engage with established areas of scholarly and artistic interest – networks, embodiment, representation – in inventive ways.

If the contributions to this book share common denominators in discussing the extension of access, communication, and connection, then the collection as a whole also speaks to these concepts. There is a good balance between essays that engage in conversation with critical theory, including the work of Derrida, Antonin Artaud, and Jean-Luc Nancy, and those that focus more narrowly on the author’s own artistic practice. This book has something to offer those interested in the confluence of performance and technology from practitioners to scholars of all levels, as well as those outside the academy with an active interest in this type of performance work. This bodes well for the series as a whole.

© Sophie Lally

TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work edited by Judith Rudakoff


Dominic Johnson
Queen Mary, University of London

Nina Arsenault is a Canadian artist whose work across theatre, performance art, and multimedia has explored compellingly the body narratives of transsexuality, drawing vividly on her own experiences as a transgendered woman. Undergoing over 60 surgical interventions since 1996, Arsenault has transformed her body from its earlier unassuming, male-identified gender presentation to the extraordinary, hyper-feminine, prosthetically enhanced appearance she now inhabits. Such achievements are described as ‘unreasonable’ by Judith Rudakoff in her introduction (p. 4) and in the book’s subtitle. Arsenault’s transformation goes beyond reason in its extremity (her procedures have included a 13-hour facial feminisation and additional operations on her face, breast enlargements, surgical castration, and rib reshaping), and in financial terms (her transformation has come at a personal cost of $200,000, amassed through sex work). More importantly, Arsenault has created a physical body, a body of work, and an identity that are each ‘unreasonable’ conceptually speaking: as excessive, awkward, volatile, fascinating, and uncompromising interventions. A non-normative approach to transsexuality gives Arsenault ‘permission to be fabulous instead of reasonable’, to ‘sacrifice being normal’ by rejecting ‘[s]tylized abstractions of beauty’ (p. 217).

The texts collected in TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault include some of the artist’s writings for performance, as well as commissioned texts by peer artists and scholar. Together, the texts testify to the ‘unreasonable’ challenges Arsenault poses to gender studies, performance studies, and histories of visual art. Of the commissioned essays, the most effective (for this reader) are Shannon Bell’s ‘fast feminist’ analysis (p. 95) of Arsenault’s body as a manifestation of the Lacanian petit objet a, and David Fancy’s reading of Arsenault’s work as a mythological endeavour via the critical philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Other essays usefully theorise Arsenault in relation to a dizzying range of themes, including cyborg politics, prosthetics, sex work, critical camp, self-portraiture, voice, acting, spirituality, beauty, and her genitalia. The diversity of approaches her work seems to license is itself a seeming indicator of Arsenault’s importance as an artist.

Arsenault is known best for her one-woman show The Silicone Diaries (2009). The performance is documented in the book through a script and photographs, and its achievements and challenges are copiously and sympathetically analysed by scholarly commentators. Described by Shimon Levy as a ‘via dolorosa play’ (p. 167), the script itself narrates the procedures through which Arsenault has achieved her gender ideal, in stark, funny, and sometimes cringing detail. Standout sections include her account of becoming a simulacrum of Pamela Anderson (‘a caricature of a woman’) in order to seduce the actress’s rock-star ex-husband (pp. 217–21), and receiving black market injections of silicone into her hips and ass in a motel room in Detroit (pp. 211–14). Throughout, the various experiences she describes add power, sass, and idiosyncrasy to her compelling art/life project: namely, her self-creation, transformation, and performance as a ‘patron
saint of plastic surgery’ (p. 205). In her life and in her work (at best an arbitrary distinction), Arsenault forgoes the seemingly normative ideal of passing and unsettles convenient binaries between natural/artificial, real/fake, male/female, and human/machine, forging both a life and an artistic practice as a cut-up of Barbie and the Bride of Frankenstein (two recurring characters in the convincing narratives set up by her readers) – as ‘[t]he unreal cyborg I have constructed’, she writes (p. 226).

In *The Silicone Diaries*, and the other script included here, *Landscape with Yukon and Unnatural Beauty* (2011), Arsenault is an acute and compelling writer, a monologist with an ability to translate her idiosyncratic experiences into embodied outlooks on beauty, desire, belonging, shame, and other themes that ring true for a broad range of subject positions, including queer or embattled ones. ‘What has been done cannot be undone’, she writes (p. 131).

One of the pleasures of Arsenault’s practice is her impertinent embrace of negative affects. She revels in the excesses, contradictions, and political impasses of her own work and life in the course of her striking transformation towards an ego ideal as ‘part assemblage, part masquerade’ (p. 5). For playwright Sky Gilbert, Arsenault is a ‘cartoon character’, ‘brazier’, ‘hypersexual’, ‘the most fascist of body fascists’, and ‘a permanent freak of nature’ (pp. 21–23). He means these descriptions kindly, and celebrates her refusal of a more convivial or socially ameliorative political agenda. Arsenault persuasively turns aesthetic or political fiasco into the foundation for an artistic achievement, as a technique for constructing what she calls ‘political autobiography’ (p. 6). The latter takes place in and through performances embedded in celebrations of bad affects and ugly feelings.

*The Silicone Diaries* has toured in Canada, and Arsenault is a well-known media personality in the country. Yet her work has had surprisingly little exposure in the USA, the UK, or Europe. Nevertheless, Rudakoff’s editorial approach entails a deliberate ‘framework of exceptionalism’, rather than an attempt to locate Arsenault in a broader, international genealogy of gender outlaws (p. 7). I found this strategy unconvincing, but the book will certainly open possibilities for useful comparisons by other scholars in subsequent studies. Future research might include a more extensive comparison to the path-breaking surgical performances of ORLAN or the confessional performances and writings of Kate Bornstein (both are mentioned intermittently). *TRANS (per)FORMING Nina Arsenault* will bring the artist’s work to a much wider audience. The documentation and discussions provided will be of interest to scholars and students in theatre and performance studies, women’s and LGBT studies, and visual studies, and should provoke new ways of thinking about the body, technologies of gender, and autobiography in performance.

© Dominic Johnson

**Theatre-Making: Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21st Century by Duška Radosavljević**


Caridad Svich
Rutgers University, New Brunswick

Some books take you by the hand and gently guide you through their corridors of insight and knowledge. Others propel you into the heart of matters and never let go. Duška Radosavljević’s *Theatre-Making* does both in a manner that is consistently engaging, provocative, forthright, and surprising. Aimed at practitioners, scholars, graduate-level students, and also at a general readership interested in knowing more about modes of authorship in contemporary theatre, this volume explores how and why theatre and works for live performance are made from a variety of perspectives and cultures in Europe and the UK. Central to the book’s argument is the audience’s role in ‘co-authoring’ works for live performance, and how the lines drawn between text-based and devised work need not be exclusionary.

As practitioner and scholar, Radosavljević brings to this well-researched and comprehensive (from a European and UK standpoint) volume a strong focus on the practical, hands-on, body-based nature of work made for and experienced in live performance. Composed in five chapters, *Theatre-Making* covers staging plays, devising and adapting material for performance, the role of new writing in the twentieth century, verbatim theatre, and work that demands a relational approach towards ‘authorship’. Central to Radosavljević’s mission throughout this dense but rarely alienating book is to contest the binaries that have been created arbitrarily, and often for economic and/or political means, in the fields of English-language theatre and performance studies between text-based and devised works. She