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The Rehearsal: Pigeon Theatre's trilogy of performance works on playing dead
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BOOK REVIEWS


In the case of some academic book reviews, a reviewer may feel it necessary to act as translator and mediator, deciphering a highly abstract theoretical proposition presented in a primarily deductive format in the hopes of offering practitioners a conceptual foothold. In other cases, a book can be considered self-explanatory, requiring nothing more from a reviewer than an emphatic framing. The Rehearsal is such a book: as a coherent multi-ontological account of how death may be imaginatively constructed and socially reconstructed in a contemporary environment, The Rehearsal enacts in writing what it discusses with regards to performance. The Rehearsal offers more than simply a record of a devised script, more than simply a critical discussion of a performance as a completed project. The organisation of material – the intertwining of three performance texts, based on transcribed interviews and rehearsal documentation, and four critical essays penned by specialists in the areas of Performance Studies, Sociology, Health and Social Care, and Psychoanalysis and Cultural theory – offers the reader several varied, but converging, viewpoints of ‘rehearsing death.’ As Anna Fenemore (editor, contributor, artistic director of Pigeon Theatre, performer and academic) states in the Introduction:

The rationale for this juxtaposition between performance text and critical essay is that the essentially ‘theatrical’ nature of the psychological/sociological/philosophical/medical processes of ‘rehearsing death’ offers itself to comment/reflection through theatre. (p. 5)

Pigeon Theatre aims to create ‘devised performance work that addresses questions of site-specificity, of non-traditional theatre spaces, of unconventional spatial/social arrangements, and of performer/spectator intimacy’ (p. xiv); and this is what the performance work, The Rehearsal (a trilogy), appears to do. In an equivalent way, The Rehearsal (the book) questions the inevitability of spatial/social arrangements associated with documentation, making explicit the way in which conventional binaries of text/reader, philosophy/practice, real/imagined, rehearsed/enacted, author/collaborator, theatrical/daily can be ‘rehearsed’ and ‘performed’ differently. Concepts of ‘play,’ ‘rehearsal,’ ‘repetition,’ ‘composition’ and ‘collaboration’ usually reserved for discussion and practice in theatrical contexts only, are critically extended into the realm of the everyday – not only as metaphors, as signifiers, but as commonplace experiential strategies. As Fenemore admits:

This work … started from a personal need, but anticipates the need for reassurance (that everyone does it) of anyone who has ever imagined the multiple (and ‘theatrical’) ways in which their father might die, or their daughter, or their mother, lover or son, and anyone who has ever compiled a fantasy funeral play-list, guest-list, eulogy and mise en scène. (p. 7)
She further states that:

*The Rehearsal* (a trilogy) attempts to bring the multimodel perceptual experience of everyday transgressional inhabitation into the performance arena. This mode of inhabitation is achieved through an interweaving of spectating bodily/visual space and performing bodily/visual space, where participants are ‘in the world’ together as individuals are in the everyday.

The three performance scripts reflect this ‘multimodel perceptual experience’ and were developed through the use of several improvisational, collaborative and ‘real time’ strategies. The simplicity and repetitive nature of the dialogue belie a more complex arrangement of: rehearsed and improvised actions and dialogue; choreographed and spontaneous interactions between performers, and between performers and audience; staged and ‘found’ sound effects; unprepared and unpredictable audience activities within the performance space.

This idea of being ‘in the world together’ is also reflected in the interweaving of the four critical essays which are written by four contributors with context-specific insights and understanding of death and dying.

In Chapter One Anna Fenemore uses Allan Kellehear’s four challenges of dying (anticipating, preparing, taming and timing) as a springboard to critically discuss four processes associated with her experience of artistic ‘rehearsal’ in devised performance practice (anticipation, imagination and projection; playing, pretence and pleasure; direction, repetition and insistence; editing, *mise en scène* and composition). She also draws on de Certeau’s notion of ‘tour’ to support a dual articulation of ‘rehearsal’ (involving repetitive reconstruction and projection) as both theatrical term and everyday practise. Significantly, Fenemore’s interest in performance and phenomenology – her understanding of rehearsing and performing as ‘complex and multilayered articulations of actions in time’ (p. 27) – makes her continually aware that the categories and processes under discussion are conditional interpretations of experience, and hence ‘always subject to “bleeding”’ (p. 12).

In Chapter Two Allan Kellehear – whose research interests include the history, sociology and social psychology of dying; mystical, religious, altered states associated with dying and bereavement; and public health policies and service sector development – underlines ‘the ever-present tensions between personal imagination/experience and the material and ideological intrusions that shape that inner experience,’ highlighting that the notion of a ‘dying’ refers not simply to the demise of a biological organism, but more specifically to a recent human experience of being ‘aware that death is immanent’ [sic] which is why it is possible to speak of a ‘social history of dying’ (p. 68).

Chapter Three offers a series of vignettes taken from the experiences of older dying people to expose the challenges and contradictions associated with socially framed notions of what constitutes a timely/untimely death, and the contradictory response of care-givers as they attempt to manage and construct this timing to signify a ‘good death.’ In this chapter Carol Komaromy weaves intimate details gained from observations in care homes, with reflections on her father’s dying and death, and frames these in reference to notions of theatrical performance (character, acting, display, credibility, spectator distance) employed by Goffman in a sociological perspective. Komaromy’s background experience includes nursing, midwifery and counselling, as well as teaching, research and publication on death and dying.

In Chapter Four, Alan Fair’s combined research interest in film and cinema, cultural production and psychoanalysis provides a frame for contextualising the work of Pigeon Theatre, with a specific focus on what death as a performative act might signify: ‘Our
awareness of dying allows us to structure the story in a particular way’ (p. 173). Fair’s chapter highlights the existential crisis associated with perceiving self, knowing self, recognising self, expressing self, enacting self; he offers questions, observations, more questions, some possibilities of what it means to see, to narrate, to rehearse, to hold discourse about experiences such as life and death – commenting to the extent that much of what we assume to know can only be signified but ‘not grasped as such’ (p. 175). Fair’s chapter offers an existential frame supporting the way in which material is meaningfully arranged in *The Rehearsal (a trilogy)*, as simultaneously real and imagined, spontaneous and rehearsed, personal and collective:

We bring about ourselves in the struggle to do so, not in the accurate delineation of a sense of being but rather in the fumbling that reminds us that the space of being is no place at all. This is what I see going on in Anna Fenemore’s practice, the interrogation of the inter-act-ion between humans. (p. 173)

*The Rehearsal* delivers what it promises to: a trilogy of site-specific performance texts which raise ‘questions about the interplay in contemporary theatre between the processes of rehearsal and the theatrical metaphors that shape our everyday dealings with trauma, including death’ (back cover). The book provides ample evidence of the conceptual and practical benefits of a well managed and effectively documented multidisciplinary project. Rather than offering conclusive predictions or reiterating predetermined theories, the juxtaposition of these essays in the book offers the space within which other voices might feel free to contribute further to what Kenemore describes as of paramount importance in contemporary societies – ongoing discussions of ‘the dying body’ that seem to ‘problemotise understandings of identity, subjectivity and socialisation’ (p. 3). Practitioners and theorists interested in extending their understanding and practice of the intimate, collaborative, anticipatory, fluid and inclusive nature of theatre and performance and its relationship to everyday reality will find much in *The Rehearsal* to inspire and affirm.

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This book is long overdue (one recalls the title and theme song of one of Bra Gib’s best-known shows, *How Long?*). It pays tribute to the life and work of Gibson Kente, variously described as ‘the father of township theatre,’ a ‘garage genius,’ a ‘national treasure,’ and a ‘traitor.’ In the words of Doc Bikitsha, ‘You cannot over-estimate his contribution.’ The sad thing is that the man who dominated township theatre for something like 30 years, who took his productions to all corners of South Africa, who trained a whole generation of performing artists, and who became a household name in the townships, died a pauper. The Gibson Kente Foundation has, to date, done little to