

Theatre, ecological sanity, and finding Baz Kershaw

Theatre Ecology: environments and performance events, Baz Kershaw
(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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Introduction

In 1993, Belfast anthropologist Kay Milton edited a book titled *Environmentalism: the view from Anthropology*. She introduced this important collection of essays with unnecessarily modest questioning of the value of anthropology as a disciplinary contribution in an era of environmental crisis. Over two decades, Milton and her colleagues have produced a body of research which assists our understanding of environmentalism and environmental crisis, strengthening the hand of theorists, activists and decision makers as they grapple towards environmental solutions.[1]

The environmental anthropologists are not the only welcome contributors. The historians, the ethicists, the phenomenologists, those studying aesthetics, media and film analysts, people writing about human rights or about war and society, those dealing in cultural studies or development, the archaeologists, and the social theorists are all turning their craft to environmental matters. This is helping to lift the blindspot in the arts and social sciences towards matters ecological, [2] and constituting what Gay McAuley has summarised as the 'placial' turn in the humanities. [3]

Skip to the End

The first thing to say about Baz Kershaw's deliberately troublesome book *Theatre Ecology* is that it claims to steer a similar course for the discipline of Performance Studies. The second thing to say is that the course it navigates, by Kershaw's admissions, is bizarre and twisted, ending in a nihilistic and even 'anti-theatre' conclusion. After ten chapters, he argues that theatre is singularly unhelpful in promoting action to protect the environment, because it supports and extends 'the modernist culture-nature binary that has been the principle misconception causing humans to destroy the Earth's environment.' (Kershaw, 2007: 306). Explaining this in his final chapter, Kershaw writes: 'Paradoxically, the ecology of Twentieth Century theatre in the West ... has reproduced the environmental pathologies that an ecologically aware theatre might most wish to avoid.' (316)

The next thing to establish is that while the book does explore the possible role of theatre and performance in achieving environmental sanity, it is more weighted

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towards a different enterprise, one that turns the tables methodologically, and is summed up by Kershaw's key question: 'How might ecological analysis be more specifically useful in the study of theatre and performance?' (283) In other words much of Kershaw's 'theatre ecology', is just that – an extended metaphor which borrows the systems approach of the science of ecology for the purpose of characterising western theatre and performance. I read much of the book twice, appalled initially at the effort of applying ecology in performance studies rather than the other way round in time of crisis. I wanted to insist (adapting famous words) 'Ask not what ecology can do for your academic discipline but what your academic discipline can do for the planet!' However, what stopped me (and I retract that exhortation) was Kershaw's Epilogue.

Throughout the book he often interrupts himself with warnings about the messiness of his analysis, advice to skeptical readers to 'skip to the Epilogue to see how it *really* all turns out' (245) and other deprecations. Of his own analysis he suggests 'Each page I write potentially contributes to the advancing calamity for humanity' (300) and early on he spruiks the book as analysis of 'theatre at the end of its tether'. But what the very moving autobiographical Epilogue conveys (at least to me), in two pages, is the author as a human being at the end of his tether. He is the wearied writer/activist faced with radio news of the latest UN bumbings and mumblings on climate change, the decimation of both African rural and Western urban landscapes, and the knowledge that responsibility for all this now passes inevitably to his thankfully savvy daughter. I learned to appreciate Kershaw on the second read. Now I understand *Theatre Ecology* as a search for hope, in circumstances where there is little scope for it, since the old tied-up dogs have evolved to be incapable of new tricks.

This therefore *is* a valuable book from a master analyst of performance; and it's one which theatre folk, environmentalists and all in between should read. It exorcises Kershaw's 'messy passion to make some little sense of the myriad connections between theatre, performance and ecology' (35), and it elevates the intellectual playing field for theoreticians trying to meaningfully engage with fast-moving environmental debates. It also builds nicely upon the important *Between Nature* conference instigated in 2000 by theatre and environmental scholars (including Kershaw), and their ensuing publications [4], and it traces Kershaw's own 'seven-year stop-start stumble towards a biocentric account of theatre and performance'. (30)

Biospheres, Oil Rigs and Activists

I do want to mention some of the things that initially make Kershaw's *Theatre Ecology* so frustrating, mindful that I now believe the messiness, the lack of evidence, the rhetoric and overly extended metaphor, the errors and omissions, and endless apologies are all part of tether's end.

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First we could critique the lack of systematic evidence in a book which appeals so strongly to science for its methodology, especially for its claims about performances which feature ecological themes. Chapter 8 on Art and Activism begins promisingly, with a winsome discussion of the way art in protest is 'incognito', forgetting that it is called art. But then comes Kershaw's example of the famous 1995 Greenpeace action on the Brent Spar oil rig, which Shell hoped to scuttle in the North Sea – ultimately not the rig but Shell's reputation was scuttled. Kershaw's is an incomplete analysis of the Greenpeace action as performance, because it gives focus only to the two month spectacle in the North Sea, omitting the wider range of performative elements, audience interactions and implications that spread from Shell's boardrooms to Scottish courtrooms, to scientific laboratories, and to German car-owners boycotting Shell petrol at the pumps. The successes of the Brent Spar campaign have been analysed in many quarters. [5] I'd recommend some wider exploration before going near Kershaw's worry that the Greenpeace action is performance 'severed from the nature it so dearly wants to protect' or his inference that green action groups such as Greenpeace may never escape the pathological processes they oppose. (266-267) Kershaw asks how a thought experiment based on black hole science might enable us to see a way past what he regards as a creative impasse and the analytical conundrums it generates. You'll find some answers to this in Chapter 8, but in the end I was tempted to advise 'Withdraw the question and join a climate action group.'

Chapter 8 heralds in Part III of the book – the part most likely to be of interest to environmentalists. Chapter 9 extends the discussion across a melange of scientific discoveries (on lightning, on molecular physics), nineteenth century acting, twentieth century avant-garde directors and turn of the millennium environmental performances. Chapter 10 then uses the provocative Biosphere II experiment (creating a sealed 'sustainable' environment in the Arizona desert) to explore manifest inadequacies in certain types of performances. In the same kit bag I'd also put Chapter 7, in which Kershaw evaluates the changing character of spectacle, concerned with:

How in the twenty-first century, might the human gain a stronger sense of the non-human world, and of humanity's integral part within it, through the spectacles of theatre and performance ecology. (214)

Clearly Kershaw's overall hope is to strengthen the hand of environmental activists. Amongst his autobiography and self doubt about the value of his own thought experiments, there are at least two important proposals. The first I'd summarise as 'humans learn by watching other humans take risks', which Kershaw reaches via an entertaining look at the spectacular and dangerous antics of Buster Keaton (with his famous collapsing wall). This he regards as important 'deconstructive spectacle' capable of reconfiguring 'the nature of the human as humans thought they knew it' (219). Being able to do this is a precondition for the second of Kershaw's proposals, which can be captured as

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'We need to learn to think *with* mountains.' I put it this way mindful of a well known Deep Ecology text '*Thinking like a mountain*' by John Seed [6]. Kershaw wants us to relocate humans within, not separated from nature. But even John Seed's use of the phrase '*like a mountain*' leaves humans scope to escape nature, to see it as separate from human culture. If you're Kershaw, or the anthropologist Tim Ingold on whom Kershaw bases his analysis, or indeed an ecologically minded political scientist, by now you are looking for practical ways to conduct environmental decision-making in a way that admits the 'voice' of nature, while committing humans as *part* of nature. [7]

On British Theatre as an ecosystem

You'll have noticed I have so far taken Kershaw's advice for the skeptical reader and given first focus to the later chapters of the book. But the rest of it does draw you in, and I'll now work backwards to cover the earlier material. In doing this I'm taking another piece of Kershaw's advice, that the reader will 'adapt' to the twisted structure and style of the book in search of insightful and sustaining experience, thereby mimicking what organisms would encounter in the material world (37). As you see, we are meant to make something of Kershaw's messiness rather than becoming exasperated.

Part II of the book is by and large an analysis of British Theatre, and a unique and valuable one. For example the lively discussions of changing characteristics of cultural industry, or 'audience' or 'applause' are lavishly supported by the anecdotes you'd expect from a practitioner academic. In this part of the book, 'theatre ecology' becomes the tag for a mode of explanation infused by ecological systems thinking. We're talking networks, interdependencies, and various forms of 'feedback' which shape modes of survival in natural ecosystems, as well as 'ecotones' 'edge effects', 'diversity of life processes', 'vectors', 'sub-ecologies' and 'species behaviour' as new language for performance studies, using historiographic methods informed by ecological principles.

I think Kershaw's application of ecology to the study of theatre is more straightforward than he wants to admit. Ever in search of a new paradox, he seems to tie himself in knots until he distrusts his own inferences, writing that

the effort to talk intelligibly about the ecologies of performance and theatre, to adapt a phrase from Alan Watts, is a bit like trying to bite your own teeth. The moment you think you've done it you probably haven't.
(257)

Kershaw worries himself sick (to the end of his tether) about the contradictions inherent in theatre ecology and environmental performance. Meanwhile both the actors and the activists get on with it.

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Within Part II, Chapter 5 on Theatre economics 1979-99, then Chapter 6 on British audiences 1940-2000 are something of a nil return if your main interest is environmental sanity. These two chapters seem wholly internal to the industry of theatre. Nonetheless, by borrowing from nature and science eg. the characteristics of lightning or the scientifically determined behaviour of free radicals, Kershaw obtains handy metaphors for understanding what makes for great acting, or how energy flows around theatre. (257) Also, various generalisations can be made. For example, one that is not as optimistic as it first sounds, is that 'in ecological terms, the ecotone of theatre survived under pressure from an inhospitable wider environment.' (185). Theatre may have survived, but as we've seen earlier, Kershaw is far from convinced that it a species worthy of a niche in an ecologically sane world.

On that, it's incomprehensible to me that Kershaw would provide this analysis of British/western theatre without mention of at least two key developments of the latter part of the Twentieth Century, certainly both thriving now. One is the rise of 'Verbatim Theatre' in Britain, and the other is participatory or 'community theatre' in Australia, Britain and elsewhere. These happen to be (overlapping) domains of performance in which ecological themes have rising prominence, and which would surely constitute interesting if not influential pressures within the ecosystem of performance. Verbatim Theatre consolidates its place as a documentary theatre populated by 'people who care about injustice' [8], while community theatre, and more generally community cultural development, continue to generate socially negotiated ecological knowledge [9], I'm left wondering if their inclusion in Kershaw's analysis might have yielded some quite different conclusions.

Underpinnings

This brings us to the earliest parts of the book, and indeed to the form and overall 'project' which underlies this collection of largely independent chapters. Part I presents critical perspectives on key historical and theoretical developments in theatre and performance. It's here we become adapted (like organisms in an ecosystem) to chapter preambles which nervously pre-figure themes, and Kershaw's insistent thread of conversation about the ancestral publications, conference presentations, seminars and site visits through which he has worked and re-worked the material which appears in a final form in *Theatre Ecology*. All this lends a strongly autobiographical updraft to the whirling storms of theatre and environment both in crisis.

Indeed the book begins in a storm, with Kershaw's own immersion in nature. This leads to the introduction of the bizarre Biosphere II project, which we loop back to in the book's final chapter. To Kershaw the whole idea of sequestering a facsimile of the earth's ecosystem in a huge glass bubble in a desert is a

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performance which smacks of 'ecological desperation' in a damaged world. The paradox of the conditions of life hermetically sealed away from life itself, launches *Theatre Ecology* into its ambiguities and analytical knots.

Kershaw tries to get away with one other important claim, that human society at the end of the twentieth century had *newly* become addicted to performance. In my view the addiction is arguable but the newness of it is not. Kershaw's gambit is to draw together the recent performance theory while exhorting us to label ours a 'performative society', suggesting that 'every dimension of human exchange and experience is suffused by performance and gains a theatrical quality.' (12) I think this may be satisfying in a rhetorical way, especially in performance studies, but I doubt it will catch on elsewhere. There are some very fierce competitors in the jungle also trying to characterise post-industrial society, and among those the social theorist Ulrich Beck appears to have a strong edge, with his concept of 'Risk Society'. With the rising pile of technological dangers matched by ever increasing human capacity to first contain then extend those dangers, Beck's concept of a society, wholly occupied with managing spiraling technological risk, rings loud bells for citizens facing ecological crisis. Many of Risk Society's allied concepts, such as the growth of a 'sub-politics', which sees networks and individuals (not centralised governance) as the greatest hope for ecological sanity, have strong explanatory power. Meanwhile 'performance' in Risk Society *is* also of great importance, as the means by which risks are 'dramatised' and then 'channeled away'. [10]

If I had to, I'd barrack for 'Risk Society' over Kershaw's 'Performative Society', because the former seems more inclusive of today's pathologies. Also I'm mystified by the suggestion that 'performance addiction most virulently took hold of humanity during the second half of the twentieth century.' (15) This unsupported claim only made me think about Foucault's analysis of earlier 'spectacles of the scaffold' with the power relations they implied, or the alliances of power and ritual and sacrifice and nature that was ancient Meso-American society, to give just a couple of quick examples. I was thankful the discussion of the untenable idea of a *new* 'Performative Society' was largely confined within Part I, and that later chapters made sense without the reader having to become a convert, other than to the enjoyment of a rhetorical device.

Epilogue

In Australia, some people grew their hopes around a change of government, thinking as Labor took over in 2007 after ten years of conservative rule, they would see accelerating effort on climate change. Such hopes are largely deflated now, and Australia's home grown brand of carbon trading gobbledy-gook is no antidote. The situation is just as grim everywhere. By the looks of it we're going to have to perform one last massive phase of protest. It better be good.

Kershaw is amongst the theorist-discoverers of the ecological, wanting to apply that frame to the very human activity of performance. To some plain-speaking environmentalists with their eye on material changes and practical solutions such a program might seem infuriating, since there seems so much else to do. But understanding how performance works, and its potential, is a step towards ecological sanity, a point on which Kershaw is convincing, in his case studies, and via the spectacle of his own end-of-tether 'rumblings'. (Let's end with this allusion to Kershaw's dust jacket, where he suggests that *Theatre Ecology* 'rumbles the contemporary paradigm of performance for signs of eco-sanity'.)

Endnotes

1. See Milton, Kay, ed., *Environmentalism: the view from Anthropology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). One of the follow up publications is Milton, Kay, *Environmentalism and Cultural Theory: exploring the role of anthropology in environmental discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).
2. See for example Hannigan, John, *Environmental Sociology: a social constructionist perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). Hannigan's opening history of the concerns of Twentieth Century sociology and anthropology explains the dominance of 'culture' rather than 'nature' between about 1920 and 1970, a period in which 'environmental factors [were] marginal elements in sociological explanation' (8).
3. McAuley, Gay, 'Introduction' in McAuley, Gay, ed., *Unstable Ground: The Politics of Place and Performance* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006): 15-24.
4. *Between Nature* is arguably the seminal conference on the relationship between nature and the arts. Instigated at Lancaster University in 2000, it spawned publications such as: Bronislaw Szerszynski, Wallace Heim and Claire Waterton, eds., *Nature Performed: Environment, Culture and Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) and Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart, eds., *Performing Nature: Explorations in Ecology and the Arts* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005).
5. Greenpeace's action on the Brent Spar in 1995 has been documented through myriad press items, reports including Shell's extensive analysis of its own mishandling of the events, and scholarly outputs in fields such as political science – see as an example: Grant, Jordan, Shell, Greenpeace and Brent Spar (New York: Palgrave, 2001).
6. Seed, John, with contributions from Joanna Macy, Arne Naess, Pat Fleming and Dailan Pugh, *Thinking Like a Mountain* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988).

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7. Political scientist John Drysek lays out the case for a communicative and ecological rationalism as the overall implication of the collection of key papers published as: John Drysek, and David Schlosberg eds., *Debating the Earth: The environmental politics reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Tim Ingold's work, which Kershaw quotes, shows through anthropological study how 'culture' and 'nature' are kept separate in western society. See Tim Ingold, 'Culture and the perception of the environment' in E. Croll and D. Parkin eds., *Bush Base, Forest Farm: Culture, Environment and Development* (London: Routledge, 1992).
8. Nicholas Kent shows how the verbatim scene is populated by 'people who care about injustice' in Will Hammond and Dan Steward, eds., *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (London: Oberon Books, 2008: 152). It's no great stretch to consider the injustice that arises from a degraded relationship between humans and places. Several Australian verbatim plays feature environmental themes.
9. I argue this with respect to community based verbatim theatre in Brown, Paul, 'Maralinga: Theatre from a Place of War', in Gay McAuley, ed., *Unstable Ground: The Politics of Place and Performance* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006): 205-226. The more general case for community cultural development as knowledge production, and for the generation of social capital, is in Deborah Mills and Paul Brown, *Art and Wellbeing: Confirming the connections between Community Cultural Development and Health, Ecologically Sustainable development, Public Housing and Place, Rural Revitalisation, Community Strengthening, Active Citizenship, Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity* (Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, 2004, available on line).
10. Beck explores the concept of 'Risk Society' in, for example, Ulrich Beck (trans. Mark Ritter), *The Risk Society* (London: Sage, 1992). For a discussion of 'sub-politics' see also Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization* (London: Sage, 2002).

Paul Brown is an Australian environmentalist and playwright, the author of the verbatim play 'Aftershocks' (1991), the first of the twenty year period since verbatim emerged in Australia as a 'mainstage' form. Documentary techniques also underpin his experience of community theatre; in 1981 he was a co-founder of one of Sydney's foremost community theatre companies, Urban Theatre Projects. His latest verbatim play is 'Half a Life' (2006), which documents the experience of British and Australian nuclear veterans. Paul is also an academic, Head of the School of History and Philosophy at the University of New South Wales. He conducts research in environmental studies, with a focus on public participation, environmental movements, and contaminated sites. He was Greenpeace Australia's campaign manager in the early 1990s, and continues his involvement in environmental decision making through government and community committees.