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## **Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice: A Review Essay**

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Book Reviewed: Prendergast, M, Saxton, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Applied theatre: International case studies and challenges for practice*.

### **Introduction**

This book is a prosperous point of departure for a journey into the field of Applied Theatre, based as it is on case studies from all over the world, which gives it a nice mosaic character. The idea of collecting published papers and articles and present them in short-cuts is innovative. The result is a hybrid of an educational textbook and a 'light' research handbook – highly recommendable reading that gives an excellent overview and lots of inspiration.

The book contains a selection of short versions of previously published articles from a variety of journals. The editors focus on applied theatre and have chosen not to include related areas such as drama therapy or employment skill training, as these areas not always include a public

or even semi-public performance as part of the work. The examples are collected in many different environments, from the Sami people in Sweden to the Hakka people in Taiwan, although the editors point out that the selection is limited to studies published in English.

The book has a clear structure with 12 chapters arranged in four parts. The first part is an introduction to the theory, history, purpose and practice of applied theatre. In part two and three, which are the main parts, no less than 30 cases from 15 countries provide a broad picture of applied theatre, its different genres and various settings. The last part deals with ethical issues, assessment and other challenges related to applied theatre practice.

Every chapter begins with a brief introduction to the theme and ends with suggestions for “further reading”, which I find reasonable and useful. This is followed by “questions for reflection & discussion” and “suggested activities”. The two latter remind me strongly of reading a textbook for students (e.g. “...carry out an interview /.../ You might like to practice with a classmate first” p. 183-184). This only appeals to ‘students of applied theatre’ and does not really fit ‘practitioners’, which is the other target group, or other readers for that matter.

Three genres of applied theatre are described and exemplified; Theatre in Education, Popular Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed. This is followed by 20 examples from a wide range of areas, such as Health Education, Theatre for Development, Community based Theatre, Theatre in prisons, Theatre at Museums and Reminiscence Theatre, in which applied theatre is being used. Obviously there is some overlapping, for example Reminiscence Theatre may be part of Health Education and Theatre for Development can include Theatre of the Oppressed. The point here, as I understand it, is not to make precise definitions to decide what should be included or excluded from the field, but to contribute to the field by making it visible in all its richness and complexity.

Many cases resemble each other in telling stories about how marginalized groups – in varying contexts and for different reasons – through applied theatre have been able to give voice to their experiences, and by doing so strengthened their own as well as the audiences’ identity. Some of these stories are amazing, touching and truly inspiring. Applied theatre may contribute to create a feeling of belonging and shared life-conditions, and encourage reflection on existential issues as well as draw attention to issues connected to the local context. But this is not always easy to achieve. The reader also learns about difficulties and setbacks, and basic conditions that need to be met to facilitate a successful applied theatre project.

The articles are originally published in different kinds of journals, the most frequent source being *Research in Drama Education (RiDE)*, followed by *NJ: Drama Australia* and *TDR/The*

*Drama Review*. Some of the more unexpected journals are *Medical Education*, and *Ageing and Society*. One intention is to ‘direct students of applied theatre to key journals in the field’ (p. vi). I find this commendable, and it is not only students who benefit from the editors efforts. To select articles from various sources on a specific topic and present them in a framework also puts forward the authors’ work. As the numbers of published papers increase, partly due to external demands, it becomes even more important to make them accessible and reach out to a wider audience.

The idea of this book is to present an international overview of the field of applied theatre, and thereby make it accessible for students and practitioners. According to the editors, one important aim is to facilitate and encourage reflection: “Shared reflections help to build, extend and enhance collective visions.” (p. 203). Reflection is said to be the only reliable way to consider any ethical and moral implications of the work in relation to the cultural context. I fully agree on the importance of reflection, especially as theatre can be a powerful tool for personal and social development, but even the afterword is followed by questions and suggestions. It seems unnecessary to me and lower my last impression of the book – the cases are very interesting in their own right and I find them almost impossible not to reflect upon.

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