

Book Reviews

Tom Maguire. *Performing Story on the Contemporary Stage*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. vii +216pp., £55.00 (hardback), £55.00 (PDF ebook).

Reviewed by **Ellen Redling**, E-Mail: ellen.redling@as.uni-heidelberg.de

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Tom Maguire's *Performing Story on the Contemporary Stage* is an insightful new study on narration in contemporary Anglophone plays. It looks at works which place a large emphasis on presenting a storyteller on stage. By employing numerous examples – from (semi-)autobiographical to 'autre-biographical' (cf. 62; Coetzee 394) performances and from dramatic monologues to tribunal plays and community theatre – Maguire's book delineates taxonomies regarding narration in drama. However, the author also seeks to convey his own personal 'enchantment' (cf. 2) with "magical and subversive" storytelling (cf. Zipes 21) in contemporary plays. Like his ancestors, who were "Irish storytellers" (1), the author of *Performing Story* is to some extent also telling his own tale to the reader.

Maguire particularly links this "magical and subversive" impact of certain plays to "body-to-body" storytelling, a concept used by Bruce McConachie to describe the interrelationship between the storytelling body on stage and the bodies of the listeners. *Performing Story* thus foregrounds not only the roles of the narrative voice and the tale but also the "circle of attention" (170) which is shared by the storyteller and the "implicated, [...] incorporated" spectator (Lavender 326) in live performance. As Maguire argues, if theatre as a live event is able to engage the audience on a both emotional and intellectual level, it might lead to social and political change.

The approach of this book is largely experiential. Maguire selects a number of Anglophone storytelling performances – including some works in translation – by writers such as Anna Deavere Smith, Eve Ensler, Karen Finley, Dario Fo, Franca Rame, Bobby Baker and Billy Connolly. The author has seen the majority of these plays either live or on video (cf. 17). He points out their commonalities and distinctions, which often revolve around the question as to what extent these plays are able to "challeng[e] hegemonic or dominant narratives" (134), and suggests that this analysis could feed back into theatre practice (cf. 2). While this experiential approach enlivens his study and makes it highly accessible, it also gives the impression that Maguire is singling out 'special' performances without considering further implications. For example, the reader is not provided with a sense of how wide-spread a certain phenomenon is and what other plays he or

she should consider together with the particular examples at hand. The author draws attention to this potential shortcoming himself and points out the arbitrariness of his examples (cf. 17), but could have fairly easily amended this.

Maguire's study has a tripartite structure that clearly follows the model of storytelling performance the author uses. It is centred on "the teller who is performing [...], the tale which is performed; and the person to whom the tale is performed, the addressee or spectator" (19). The author bases this tripartite structure on Michael Jackson's delineations of intersubjectivity, put forward in *The Politics of Storytelling* (2002). In Maguire's study the three constituents – teller, tale, audience – are, however, always viewed via the actions of the storytelling performer. The author maintains that the status of the performing body is "more present than any of the bodies represented" (36). Thus, Maguire, for example, indicates that the tale itself and the "presentational space" (McAuley 79) where it is staged can be transformed by the choices the performer makes during the live event (cf. 80).

Performing Story first discusses the teller of the story and narrative identity. Maguire argues – with Paul Ricoeur (1991) – that identity is the outcome of narrative (cf. 2). As he later summarises:

My fantasies, my day dreams and my hopes may all take narrative forms through which I come to a sense of myself. Equally, the lies I tell, the half-truths and edited versions, as well as the jokes and tricks that are narrated out are who I am too. It is what I seek to do and achieve with my storytelling through the perspective and the narrative identity that they bestow on me or that we claim through them. (170)

The author accordingly analyses the hopes that a performing storyteller might express, for instance by means of "narrative futuring" (78). He draws attention to the (un)reliability (cf. 67) the performer might display in telling the tale as well as the comic appeal that he or she might have – especially in stand-up comedy (cf. 32). Maguire looks at narratological terms such as Gérard Genette's heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration (cf. 24), (multiple) points of view (cf. 88 *et passim*) and focalisation (cf. 93). He examines the ways in which they apply to drama, but makes clear that there are limits to textually-focused narratology (cf. 19). This is because with regard to drama one always needs to take into account that "the material presence of an identifiable subject, an actual body doing the telling, adds a number of dimensions" (*ibid.*). An example Maguire discusses is Peggy Shaw's *You're Just Like My Father* (1994). It is a semi-autobiographical drama of female masculinity, performed by Shaw herself. In this play, Shaw's persona, who recounts the story of a "butch lesbian [growing up] within a working-class household in 1950s New York" (23), is protean. Her subversive performance "reject[s] any sense of fixed identity based on dominant oppositions of gender or sexuality"

(23). This is achieved by “cross-dressing” (23), but also by the way the performer *embodies* different personae (cf. 23).

In delineating narrative identity, Maguire highlights not only the teller’s identity, but also that of the performer. He details that the performer’s “phenomenal body” (Fischer-Lichte 106) might establish another level of signification of the storytelling performance – for instance through sweating, breathlessness or by betraying a certain personal tic (cf. 35). He emphasises the fact that the information which the spectator has about the performer’s idiosyncrasies and previous theatrical and extra-theatrical work and achievements might evoke a “mega-identity” (cf. Ryan 109–123) in addition to the other identities suggested by the play, thus having a “multiplying” effect (36). Maguire points out that the performers may “mean what they say, even if the words they speak are not their own” (153) and that the choice or rejection of a certain part could reveal something about the performer’s self (cf. 76).

This focus on the performer’s own identity at times perhaps reaches too far in Maguire’s study. Nevertheless, the author’s attention to the special situation offered by theatre as a live event is certainly the main strength of his work. Like Peggy Phelan, Maguire focuses on the “ephemeral aspect of liveness” of a performance, which he contrasts with “late capitalism’s forces of commodification that insist on replication or modernity’s pressures towards disenchantment” (168).

The author develops this emphasis further in the second part, which concerns the tale itself. It analyses characterisation, temporal and spatial aspects and “[t]he ways in which narratives [...] combine multiple figures and points of view” (16). Regarding the last topic, Maguire, for instance, examines the role of monologism and Bakhtinian dialogism in storytelling (cf. 97–113). He convincingly maintains that a formal dialogism is not sufficient to guarantee that the play “enter[s] into any wider political discourse” (111). The author indicates that one has to look at the context to judge whether or not a play engages with larger issues (cf. 112). This observation leads him to his final point, which concerns the audience and the social significance of the storytelling performance.

In the third part of his study, Maguire crucially draws attention to the potential problems of storytelling performances. Since he is interested in inter-relationships between human beings and in wider social, cultural and political implications of particular performances, he is fully aware that storytelling might not achieve these goals if it turns out to be completely one-sided on a certain issue (cf. 143) or voyeuristic (cf. 150). He thereby implies that the story of an individual presented on stage should never just be about this person or fictional character *only* but should engage critically with wider concerns. Furthermore, while the spectator’s empathy with the character(s) on stage might translate into social or

political action outside the theatre (cf. 148), it might also remain ineffective if the performance is merely a form of “pornography of suffering” (150). Thus, according to the author, both an emotional and intellectual engagement of the audience is necessary (cf. 150). In this last part of his work, Maguire therefore displays a great insight into the advantages and possible disadvantages of storytelling performances. In doing so, he also indicates ways in which a performance might be judged concerning its political significance – both on a private scale and on a public one. It is in this part of the book that Maguire’s work itself achieves significance on a wider scale.

There are, however, certain shortcomings perceivable in this study. Aside from the random and restricted choice of examples mentioned above, there are also weaknesses regarding terminology. While Maguire seemingly aims to give a taxonomical overview and analyses concepts such as “metalepsis” (28), he either leaves out certain other terms or does not name crucial secondary sources. For instance, the notion of jumping back and forward in time in a storytelling performance (cf. 91) could have been described as ‘analepsis’ and ‘prolepsis.’ What Maguire calls a ‘metonymic’ process – i.e. the spectator’s or reader’s action of filling in gaps in the story according to his or her “horizon of expectations” (44) – could have been explicitly linked to Wolfgang Iser (*The Act of Reading*) and Hans Robert Jauss (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*). Likewise, various seminal works by Monika Fludernik (e.g. “Narrative and Drama”) and Ansgar Nünning/Roy Sommer on storytelling in drama (e.g. “Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity” and “The Performative Power of Narrative in Drama”) are not referred to.

What is perhaps generally still missing in studies of narration in drama – including Maguire’s – is an *in-depth* consideration of what actually links the current prominence of the genre of the novel with the growing number of narrative plays that we see right now on the ‘contemporary stage.’ Scholars often seek to show – together with Walter Benjamin – that the rise of the novel from the eighteenth century onwards threatened oral forms of storytelling (cf. 155). While there is undoubtedly much truth in this statement, the confessional nature of many first-person novels in a globalised culture of ‘sharing’ seems very much connected to an increase in (semi-)autobiographical or ‘autre-biographical’ performances on stage. Whereas Maguire’s work is indeed an excellent critical study in terms of his focus on live performance, his at times hesitant use of narratological terminology shows that there is still room for further explorations on the subject of narrative drama and the novel.

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